

I want to celebrate something that God did through your faithfulness. Last week, in our "Feed the Starving Children" initiative, over four thousand of you showed up, put on those crazy hairnets, and packed meals to feed starving children. Check this out: You helped pack over five million meals for hungry children. Folks, here is what I love, love, love. That means over thirteen thousand children will be fed next year, and who would otherwise have gone hungry next year. That means, because of your faithfulness, because of your heart of serving, there will be children who will be alive this year that may have been dead this year, because you stepped up and cared enough to feed them. I know God loves you, and I know God is proud of you for your faithfulness and your humble heart of serving. Give yourself a hand!

I'm going to ask you to remain standing, because today we are kicking off our brand new series that we have entitled "Roller Coaster: Staying connected when the bottom falls out." This is all a part of our ongoing study of the gospel of John, and today we open the pages of John, chapter thirteen to kick off the series called "Roller Coaster. What I want to do is put John, chapter thirteen in perspective of John twelve where we've been, and John thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen where we are headed so you see the big picture. So I'm going to ask you to do is to remain standing in honor of the reading of the Word of God. I want you to read with me this passage. Let's read it slowly, reverently together: John 12:12. The Bible says: *"The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'"*

Folks, you talk about things looking up for Jesus, and looking up for the twelve disciples. I want to fast forward to a couple of days later to John, chapter 19. Verse 15: The Bible says, *"But they shouted, 'Crucify Him'".*

I want to set all of this up by talking to us a little bit about roller coasters, because we all have different thoughts, different emotions, when it comes to a roller coaster ride. How many of you would say, "Rick, I love roller coaster rides?" Now, how many of you would say, "I hate roller coaster rides because they freak me out?" Now, I've got to tell you. I'm one of those folks who happens to love a good roller coaster ride. I do. But at the same time, I recognize that there are some of you who hate them. The reason you hate the roller coaster ride is because of the ups and especially the downs just freak you out. I want you to stay with me, because a roller coaster ride begins with that initial up click, doesn't it? It's just click, click, click. There is that exciting anticipation that builds. But folks, I don't have to tell you, that after that initial up click, there

always comes the inevitable downturn. And what makes you freak out about the downturn is the sudden change of direction.

One minute you are looking up and before you can even prepare yourself, you are looking straight down. What makes your stomach flip upside down is this feeling that the bottom has dropped out. You are freefalling at over sixty-five miles per hour. Some roller coasters add twists and turns, and sharp turns, and even dark tunnels that you have to go through. It is enough to make somebody freak out. But again, for some of you, it is no big deal, right? For others of you it is an all out panic attack.

I've been on roller coaster ride where the person in front of me was so calm that he waved his hands all through the ride. I've also had to duck the vomit pieces at Myrtle Beach going over my head, because that person was absolutely loosing it. My point is this: We all have different reactions, and we all have different responses to the ups and the downs of a roller coaster ride.

Let me turn a corner and draw an analogy to all of that, because life has a way of making us feel like we are on a roller coaster ride sometimes, doesn't it? By that I mean one minute things are looking up in your life and all of a sudden before you can even prepare yourself, life takes a dive, and all of a sudden things are looking down. The thing that makes people fearful sometimes about life and fearful about the future is that feeling that the bottom is about to drop out in their world. For some of you, you would say, "Rick, the bottom is not about to fall out in my world. You showed up today and you would say, "The bottom has already fallen out in my world." You would say, "I'm already free-falling at sixty-five miles per hour." Folks the idea is, it's not when life is looking up that we feel down. It is when life is looking down that we feel down. Sometimes it happens just like the snap of your finger. One day you feel fine; you feel great. You go to the doctor and he puts an x-ray up there and says "You've got cancer." One day your finances look great. Things are looking up. The next day, the next week before you know it, your finances are in free fall. One day your 401 is on the up kick. The next day the market is in free fall. One day your marriage, your relationship, your girl friend, boy friend, husband, your wife, everything is going great for you, and then something happens, you can't even put your finger on it, and all of a sudden you are angry with each other, you are fighting with each other, you are talking divorce with each other, and everything is in a free fall.

