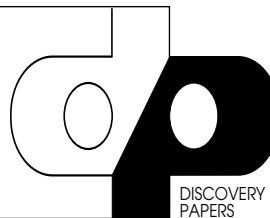


DISCOVERING PURPOSE IN THE LORD

SERIES: JESUS, OUR JOY



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Philippians 1:12-26
Second Message
Gary Vanderet
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As Christmas draws closer, I am sure the pace around your home is speeding up. I also imagine that your Christmas is not as Currier and Ives had pictured and that you celebrate Christmas differently than the Ingalls in *Little House on the Prairie*. This is why I was recently attracted to a new book entitled *Little House on the Freeway*. Walnut Grove has changed since they added the Pizza Hut, 7-11, and video arcade. Simple lives with home-spun ways have given way to off-ramps, automatic teller machines, and Quarter-pounders with cheese.

In a "Peanuts" cartoon I read recently, Lucy offered one of her unsolicited observations to Charlie Brown: "Life is like a deck chair. Some place it so they can see where they are going. Some place it so they can see where they have been. And some place it so they can see where they are at present." Charlie Brown replied, "I can't even get mine unfolded!" Maybe this is how you feel. You cannot get your life unfolded. With all the worry and hurry around us, it is sometimes difficult to get an honest perspective on life.

Though Paul's world did not resemble ours, his lifestyle did not look like that of the Ingalls' family either. In Philippians 1:12-26, we will get a glimpse of Paul's deck chair which was positioned to have a clear view of where he had been, where he was presently, and where he was headed. I hope as a result of the truth we learn in Philippians that we will allow God to rearrange the furniture in our lives so that we will be able to better evaluate our past, cope with the present, and prepare for the future.

Paul knew that the Philippians were concerned about him in his imprisonment. Having greeted them and thanked God for them with prayerful concern in the first eleven verses, he now tells them about himself. These verses are a window not only into Paul's experiences but also into his mind. This passage contains more than mere extracts from the diary of a fascinating man. It gives an example of true Christian living, the correct perspective with which to order our lives.

These verses, filled with "I" and "me," are Paul's personal testimony. In the opening verse, Paul looks back on the past. In verses 13 to 18, he looks at his present circumstances. And finally he probes into the future in verses 19 to 26. In each of these three sections, Paul gives his perspective on life, the common thread woven throughout the passage. I have rephrased Paul's perspectives into three exhortations to help us understand God's purpose in our own lives. Let us begin with verse 12.

I. VIEW YOUR PAST SUFFERING AS

PREPARATION FOR MINISTRY 1:12

Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel,...

Before Paul begins, he lets his readers know that what he is

about to say is important. Paul always used the expression "I want you to know, brethren..." as an introduction to something significant. In other words, this is not merely an update on his circumstances. He wants them to know something important about his past.

His review of the past can be summarized in one sentence: "The things that have happened to me have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel." Although Paul does not give us any details, they are recorded in the latter chapters of Acts. In Jerusalem a few years prior to the writing of this letter, Paul was falsely accused of bringing a Gentile into the Temple. As a result, he was dragged into the street and nearly lynched by a religious mob. He was then put in prison and narrowly escaped a flogging by pleading Roman citizenship. His case was a mockery of justice! Forty Jews even took a vow that they would not eat until Paul was dead. Eventually he was taken to Caesarea where he spent two years waiting in prison. Because of his appeal to Caesar, he was put on a ship and sent to Rome. On that journey, he was shipwrecked, bitten by a snake, and forced to spend the winter on the island of Malta. When he finally reached Rome, his entry was far from triumphant. He came in the company of the condemned, bound by chains and awaiting the uncertain decision of an earthly king.

Our past suffering can prepare us to serve others more effectively

Still imprisoned, chained and uncertain, he cried, "Why is this happening to me? If I had just stayed home that day in Jerusalem, this would have never happened!" No, those were not his words. That is what we would have said. Paul was not depressed, nor did he feel frustrated in any way. He did not think that God had put him on a shelf. He does not show us his bruises and ask for sympathy. Instead, he says that his suffering and imprisonment were far from being a negative experience. He exclaims, "What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel!"

