

Valley Times

by Bill Agee

Bill Agee's sermon highlights the significance of embracing life's challenges as opportunities for spiritual growth and the importance of commitment in serving God.

Duration: 30:23

Scripture: Joshua 1:1, Matthew 26:39, Acts 13:13

Topics: "Valley Times"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher reflects on the tragic death of a young lady and emphasizes the uncertainty of life. He encourages the audience, particularly the young people, to recognize their potential to change the world through their faith. He shares the story of John Mark, who faced difficulties and challenges in his service to God, dispelling the notion that serving God will always be grand and glorious. The preacher also mentions the sacrifices made by preachers like Gypsy Smith, who gave a part of their lives every time they preached. Overall, the sermon highlights the importance of perseverance and commitment in serving God, even in the face of adversity.

Transcript

Let me just share with you a little bit about who I am and where I've come from. I've been pastoring for 14 years. I've pastored churches from the size of two, where my wife was the only member I had in South Dakota.

We began a work there, to the church where I'm at now, which is considerably larger than that. And we spent 10 years in the pioneer field, in service to the Lord. We learned a lot there.

We grew a lot there. I think what the young lady said here in her testimony about the desert experiences, you learn more on the backside of the desert than you ever learn on the mountaintop. And too often we think we can just live on the mountaintop, and that's all that we really strive for.

When really in the valley times, you learn more about who you are, and about who God really is, than you ever learn when you're on the mountain. If you look at the mountain above the tree line, nothing grows there. But in the valley is where you find all the vegetation and all the beautiful things.

So don't shy away from the valley times in your life. And don't always seek to dwell on the mountaintop. You're not physically, emotionally, or spiritually able to handle all that.

There are going to be the valley times. What I want to share with you tonight is probably not so much a sermon, as it is something I just want to share with you. Because in the ten years I spent in South Dakota, and the two and a half years I've been in Norman, and I'm kind of like many of you.

I'm a student again for the first time in 15 years. That's an interesting thing when you're my age. I've come to a time when probably over and over I wanted to quit.

I wanted to just stop. I wanted to just let somebody else do what needed to be done. And I just wanted to take a break.

Have you ever been there? Have you ever felt like there's been a time in your life when you just couldn't go on, and you needed a fresh start? You needed a new touch from God? You needed a fresh vision, a fresh direction? If you're like that, you're not by yourself. You see, there are other people who felt that way. I always thought I'm probably the only one who feels this way.

Everybody else talks about how grand things are with God. Well, I've had times in my life when I didn't think they were so hot. And I always wondered, am I the only one? That's not the case.

In the Scripture, in Acts chapter 13, verse 13, we find a story of someone here who went through the same kind of things that I'm sure I went through, and the same thing that maybe many of you are going through right now, the tendency to say, I'm just going to give up. I'm just going to quit. I'm going to stop.

In Acts chapter 13, verse 13, it says this, When Paul and his company loosed from Paphos, they came to Perga and Pamphylia. And John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem. John Mark returned to Jerusalem.

Imagine if you can the scene here. John Mark is sitting on the ground. His hands are clasped together.

He's looking at the fire, trying to figure out what life is all about, trying to figure out what serving God is really all about. Because you see, it wasn't very many days before that, he pleaded with Paul and Barnabas to go on the first missionary journey. He wanted to be involved in missions.

He wanted to be involved in the cutting edge of serving God. He thought that's where the glory would be. He thought that's where serving God was really going to bring all the glory and all the wonder.

And that would be a mountaintop experience. Some of you, I know, I know some of them from our church went on summer missions this year. You didn't find a lot of glory out there, did you, Lisa? Not a whole lot of glory out there before you served God.

And I found very quickly in my own life, there wasn't a whole lot of glory out there in the middle of the jackrabbits and rattlesnakes. There wasn't too much glory there. John Mark found that out in his life.

He found out very quickly it wasn't what he thought it would be, this serving God. Sometimes we have this idea that serving God is always going to be the grandest and the glorious and the most wonderful experience of our life. John Mark didn't find that.

He didn't find that at all. He never thought it would be that way. You see, that very day, he'd face death.