One day you have a great friend that you love to be with, that you have hung out with for years, and something happens to that friendship. That friendship is broken and you don't even know why. One day your job is looking good. Everything is looks fine. The job is looking up, and then next thing you know it's going down. Business is

looking great, it is looking up. The next thing you know, profits are down. You don't know what to do. You're in free fall. One Thanksgiving, one Christmas, everybody is at the table, and the next Christmas, the next Thanksgiving somebody is missing.

Here is what I want you to understand. This is what we are going to talk about in the weeks to come. If you have a soul, we are going to talk a lot about our soul. Everybody say, "I have a soul". We need to get in touch with our soul. If your soul is connected, and if it is connected to four disciplines that we are going to talk about in weeks to come, you will stay connected to the peace of God, even when life is in free fall. If your soul is not strong, and if it is not connected to these five disciplines that we are going to talk about, what is going to happen is when your life is down, your emotions, your soul is going to be up and down and you are going to be riding the proverbial roller coaster your whole life.

Here is my proposition today, and this is what I want you to walk out the door with. Our world can feel like we are on a roller coaster. Sometimes the bottom drops out just like that. Sometimes it is a little more subtle. But I don't even have to tell you that when it does, it can cause you to panic, to make you fearful, and can even make you feel sick to your stomach. You may be saying, "Rick, I'm tracking with you on this whole thing." People come by after the service and say to me, "I'm on a roller coaster." Your question would be, "How do I not bottom out emotionally? How do I stay strong? How do I stay stable? How do I stay connected to my sanity, when the world is a roller coaster?" We are going to find out as we open the pages today to John, chapter thirteen. We begin this brand new series called "Roller Coaster", "How to stay connected when the bottom drops out."

I want to go ahead and warn you, just so you will know. Today is going to come across a lot more like teaching than preaching. I like to tell you that. Today we are going to lay a theological foundation, and build on that in the weeks to come. Let's look at what the Bible has to say about this life of ours. I want to give you two thoughts: Number one. Life will have its ups and its downs. And everybody says "Amen" to that. We should expect some thrilling ups in life. It is not all down. There are some thrilling ups.

Example in point: let's go back one more time to John, chapter twelve. Here is the up. John 12:12: *"The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. (13) They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna!' 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' 'Blessed is the King of Israel.'"*

Jesus had just raised Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus had been dead four days. In fact, Lazarus was so dead that his body was already stinking. His body was already

decomposing. It was already rotting. Yet, Jesus stepped to the tomb where Lazarus was and He gave a command to a corpse, to a shell, to a mannequin, to come to life; and when He did, a heart that was dead came to life and started beating. Lungs that were rotting came back to life and began to inhale and exhale. Lazarus, a corpse, got out and walked out a living man. You will recall, there were millions of people in Jerusalem celebrating Passover, the highest Feast day in Israel. They were all celebrating that, and many of them saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead, and they were electrified. The whole town comes out and lines the street as Jesus comes riding in. They are putting palm branches in his way saying "Hosanna!" "Save now!" They are saying, "You are our King." "You are the King of Israel".

Now, put your thinking caps on, and slip into the thinking of the disciples, because for the disciples, they were no doubt thinking that Jesus is about to be crowned. He is about to be crowned King of Kings and Lord of Lords. In their mind, they are thinking He is about to establish the Messianic Kingdom on this earth. The Messianic Kingdom is what the Messiah was going to bring. We read about that in the Book of Revelation, which Jesus will bring at the end of this age. But Jesus offered the Messianic Kingdom at His first advent. The disciples are no doubt thinking: "He is going to set up the Kingdom. They are about to make him the king." Folks, in all of their three years of following Jesus, this was the highest point. I mean, this was the mountain top experience. It was like click, click, click.

