

Keep Calm in Christ

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Isaiah 52:7-12, Luke 10:38-42

Have you ever heard the expression, “The early bird catches the worm”? Maybe in Japanese a phrase with a similar meaning might be, “Hayai mon gachi” – “First come, first served”, or “the one who is faster is the one who wins.” In general, I am not the type of person who is super fast to do things. I usually take my time. In Tokyo, many people seem to highly value the idea of moving quickly. One look at the crowds of people in Shinjuku station and you can see that most seem to be in a hurry to get to wherever they are going. I need to be careful if I’m buying a train ticket. I need to have my money ready ahead of time so that people are not lining up behind me, irritated that I’m not moving quickly enough. When a train is only 2 minutes late some passengers may get irritated, and there is usually an announcement with a polite apology for the delay. While it’s true that there are often benefits to moving quickly, it can sometimes cause problems. Japan is a nation where many people are stressed out and overworked. Technology has made it possible to do things more quickly, but we’re then expected to do more and more. Our minds become filled with all the things we need to do and we lose energy to seriously reflect on what we’re doing and where we’re headed. Taking time for prayer is an important way to regain a healthy perspective.

Perhaps the saying that fits best with today’s message would be, “haste makes waste”. Or, “Slow and steady wins the race”. Just like the story of the race between the rabbit and the turtle. The rabbit takes naps along the way and is distracted from focusing on the race. In the end, the turtle gets to the finish line first. With all our busyness, how can we balance our thoughts with a focus on God’s leading, and keep calm even in the face of many challenges?

Today, we read two bible passages that highlight a calm focus on the Lord. Let’s take a look at each of these. We began in the book of Isaiah. Israel has been conquered and the people taken into exile by the Babylonians. God had allowed this to happen because of the sin of the Israelites. In today’s passage, the prophet Isaiah uses poetic language to announce the good news that the exile will end, and the Israelites will again sense God’s presence in their midst. In verse seven of Isaiah 52, we read, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.” The watchmen sing for joy when they see it, and Zion (that is, the city of Jerusalem) also breaks forth with singing. This poetic vision is one where salvation and God’s reign are proclaimed. Freedom and peace are characteristic of God’s reign. The words “Your God reigns” are significant. Here the people are in captivity, taken away from their home, living in exile. But, “Your God...” meaning the God whom Israel follows is the one God who reigns over all. God in control, not the Babylonians. The exile will end and the people would soon be free to live in peace. We read, “The LORD has bared his holy arm.” It’s an expression of strength and power. This will be very public, “and all the ends of the earth” will see God at work.

Verse 11 describes what the people are to do. “Depart, depart, go out from there!” The words are repeated for emphasis. It’s finally time to get up and go, returning to their homeland. They are to “touch no unclean thing,” purify themselves, and carry the “vessels of the LORD” as they return. These represent a renewing of their faith. In Babylon, they may have started to forget about God. They may have picked up some of the Babylonian customs of idol worship. But here, God calls them to return to God’s ways. They are to avoid getting into the “unclean” practices of the surrounding people, and instead purify themselves by following God’s laws. The vessels of the LORD were things that had been taken from the temple by Nebuchadnezzar when Israel was attacked. Now a new king, Cyrus, would allow the Israelites to return home, along with the vessels taken from God’s temple. This part also has a spiritual meaning. The “vessels of the LORD” could represent the spiritual gifts given by God; gifts such as the treasure of the gospel, mercy, and kindness... Finally, we come to our focus verse for today, verse 12. “For you shall not go out in haste, and you shall not go in flight; for the LORD will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard.” The people would not need to run, because God would be with them. They would not need to panic and flee, like they had done many years earlier when they left slavery in

Egypt under the leadership of Moses. At that time, Pharaoh the Egyptian leader, ended up chasing after them with his army, but God miraculously protected the Israelites from behind with a pillar of cloud. God then leads them across the Red Sea, on dry land, and then continues to lead them with a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night. Now in a similar way, as the Israelites would leave Babylon, the LORD would lead them, protecting them from all sides. There would be no reason to rush and the people would be able to calmly walk back to their home country, knowing that God Almighty was in their presence.

As history showed, the Israelites were eventually able to calmly return to their home country by the decree of king Cyrus. But, as is often the case with prophecy, there is also a deeper meaning. This is a prophecy of the coming of Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God's reign has been revealed. He is known as the Prince of Peace, and by his call to love even our enemies and his non-violent life he showed us what God's reign looks like. We didn't read it today, but the following verses introduce what kind of messenger he would be. Jesus would be a "suffering servant"... Jesus showed us God's love, a love that led him to die on the cross for all people. Jesus had access to the power that created the universe, yet he showed us that God's love is greater than the power of violence and death. He was raised to life and now reigns over all.

Coming back to our focus verse, how do we live with faith that God loves us and walks with us? Can we keep a calm attitude and trust in God's presence? As I prepared this message I began by thinking about my own life. Even though I am often calm on the outside, in my mind my thoughts are often moving quickly. As I weigh all the options in even a simple decision it's easy to get stuck. I always want to make the best decisions. In my mind, as I look at all the options, they become a distraction. I end up worrying too much about making a mistake. I sometimes jump from one thing to the next, flustered and overwhelmed because I have so many things left undecided. In my head it's like I'm running around "going out in haste" rather than trusting in God. How can we avoid going "out in haste"? How do we keep from getting stuck and flustered with all the challenges around us? I find that it helps to spend time in prayer, and bible reading every day. This kind of habit helps us keep focus on what's most important. When I pray in the morning, it's like an anchor that gives perspective on the rest of the day. I regularly try to remind myself that we all belong to God, and God loves us. We need prayer to help us focus on the most important things rather than allowing all the less important things to distract us.

In Luke, chapter 10, we read the story of Mary, and her sister Martha, having Jesus over to their place as a guest. While Martha is busy running around, likely with meal preparations and such, Mary sits and listens to Jesus speak. When Martha complains that Mary isn't helping her, Jesus answers her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." He was not saying it is wrong for Martha to be busy hosting. But, her spinning thoughts and worries about getting everything perfect for Jesus were distracting her from something that is much more important; calmly putting her trust in Jesus and listening to him.

The year 2023 has just begun. How are we going to live in the coming year? Are we going to go about with haste, flustered at what to do about all the different challenges we face? There may be tough times ahead, but are we going to live in fear of all the terrible things that could happen? Or, will we put our deep trust in the Lord Jesus, knowing that he is Lord of the past, present, and future? We will gain a deeper sense of God's presence if we regularly come to God in prayer, as even Jesus did. For example, before facing his arrest, torture, and crucifixion he spent time in earnest prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. That was where he struggled, knowing what was to come. In the end, he put his trust in God, and it was amazing how calmly he could face such a terrible thing as being publicly ridiculed and nailed to a cross. My prayer is that we may more and more put our trust in Christ, so that we can walk calmly, knowing that we're in God's powerful hand. Let's pray.

Loving God, you are Lord of all. Through the power of your word, you created the universe. And yet, we so often forget that you love us and are with us. We so easily get caught up and flustered with running around, or jumping from one thing to the next. Help us to, instead build our

trust in you. We want to focus on the most important things and let go of the many things that draw us away from you. We pray that you would help us find a healthy balance between work and rest, time in prayer, and time for other things. Through Christ, our Lord, we pray, Amen.