I've come pretty close a time or two. Sometimes on my own ignorance, I actually had somebody threaten my life one time for serving God. Said, if you stand up and preach again, we're going to kill you and your

family.

That'll bless you. That'll bless you. But you got to do what you got to do.

You got to keep doing what God said to do. John Mark had faced death that very day. He was hungry, didn't have anything to eat.

He was cold. He was tired. He was lonely.

I think we can understand loneliness. John Mark didn't have what he thought he would have. He didn't have this glorious mission experience.

He found out that serving God sometimes was difficult. Sometimes it was rough. This Christian service thing was not really what it was all cracked out to be, John Mark thought.

So what he does, he decides to wake up Barnabas and Paul. Is that me? He decides to wake up Barnabas and Paul. And as he does, he tells Paul that he's got blisters on his blisters, that he's tired, that he's been threatened, that there ought to be an easier way to serve God.

He says, can't we go back to Jerusalem? Can't we go back where we know people? Can't we go back where we know the situation? Can't we go back home? We can win the Jews there. We don't have to go out of here to the Gentiles. Why don't we go back home? And Paul looked at him and said, son, I can't go back.

I put my hand to the plow and I can't turn back. So he goes on to Barnabas and he asks Barnabas to reason with Paul. He said, we've traveled all day long.

We're tired. We can't take it any longer. Barnabas, can't you reason with Paul so that we can go back home? Barnabas looks at him and he tells him, he's got to stay too.

He's committed to serving God. No matter what the circumstances, he's committed to serving God. He can't go back.

He's got to go forward. Paul finally tells John Mark that they're going to stay. That they're going to go on and do what God said for them to do.

But he says to John Mark, John Mark, you don't have to go on. You can come back. Are we going to do it again? All right, I don't move around much anyway.

I'm one of these preachers, don't flop around, don't run around. I just talk to you. Is that all right with you? All right, it's all right with me.

It's not all right with you. That's the brakes. Are we ready now? All right.

Thank you. Man, that's big. John Mark wanted to go back home.

And Paul told him, you can go back. You don't have to stay. You don't have to go on this journey.

You know what? You guys have the same choice. You have that choice about school. You have that choice about your life.

You have that choice about your service to God. You don't have to go on. You don't have to serve God.

You don't have to keep doing what God says to do. You can go back home. That's what Paul told John Mark.

He says, go back to your soft bed. Go back where it's easy. Go back where you have plenty of food.

Go back where you have plenty of water. Go back where you're popular. Go back where there's no confrontation.

Go back where you don't have the problems that you're going to face out here in the mission field. John Mark, according to Acts 13.13, returned to Jerusalem and stopped serving God. It's amazing that Luke doesn't say any more about that.

He doesn't give us any explanation. He doesn't try to make any excuses for John Mark. He doesn't try to rationalize why he went back.

He just simply says, John Mark departed and he went back to Jerusalem. What I would share with you tonight, I guess, if it had a title, would be, you don't have to go on. You don't have to go on.

But tonight, if you choose not to go on for God, if you choose not to serve Him, if you choose not to get involved in the forward advance of the gospel, wherever you are, whether it be in school, whether it be on a job, wherever God leads you, if you decide tonight that you're not going to go forward with God, there are some things I think you need to understand. The first one is that the work of God will go on without you. The work of God will go on without you.

Paul and Barnabas left for Antioch after John Mark left. They were tired just as much as John Mark was. But they gathered their courage and they gathered their strength and they moved forward for God.

And there were probably times when Paul needed something and he would look around and he would want John Mark to get it for him, but John Mark wasn't there. And there were times, I'm sure, that Barnabas wanted someone to talk to. And he didn't have anyone but Paul because John Mark was gone.

They depended on him. And now he was gone. And they missed him.

You see, when John Mark left, it made their work more difficult. It made their effort more intense. They had to do more than what they were doing before because John Mark wasn't there.

Your service to God makes a difference. Whether or not you choose to serve him or not serve him makes a difference. It not only affects you, it affects other people.

It affects the overall kingdom of God. Their work was more difficult. But the work did go on.

God didn't close up shop because John Mark said no. You see, there's always someone who'll say yes. There's always somebody who's going to say, Yes, God, I will go for you.