I want you to stay in this scene, because folks, the same crowd that one day was shouting "Hosanna!" in chapter twelve, just a few days later that same crowd in John 18 and 19 will be shouting "Crucify Him." In fact, listen to John 19:14. It was the day of preparation for the Passover. It was about noon. Listen to this: "Here is your king", Pilate said to the Jews. But they shouted, "Hosanna!" They shouted, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." They shouted, "This is our king." "What did they shout? They shouted, "Crucify Him". "Shall I crucify Him", said Pilate. Watch this. They say, "We have no king."

Folks, here is what I want you to get. You talk about a roller coaster dive, from John 12: "Hosanna!" to "Crucify Him". Here is what I want we need to know. Downturns in life are inevitable. One day the crowd is shouting "Hosanna!" The next day they are shouting "Crucify Him". One day they are shouting "Blessed is the king of Israel!" The next day they are shouting "We have no king but Caesar!" The crowd was skitsofrenetic". Here is what I want you to get. Life can be skitsofrenetic. Just at the moment you think you've got it all figured out. Just at the moment when you think you've got all the

finances in order. It happens! Boom! Something breaks. Just when you think you've got your family under control and things in control. Life can be skitsofrenetic.

Let's go back to the twelve disciples. Because the skitsofrenetic crowd gets more and more skitsofrenetic, the disciples become skitsofrenetic with them. In other words, as this thing takes a dive with the crowd, the disciples freefall with the circumstances. They free fall from one day being extremely confident about Jesus, to the next day being fearful. They go from being so excited about the King of Kings, but in a few days they go to a panic attack. Folks, from the Hosanna moment in John, chapter twelve, to the "Crucify Him" a few days later in John, chapter eighteen and nineteen, in that few days, Judas will go from following Jesus to betraying Jesus. Peter will go from chapter twelve, from following Jesus to denying him. From saying "I'll die for you" to saying "I don't even know who that guy is." All of the disciples are going to go from following Jesus, being loyal to Jesus, to abandoning Him in the hour that He needed them the most. They all forget Him. They are all going to go from this very high emotional time in their life to within hours, within days, to a freefall, to the bottom dropping out. They are going to experience all kinds of downers of emotion, including fear, failure, shame, sadness, remorse, and regret. We can all relate to that, can't we? We'll feel this downward, emotional feeling of having lost the one they loved the most. They are going to feel like they lost God.

How many of you have ever felt like you lost God? How many of you can relate to the roller coaster ride? I can too. Let me give you an example in point. When we lived in Charlotte, Rhonda and I were going to buy our house. It would be our first real house. We had saved during our entire marriage for this house. We had a total of sixty-one thousand dollars in the bank. That was our life savings. So with our money in the bank, we picked out a lot on the lake. Then we selected a house plan and we chose a builder. With all of that in place, I then cut a check for sixty one thousand dollars, our life savings for years and years, and gave it to the builder to buy our lot and to build our house.

I'll never forget: It was a Sunday afternoon in the spring time.. Church had let out. Rhonda and I and our girls, Natalie and Rebecca, go out to the lot. We are out there looking at the lot. It was springtime, and the dogwoods were blooming. Natalie and Rebecca running around the lot saying, "Daddy, I want my sand box right here." "Daddy, I'm going to put my tree house right here." I'm talking to Rhonda; "Honey, do you want to point the house toward that part of the lake or do you want it put toward the long part of the lake?" Folks, we were just having so much fun. This was a huge up click for us. It was a high point of our marriage. We were like click, click, click. But

within two hours of that moment, I get a phone call telling me that our builder had filed bankruptcy on Friday and he had spent every dime we gave him. So within two hours folks, we go from our house on the lake to “we are flat broke”. We go from “house on the lake”, to we are going to be in this little apartment, and our mother-in-law is living with us. We go from that to that.