Paul viewed his past as preparation for ministry. One controlling factor was the truth he shared in verse 6: "He who began this good work in us will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus." God rules. The pressures in our lives are created by the hands of the Potter who is also our Father. Paul knew that the fires of life he experienced were ignited by the Refiner. God does not abandon the perfecting process to others; nor is he ever knocked off course by the wickedness of evil men or the weakness of good men.

Have you learned this truth? Have your dreams lost their clarity? Maybe you know tears where there once was laughter, misunderstanding where there once was affirmation. Viewed from a human perspective, your circumstances seem to have prevented rather than prepared you for ministry. Remember

Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 1:3-6:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation;...

If we will allow God to work, all of our past suffering can prepare us to serve others more effectively. The very circumstances we would have changed and from which we longed to be freed are preparing us for who we want to be.

Three weeks ago, I spoke at the memorial service for a Silicon Valley executive and his 5-year-old son. Facing a disintegrating marriage, this man had committed suicide. Unable to leave his son behind, he killed him before he took his own life. The faith of the widow and mother of that child has been a tremendous encouragement to my own life. This week, she said to me, "Gary, there are so many people I have come across who have had similar experiences and know deep pain, but there aren't many groups ministering to their needs. Maybe the Lord wants me to do something." In the midst of tremendous anguish and days of numbness, she is already learning that her past suffering is preparation for ministry.

I want you to notice the word "really" which is included in verse 12 in the Revised Standard Version. Paul says that these circumstances "have really turned out for the progress" even though it does not look that way from a human perspective. Contrary to their surface appearance, the events of Paul's imprisonment had progressed the gospel.

All of our past sufferings are preparation for ministry. If Paul's memory had been focused on pleasant circumstances, there would have been no need to say that they "really" promoted the gospel. He purposely stresses the dark threads which the recent years had woven into the pattern of his life—the animosities, the physical pain, the lies, the injustices, the chains and the mental turmoil, the nearness of death and the continued suppression of the truth. Paul invites us to look directly at these sufferings, for they had resulted in the progress of the gospel.

After viewing the past, Paul then turns to the present to tell us how the gospel has progressed. Far from being negative, his imprisonment was a positive influence. There is a second exhortation in this passage. Look at verses 13 through 18.

II. ALLOW YOUR PRESENT RESTRICTIONS TO BE A PLATFORM FOR MINISTRY 1:13-18

...so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well-known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear. Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, rather than from pure

motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice.

As we have mentioned earlier, Paul does not elaborate on his own discomfort. When discussing his imprisonment, his desire is not that we stare at his chained wrists, but that we look through the links of those chains to the effect those bonds had on others. Paul constantly saw his restrictions as a platform for ministry.

First, he says those bonds were a testimony to the world. Verse 13 says, "...so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well-known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else." The Praetorian guard was a hand-picked division of Roman troops, the cream of the crop of soldiers. Membership was valued because of the numerous benefits including higher wages and living in the Emperor's palace. These soldiers were the future "movers and shakers" of the Roman Empire. We can infer from this passage that one of their duties was to guard prisoners awaiting trial before Caesar.

One by one these men took turns being chained to the apostle for four-hour shifts. Can you imagine what this must have been like? What a captive audience! I am sure that after awhile one wondered which man was the prisoner. These soldiers watched as Paul penned this letter along with those to the Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon. They listened as Paul talked to friends. They sat in wonder as leading Jews came to inquire about Paul's faith.

Interesting things began to happen. There is a reference in chapter 4 which Paul inserted as a delightful encouragement to the Philippians. He wrote, "Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household." That was the praetorian guard! Those young men were simply trying to live their pagan lives, minding their own business, but one by one they were coming to know Christ.

Now, who would have thought of this plan? Who would have appointed Caesar as Chairman of the committee to evangelize the Roman Empire? We certainly would not have thought of that. Paul's imprisonment, his limiting circumstance, gave him access to this elite group of men whom he would have never met in any other way.