I will do what you want me to do. John Mark was not one of those people at that time. You see, where Paul and Barnabas went, the word was still preached and the songs were still sung and people were still one to Christ and churches were still started.

Lives were still changed. The kingdom of God does not rest on any one person. It doesn't rest on you and it doesn't rest on me.

It doesn't rest on Brother Max. It doesn't rest on any one person. You can let the greatest pastor in all the world resign and a church will call somebody else by the leadership of God and that church will go on.

You can let a great evangelist meet a tragic death and God will raise up another man of God and the work of God will go on. You can let a great missionary die on the mission field and God's going to call someone else who will fill the void, make up the hedge and stand in the gap and the work of God will go on. It's true in the past.

It's true today that no one person determines the kingdom of God. Moses probably thought at some point that he was a pretty important fellow and God probably said something like this to Moses. Moses, you're not that important.

You disobeyed me and you're not going to go into the promised land. And when the people found out that Moses wasn't going into Canaan, they got upset and they said, God has brought us out here to this desert land so that the buzzards can pick our bones. Without Moses, we'll die.

That's what they said. You know what God said to them? He said, you're not going to die. I'm going to raise up another man.

I'm going to raise up Joshua. And Joshua led the people into Canaan. He led them into victory.

The work of God went on. Just because people quit serving God, God is not going out of business. We need to understand that if we choose to not serve God.

If we choose not to go forward for God, we need to realize that the work of God will go on anyway. God will find a Joshua who will say yes. The second thing I think you need to understand if you choose not to go on for God is that you'll miss the greatest adventure of your entire life.

You'll miss the greatest opportunity of your entire life. Who do you think lost the most in this story? John Mark says, I can't go on for God. Paul says, go on back, John Mark, where it's easy.

Go on back where it's comfortable. How often, students, do we find ourselves going where it's easy and nowhere else? Do you know the easiest place in Norman, Oklahoma, for you to be a Christian is right here in BSU? That's right. For most of you, this is the greatest contact with people of your age and interest anywhere else.

This is the most comfortable place for you to be. And if you're not real careful, you'll retreat to the comfortable place and miss one of the most exciting adventures of your life. Because there will not always be BSU in your life.

You understand? It will not always be just like this. There will come a day, Phil, when you have to go out in there and build that little paper house. He did that some this last summer.

Lisa, you know what that's about, going out there where ministry really is. This is easy. It's easy for me to come in here.

Most of you folks, I'm sure, are Christians. It's easy to come in here and try to talk to you and teach you the Word. It's easy.

It's a different story outside the walls. See, John Mark found that out. It was easy and comfortable in Jerusalem, but it was a different story in Antioch.

And he found that out very quickly. John Mark said, I've got to go back. And Paul says, go on back.

Can you imagine John Mark as he crawls into his bed at night? Crawls under his sheets. He's got his comfort. He had a nice meal before he went to bed.

And he thinks, I wonder what's going on in Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. I wonder how they're doing tonight. And all he can do is think about how they're doing instead of living the experience.

Don't live your life on somebody else's experiences of service to God. It doesn't do a whole lot of good just to listen to people who have been there and have come back. At some point, you need to go there and get involved in the work.

John Mark went home and I'm sure he missed out. One of the results of not serving God is a lack of vision. We lose sight of what God really has for us.

John Mark, the Bible tells us, tried a few things. Tried a few things after he went back to Jerusalem, but you don't hear much about him for a long time. You see, until you do the very one thing that God has called you to do, you'll not be successful at anything.

You've got to be doing that which God's called you to do. It's obvious that God has not called me to be a singer. You can ask anyone in my church and they'll vouch for that.

It's obvious. If I were to go out and say I want to be a singer, I'd have a big problem with that. A lot of them have said he's not much of a preacher either, but that's beyond point.

You've got to do what you believe God's called you to do and you've got to carry through with it. John Mark was the loser in this story. He missed the preaching.

He missed the times that testimonies were given. You would have missed out tonight had you not come and heard this young lady's testimony. You'd have missed out.

You'd have missed out had you not come and heard this young lady sing. That was a beautiful testimonial song. You would have missed out.

All you could have done was heard how somebody else was blessed by it and you would have missed it. John Mark was feeling that very same way. He missed seeing people say yes to God.