I remember when I got the news: It was like I was going to throw up. I’m not joking. I remember my little wife saying, “Hon, it’s okay. We’ll just pretend like we just got married and start all over again.” I remember my daughters saying “Daddy, it’s okay. The apartment complex has a swimming pool. We love the swimming pool.” Folks, you see, this raises the question: “How do you not just dive into depression when life goes from these highs to these extreme lows? How do we stay up when life turns down? How do you stay up when life goes south? How do we do that?”

Well, listen: This is what I love about John, chapter thirteen. Here is how we do it. God has a strategy to keep you up when life turns down. Let’s go back to the narrative: The huge up with Jesus and the disciples happened in John, chapter twelve, with the Hosanna moment. Right? The sharp downturn happens in John, chapter eighteen, when Jesus gets arrested. John 18:12: Listen to this: *“An attachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials show up and arrest him.”* Folks, you’ve got to understand that from this moment when they are saying “Hosanna!” to the moment they arrest him is just a few days apart. Folks, here is what I love about our Lord. Because between the huge up in chapter twelve and the sharp downturn in chapter eighteen, Jesus does something amazing in John chapter thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen and seventeen.

You say, “Rick, what did he do between that huge up and that down? What did He do?” Here is what He did. Jesus gathered His disciples into the Upper Room. He pulled them off the roller coaster. It’s like “Stop the roller coaster. “Pause!” Everybody say “Pause”. It’s like He said “Stop: Guys, get off the roller coaster.” And He got them off of that roller coaster and He gathered them into this Upper Room. Before the roller coaster went straight down the hill and everything just went bad, before that happened, Jesus said, “Everybody off of the roller coaster and up to the Upper Room. He gathered them together in that Upper Room. He began to talk to them, and for hours in that Upper Room He taught them. He shared His heart. He shared His plan. He shared His dreams with them. And all that Jesus taught them is recorded in John 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17. It all happened in the Upper Room, and we are going to look at this in the weeks to come.

But folks, what He has done in this section between the up and down, here is what He does. He prepares their soul. Everybody say "soul". He prepares their soul for the madness that was headed in their direction. You see, you have to understand, Jesus was God. That means He is omniscient. He knows everything. So, He knew what was coming. He knew He was going to be arrested. He knew He was going to be put on trial. He knew that He was going to be tortured, and beaten, and whipped, and flogged. He knew all of that. He also knew that He would be executed and that He would rise from the dead on the third day. He knew all of that was coming. But not only that: He knew that his disciples were going to fall into all sorts of failures. He knew they were going to let Him down. He knew that had the potential to crush them. So what He does is before they hit the downturn in life, He pulls them out off the roller coaster and He hits the Pause" button in life. What He does folks in these hours, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen, he connects them to four great practices that would keep them connected to the peace of God, and the ups and the downs. He pulls them off; hits the pause button. Everybody stops, and He connects them to four great practices that will keep them and you and me connected to God's peace, even though life is going down

Folks, here are those four connections that will keep us connected when life turns down. When life takes a turn down, here is what you need to do. Stay connected to God. Stay connected to others, God's people. Number three, stay connected to serving. Number four, stay connected to missions. Now, we are going to unpack that in the coming weeks.

Here is what I want you to understand. On the roller coaster there are four wheels. When it is in the downhill, there are four wheels that keep it connected to the track. That is why it doesn't come off the track. There are things under it that actually hold it and keep it from coming off. Just like that, Jesus connects you and me to those four connections. They are like the four wheels on the roller coaster. They are connected to God. They are connected to others. They are connected to serving. And they are connected to missions. Why? Because those factors, those disciplines will keep you connected to the peace of God when the world around you is out of control, going crazy, and like a roller coaster ride, it will keep you connected.

Folks, it all begins when you stay connected to God. You have got to stay connected to God. So, with that in mind, let's start reading the narrative again. John, chapter thirteen: The Bible says, "*It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for Him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. (2) The evening meal was in*

progress. That passage shows that Jesus knew that he was going to die. He knew that He was going back to the Father. The passage tells that Jesus loves us to the end, to the uttermost, to the extreme.