Do you view your present restrictions as opportunities for spreading the gospel? Your prison may be a boring job or an illness that limits you. Perhaps you feel trapped being the mother of young children. You may be chained to a group of obnoxious associates. Maybe you are chained to an unbelieving coach. You wonder why you practice with the team day in and day out and never get to play in the game. There are no circumstances which cannot provide an opportunity for the spread of the gospel. Far from being a hindrance, your present obstacle can be an opportunity for God to display himself in great power through you.

Not only was the gospel spreading among the praetorian guard, but many Christians took the obstacle of Paul's imprisonment as an opportunity to speak out. Initially, the Christians were probably discouraged by Paul's imprisonment and may have been hesitant to share Christ, realizing the risk

they faced. But when they heard what was happening because of his imprisonment, many were infused with new courage. If God could use Paul in his circumstances, then he certainly could use them also.

The proclamation of Christ determined Paul's present decisions. He had even learned to view personal attack from this perspective. As Paul viewed the scene from his prison cell, he knew that all was not rosy in the church. Paul knew people whose hearts were at war with their testimony.

The preachers in the Philippian church were in two camps differentiated by their attitude toward Paul. One group consisted of those who loved Paul and viewed his ministry as God-given. There were others who were jealous of him and sought to cause him distress.

We are not told what Paul knew about those who were jealous of him. They appear to be Christians because Paul approved of their message. He would never have rejoiced in an impure gospel. Perhaps they were people who saw Paul's imprisonment as an opportunity to gain advancement for themselves. Now that he was locked away from the church, they thought they could gain positions of power and authority with their preaching. Paul does not fill in the details for us. All we know is that they presented the truth in such a way as to express their animosity toward him. To his credit, he was as reticent to talk about their sins as he was about his own suffering.

Paul did not even react to this personal animosity with rejection or excommunication. Our tendency is to judge the motives of other people's ministries too hastily. Paul's attitude caused me to wonder if there is any such thing as a pure presentation of the gospel. At times, I do not even know my own motives. Only God can judge the motives. We are to rejoice that the truth is proclaimed and allow God to deal with wrong motives.

Differences will remain in the body of Christ—different tastes, different stages of maturity, different ideas regarding the will of God. In Paul's mind, all these are secondary to the grand truth of our redemption through the blood of Christ and our acceptance by God in Christ. This saving truth controlled Paul's mind as he made decisions. Paul saw that the principle that governed all of history and his past had to govern his present decisions. God turns all events and people to advance the gospel.

This theme ought to dominate our thoughts as well. The proclamation of Christ and the advancement of his kingdom must be preeminent in all our present decisions. View your restrictions as a platform for ministry.

There is one more exhortation. Look at verse 19 through 26.

III. SUBMIT YOUR FUTURE CONCERNS TO THE ONE GOAL OF HONORING CHRIST 1:19-26

For I know that this shall turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I shall not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. And convinced of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again.

As you can see, the same controlling interest that governed Paul's evaluation of his past and his present circumstances holds true for the future as well. These verses are characterized by both certainty and uncertainty. Paul faced the same possibilities we all do—to live or die. His certainty involved his ambition and purpose; his uncertainty dealt with how everything would be worked out.

Paul's confidence concerning the future rested on the assurance of God working in his life. The word translated "deliverance" in verse 19 should be translated "salvation". He is not referring to being delivered from prison. Rather he was confident that God was using all of the circumstances in his life to produce a greater manifestation of Jesus Christ. Ultimately, it did not matter whether he was free or remained in prison, whether he lived or died.

There are no circumstances which cannot provide an opportunity to spread the gospel

What principle guided his future? What mattered to Paul the most? The answer is found in verse 20: "...that Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death." The future could bring anything, but Christ would always be honored. That word "honored" is better translated "magnified." Paul's purpose was not to carry a snapshot of Christ in his wallet to share occasionally with certain people. He wanted to show an enlarged, life-size Christ to all who cared to look—a Christ displayed in every area of his life. His desire was to be a telescopic lens, an instrument used to bring a hazy Jesus Christ into clear focus. As Paul's circumstances crushed and weakened him, taking away the areas of human strength upon which he would normally depend, he was able to take hold of the life of Christ. As a result, Christ's life could be seen in him.