And I think John Mark even missed the shipwrecks. I think he even missed those times that were difficult because he was back home and he was missing out on the actual living of the life of service to God. You see, the people who have done the most in the kingdom of God and those who love Jesus the most are those whose heart may be a little bit richer and whose soul may be a little bit fuller and whose life is a little bit more worn because they've tried and they've risked and they've put it all on the altar for God.

The loser is the person who stands back and watches the forward movement of the gospel and never really gets involved in it. That person's the loser. They're the loser.

The greatest adventure of all is to go forward into the thick of the battle for Christ. That's the greatest adventure of all. You say, well, that's what you expect a preacher to say.

But it's the truth. Preacher or not, it's the truth. The greatest adventure of your life is service in the kingdom's work.

Doing that which God would have you to do. To some people, self seems to be the only thing of importance. We want to serve self.

We want to feed self. We want to recreate self. We want to do everything that pleases self.

We have no real burden for the cause of Christ or for those around us. What a tragedy that really is. To those people, I would say, you don't have to go on.

You don't have to go on. But you'll miss the greatest adventure of your life if you don't. Some don't want to risk the unknown in the adventure of serving the Lord.

It's a scary, frightening thing. How many of you have been on some mission tour or mission service trip? Before you went, it's a pretty frightening thing. You don't know what you're going to get into.

You don't know what's going to happen. It's a frightening thing. That's the way serving God really is.

It's an unknown. And you've got to be willing to risk it all. To risk it all if you're going to really be where He wants you to be.

John Mark didn't want to risk. He didn't want the trials that went along with it. He didn't want the sacrifices that went along with it.

He didn't want the sweat. He didn't want the blood. You know what John Mark wanted to do? He wanted to go back to his fortress.

He wanted to go back to Jerusalem where he could hole up and feel spiritual and be holy and love God but never really get involved in the risk of service. You'll miss the greatest adventure of your life if that's all you do. If all you do is receive and receive and receive and receive.

And I know you receive a lot. You receive a lot right here. You receive a lot through your study groups.

You receive a lot through your churches. You receive and you receive and you receive. But a sponge is no good until you squeeze it.

It's no good until you squeeze it. God needs to squeeze some of us out. Some of us have absorbed all we can absorb and it's time God squeezes us out.

That's the only way a sponge is ever in good. We've got a lot of spiritual sponges today who need to be squeezed out in service to the Lord. John Mark wanted to go back.

He wanted to stay in Jerusalem in his easy chair and claim victory and never really be involved in the battle of service for the Lord. We need to move out of the fortress. We need to move out into the highways

and the hedges and the byways.

We need to move out from where it's comfortable. We need to come to a place where we're willing to risk reputation, risk our very lives if necessary and many people do every day as they go through the steamy jungles, as they cross the seas, as they try to minister to people in the very frigid land. They risk their very life every day in service to the Lord.

The greatest privilege of all is to give up something to be close to Christ. John Mark was not willing to do that. Are we willing to do that? Are we willing to sacrifice to be close to God? That's a good question.

What if Christ had said, I'm not going to risk it? What if Christ had said, I'm not going to take the chance of the cross? Where would we be? We'd have no hope. We'd have no hope. But Jesus said, I'm going forward.

Not my will, thy will be done. And he went on, paid the price so that we could have life. Years ago, there was a great preacher named Gypsy Smith.

He was asked by a lady one time to come and speak to a small group. And she said, Brother Smith, you won't have to worry about anything. It's just a small group.

It won't take much out of you. He looked at her and he said this. He said, Lady, I don't preach any place that doesn't take a lot out of me.

I give a part of my life every time I preach. He gave a part of his life every time he preached. We will never have this moment like this ever again.

This time in eternity is gone and we'll never have it just like this again. It comes home to us very tragically. A young lady, seventeen years old, life was snuffed out yesterday, very quickly, very tragically.

She didn't realize it would happen, but it did. We're not guaranteed anything like this again in our lives. Life's greatest adventure is when we give of ourselves and give of ourselves until the ease of Jerusalem is a bitter sound in our ears.

And until the risk of Antioch is what we're really looking for. You guys have the greatest potential right here to change the world of anybody I know. You've got opportunity for education.