It says, "He loved his own, that's you and me, who were in the world. That's our problem. We are in this world. I don't have to tell you, the world in Miami, Florida, is ninety-five miles an hour down ninety-five. It's just crazy break-neck speed. Folks, what happens when we are moving that fast in life and life is going that fast? What tends to get ignored is our soul. You know what your soul is. Your soul is you. It is who you really are. Your soul is that part of you that can love, that can feel, that can dream, that can hope. Your soul is that part of you that can be happy; that part of you that can be sad. Your soul is that part of you that can be up. It is that part of you that can be so down that you are utterly depressed. Your soul is also that part of you that is connected to your spirit, and that can have a relationship with God.

Folks the problem is, in this roller coaster world that we live in, it is most often your soul that gets neglected, that gets left out. Our world is going so fast, and yet your soul is you. Your soul is who you are at the core. It is fundamentally who you are. By the way, this is why the believers of old Biblical days would greet each other with "How is it with your soul?" Has anybody ever asked you that? We are great at talking to each other about our bodies. We are great about having conversations about the exterior. We are terrible with talking to each other about our soul. Our soul is the core of who we are. It is that part of us that connects us to God.: Listen to what the Bible says about our soul. The Bible says, "My soul, thirsts for the living The Bible says, "My soul longs, yes even faints for the courts of the Lord. Psalm 103 says "Bless the Lord, O my soul. All that is within me, bless His holy name." You see folks, there is something within us at the level of our soul that longs for God.

Maybe you are here today and you are not a believer; we are glad you are here. Maybe you say, "Rick, this God thing doesn't really bother me." Listen: Yes you do care about God, because God has wired it into the very framework of your heart, or your soul, and it is in you. There is something in us that longs to be connected to the One who made us, the One who designed us, the One who created us. You will never be whole; you will never be complete; you will never have happiness that is sustainable until you have that relationship with your Creator. It is why He made you. When God made the decision to bring you into this life, when God made the decision to bring you into this world, he only had one reason and that was to have a relationship with you; not religion, but to have a relationship, where you walk with him and He walks with you;

you know Him and He knows you; you and God, dinner for two, doing life together. That is why you were made.

Let me tell you: Just because you are a Christian doesn't mean that automatically happens. In fact, if you want to get close to God, you need to pause and stay connected to God. By that, I mean we've got to learn to be still. It's not easy is it? Yet in God's Word He says "Be still and know that I am God." Translation: You would be hard pressed to know God intimately, to have a close relationship with God until you learn how to stop, until you learn how to be still. That is exactly what Jesus does in this passage. After the big high in chapter twelve, before the let down in chapter eighteen, Jesus said, "Everybody stop. Everybody get off the ride." And He pulls them into the Upper Room to fill them with His love, and His mercy, and His compassion, and His goodness, and His forgiveness, and His mercy. Just to fuel them up in their soul. Listen to verse one again. *"It was just before the Passover Festival, Jesus knowing that his hour had come for him to leave the world and go to the Father, having loved his own that were in the world. The evening meal was in progress."* I love that, because when you look at the life of Jesus, He loved to have meals with people, didn't He? He was just eating all the time with people. But you see, that was the cultural thing to do in Jesus' day, because when you ate with somebody you didn't eat just to fill your belly. You ate just to hang out with them. You ate to talk to them. Put another way: When you ate, everybody had to hit the pause button, and you focused on the person that was right there. That is what Jesus did. He hit the pause button so He could be with them. Let me tell you folks; that is what you so want to do. He wants you to learn to hit the pause button in your life. Get off the crazy roller coaster and just spend time in the presence of God. Just being still, and talking. You don't have to have high prayers; you don't have to sound religious; just talk and listen and enjoy the presence of God refueling your soul.