Thus, Paul says the gospel was not only making progress in the world, it was making progress in him. The majesty of Jesus Christ was being manifested in his life. In fact Paul says, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Living is Christ—experiencing his life, drawing upon his strength, gaining his wisdom, and proclaiming his name.

Death simply meant having more of the same! In fact, Paul viewed death as a departure. The term translated "to die" was a camping metaphor taken from his tent-making vocation meaning "to take down a tent." What a beautiful picture! Death for the Christian is the end of camping and transitory living. It is the opportunity to go home, leaving behind all of our uncertainties and dangers. Although there is more to be

understood about life after death, one thing is certain: death is to be with Christ.

When he pondered the future, Paul was “hard pressed.” To die was glorious—possessing Christ. To live was also glorious—bearing fruit. This presented a tough choice, but the choice was not his to make. Somehow God had revealed to Paul that his ministry was still needed and that he would remain on this earth for a time. What a wonderful confidence Paul had! He knew that the Roman Empire could not touch him as long as God desired to use him. Augustine said, “Man is immortal, until his work is done.”

Do you know this assurance? Death cannot touch you until God is through with the work he is performing in and through you. There are no untimely deaths among Christians. Paul’s view of life was ministry. When that ministry was done and his work completed, he knew it would be time to go home.

In all three areas of Paul’s life—past, present and future, the Lord Jesus Christ was the controlling factor in his mind. Paul had a single purpose which brought unity to all of life. He had only one goal, and that was to honor Christ. Christ put meaning into every area of his life—making sense of the past, giving opportunity to the present, and bringing hope for the future.

The same is true for us. Jesus Christ is the key to all of history, and he is the key to our personal histories. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said:

We shall understand Christ only when we are prepared to decide about Him in harsh either/or. He did not go to the cross to decorate or beautify our life... We shall not understand Him if we make room for Him in one sphere of our life only; we shall understand Him rather, if we orient our life by Him alone... The religion of Christ is not a delicacy served after the bread, it is the bread itself or nothing at all.

We were reminded in the first eleven verses that God is working toward the day of Christ. Whether or not they appear to be doing so, all of our circumstances are preparing us for that day. The advancement of Christ’s gospel and its proclamation deserve preeminence in our mind.

Paul says, “Now as always Christ will be honored.” It is my prayer that the word “now” will be etched into your mind and heart. We must honor Christ *now*. Never again will we have

the opportunity to live for him in this moment, to please him in our present circumstances, to trust him with all the suffering we bear. Now is the time to live for Christ.

In *Living Above the Level of Mediocrity*, Charles R. Swindoll shares a letter which he received from a man who finally understood his purpose in life:

I have attended this church for about two months. I’ve reached a pivotal point in my 40 year life...I married at 18, had three sons by age 21 and spent years in drug and alcohol abuse. At age 25 I gave my life to the Lord but slipped back a couple of times.

A year ago I had a 23-foot sailboat, a beautiful car, a beautiful van, a beautiful home, etc. At that time I was with a new company and my boss said he would get health insurance but lied about that and other things.

Last February my wife had a brain aneurysm and almost died, but with prayer and surgery she lived. I lost everything but my family.

I drive an old car about to break down. I am broke financially and my new boss emotionally destroys me, but I need the job. I said it with my mouth that the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh, blessed is the Lord, but my heart was still bitter. In your message I could relate very much with King Nebuchadnezzar, and you ended with a story that hit my heart. I walked to my car with tears streaming down my cheeks and a pain in my throat. I came home and my wife and I cried and talked and prayed. At that time I gave it all to the Lord.

I know I will struggle in my life, but I see everything differently now. I am under-educated, but very talented. I will work as unto the Lord. I need a church home for me and my family and believe I have found where I belong.

Here is a man who is learning to view his past suffering as preparation for what he is to do now. His present life is a platform for ministry with a future hope of honoring Christ.

Perhaps you need to let God rearrange the furniture in your heart. As you do, it is my prayer that the Lord Jesus Christ will have preeminence in your life—providing meaning for the past, wisdom for the present, and hope for the future...

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