You've got fellowship. You've got a world out there that's becoming more pagan every day. You've got the answer to the world.

The tragedy of it is somebody here in this room, maybe several of you will say, it's not worth the risk. And to you, I would say, you'll miss the greatest adventure of your life if you say no to God. The last thing I want you to notice about John Mark and about your own life as you think about these things, if maybe for some reason you have stopped serving God, that happens sometimes, sometimes purposefully, sometimes by accident.

We just stop serving God. We're not involved in any kind of activity of service to the Lord at all. To you, I believe that the Word of God would say, God hopes you come back.

He hopes you come back. See, John Mark decided not to go on and his message you'll not only hurt the cause of Christ, but you'll hurt those around you who believe in you, who work with you, who trust you. But

over a period of time, John Mark became concerned about a situation and John Mark became repentant.

He realized what he'd done. He realized his lack of commitment and he came back to God. Do you realize had John Mark not come back, we would not have Book of Mark? We would not have it had he not decided to come back and serve God.

He dropped out, but he came back. Every one of us tonight could have a reason to say no to God. You know what some of your reasons could be? I don't have time.

I got to study. I about said that this week. I'm back in school and for you guys it's easier.

You know, you say, well, this old guy is telling you that. Well, it's true. You guys can remember better than mine can.

I know that because mine used to do better than it does now. I could memorize things for the test. I might forget them an hour later, but I can memorize them.

Now I'm having a hard time even doing that. I preach three times a week. We have visitation.

We have church. I have Sunday school class I teach. I have a church training class I teach.

I do a few other things on the side and I'm taking six hours of school. It seems like 12. When you get my age you can multiply whatever you want.

And I'm finding that to be a hard thing. I'm finding it to be a difficult thing to find time for that and find time for family and find time for anything else. And it would be very easy to say I'm not going on.

It's too much. I don't have time. But you have time if you make time.

John Mark had all kinds of excuses. And you could give me every one of you probably have a different reason and a very valid one why you can't serve God. Why you won't take that risk and be involved in God's service.

Every one of you have a very valid reason. But it's just not good enough. It's just not good enough.

Some would say I'm going to do it in spite of my excuses. Those are the people who are in for a great exciting adventure in their life. John Mark quit.

He went back to Jerusalem. He seemed satisfied with that for a while. But the work of God called him back.

And he came back to the Lord. You can come back too. If you said no, you can come back.

You see, there's always a need. There's always a new ministry that needs to be birthed. Isn't that right, Max? There's always a new ministry that needs birthing.

You might be the one that God calls to birth a new ministry that's called to There's always truth to be shared. There's always a kind word to be said. There's always a mission field to be crossed.

There's always a testimony to be given, a song to be sung. Where would we be if everyone said, I'm going back? We need some to say, I'm going to go on with God. And for those who have said no in the past, we

need them to say, I'm coming back, and I'm going to serve God.

You need to come back. Some of you are sitting in your reclining chairs in Jerusalem right now. You're in the rocking chair of the BSU.

It's a nice place to be. It's a nice place to be. But one day, that rocking chair will not be there for you.

You need to go on for God. Some are watching the Pauls and the Barnabases do the work and make the sacrifices. God may call you to make the sacrifices and carry on the work.

You don't have to stay outside the will of God. You can come back to Him. Anybody can sit in Jerusalem.

Anybody can sit in the easy chair. But it takes dedication to fight the battle in Antioch. The glory of the presence of God that you sense along the way will be more than enough payment for the sacrifice that you make.

Keep going if you're serving Him now. Come on back if you've gotten away from Him. And you'll never be sorry that you did.

Would you bow your heads, please? Father, many, many times in our lives, we want to just give up. We want to just quit. Help each of us tonight to realize that if we say no, that we'll miss out on the greatest adventure of our life.

Help us to be willing to move out of our fortress and out of our comfort and out of our popularity zone and move into the area where real ministry takes place where there's not a lot of glory. There's not a lot of fanfare. A lot of blood, sweat, and tears.

Father, I pray for these students as they seek to grow closer to You and to grow in discipleship and in an outreach. I pray that You would use them as a mighty force as they'll go out to that place.

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