Again, we are in this world that is going ninety-five miles an hour. Sometimes we don't know how to stop, do we? We are great at going but we are terrible at stopping. In fact, we feel guilty if we stop. We feel like we are being unproductive if we stop. We don't know how to stop. Let me give you an image of that. When my wife Rhonda was a teenager, fourteen years old, her dad was going to teach her how to drive. They had a Maverick. How many of you remember the Maverick? So Rhonda gets in the car and Rhonda was great at the going part. She was awesome at the accelerator part of the drive. But folks, as she was pulling into the garage, instead of hitting the brake pedal to stop, she hit the accelerator again and she drove right through the back wall of the garage. She drove through the back wall and tore up the wall. My point is, she was

great at going but she needed to work on the stopping. So do we. We are great at going but horrible at stopping; yet we will never have an intimate, personal relationship with God until we learn how to hit the pause button; to hit the stop button.

So, what I want to do in closing is help all of us learn how to stop. So, I want to give you two thoughts. Begin each day by stopping. Let me tell you what that means. That means before you get on the roller coaster ride, before you get out there and start the day with the twists and the turns and the things you don't even know are coming yet, start the day with God. By that, I mean get alone with God and fill your tank with His love, and His mercy, and His goodness, and His kindness and meditate on it before you go out. Talk to Him! Share your heart. He is your Father, He is your dad. He loves to hear from you. Just spend some time looking at creation, and enjoy what He has made for you. You need to schedule a time. Only what gets scheduled gets done. Schedule it before the day gets crowded. Have a place where you do this.

Schedule pit stops through the day. Schedule pit stops through the day. You know, growing up in the Carolinas, I was exposed to a lot of Nascar. How many of you like Nascar? Now, I'm not that crazy about it, but that world was around me. One thing that I know about Nascar is that for a race car to survive a four or five hundred mile race, All of a sudden the car pulls out of the race and pulls down this road called "Pit Road" and the car pulls up. Just like that we need scheduled pit stops during the day. You just quickly pull up. You are not going to have a prayer meeting. You are just going to pull up. They fuel it up with gasoline. Put air in the tires. Somebody cleans the windshield so the driver can all of a sudden see clearly, and then within ten seconds, back out he goes. Just like that, we need to schedule pit stops through the day, when you just quickly pull up. You are not going to have a prayer meeting. You are just going to pull up and stop for a moment. Just recognize that you have a soul that needs fuel, and just remind yourself that God loves you, that God cares about you. Talk to God. "God, I'm going to have this meeting coming up. God, I need your help." Stop, and talk to God, and then get back into the rat race.

Here is what I have done that helps me. On my phone I have set alarms that go off through the day. When the alarms go off I stop and talk to God. At these scheduled pit stops through the day, I remind myself that my soul needs God. We need to talk with Him all day long.

By the way, in two weeks all of our campuses are coming together for a pit stop. If you serve in a ministry, or want to serve in a ministry, this is a ministry rally, from seven thirty to nine o'clock. We are going to praise God. Then we are going to pray. We are

going to pray for our souls, for our marriages, for our children, for our jobs, for our finances, for our soul, for the lost people in this city. It is going to be a night of prayer; nothing weird; you are not going to be called on to pray, but we are going to pray for each other. Jesus said, "My house shall be a house of prayer." Folks, we are going to take a pit stop, two weeks away. We know that we cannot do what God has asked us to do unless we are a people of prayer. Be here. We are going to ask God to give us the power to do what He has asked us to do.

I want to close by reading this verse. "My soul thirsts for God. My soul longs, for the courts of the Lord." We are going to read a resolution to God about our souls. Read it like you mean it with all of your heart and all of your soul. God bless you.

"O God, I will not ignore my soul.

My soul is thirsty for you. My soul longs for you.

I will do my best every day to stop and
Connect my soul to you.

Lord, make me a person of prayer, and
Make Christ Fellowship a house of prayer."