



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
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The Lord's Day, October 15, 2017

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God's Purpose and Circumstances
Philippians 1:12-26

From a biblical and historical perspective, one of the chief roles of a pastor is that of preaching and teaching God's word. To accomplish that effectively, there's no substitute for consistent, systematic biblical exposition. Other approaches are useful and needed, and I practice them. But I'm convinced that this kind of preaching and teaching is essential to our formation in Christ.

So this morning I'm beginning a six-sermon series focusing on some key passages from Paul's letter to the Philippian church. My prayer is that as we learn more about what Paul was saying in this letter, we'll be spiritually formed by God's word through it.

It's always helpful to know something of the background and context of a letter or document. Suppose you buy an old house from someone you don't know. As you move in, you find some old letters in the attic. They really don't mean anything to you. But you give them to the previous owner's grandchildren. They know the family history, and for them, the letters live!

It's that way with the Bible, too, especially the parts that were originally written as *letters*, like Philippians. Knowing more about the background helps us gain new insights and a deeper understanding. And that in turn opens the door wider for the Holy Spirit to use the book in our own spiritual formation.

So, a little about the background of Philippians . . .

According to Acts 16, Paul established the church in Philippi amid persecution. He loved this congregation dearly, and had a very close relationship with it.

Now the city of Philippi was a Roman colony, named after Philip of Macedon. Though located in Greece, most of its people saw themselves as Romans, since it was a colony. So the congregation was made up mostly of Gentiles who had trusted Christ.

Paul probably wrote the letter around AD 61 while he was under house arrest in Rome. The occasion was the return of Epaphroditus to the church with a thank-you for the love gift they had sent Paul. Paul also addressed some potential divisions or disunity that seemed to center around a strained relationship between two women, Euodia and Syntyche. Paul considered these women his fellow-workers in the ministry of the gospel in Philippi.

So Paul was writing to a congregation he loved dearly and that loved him dearly to thank them and to help them, especially in the area of this potential threat to their unity. He focuses a lot on thankfulness and on joy. But most of all, he focuses on their unity in Christ that is found in having the mind of Christ.

He begins the letter by thanking God for the Philippian Christians and his partnership with them in the gospel, confident that God will complete his work that he has begun in them. And he prays for them that their love **"may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight . . . filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of**

God.”¹

Then knowing that they love him and care about what’s going on with him, Paul tries to assure them about his situation by telling them how God was working through his circumstances. Listen to what he said . . .

Read text . . .

Paul’s circumstances

“Circumstances”—according to *Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, circumstances are “conditions surrounding and affecting a person.” They can be good or bad, positive or negative, hopeful or desperate.

As I said, the Christians in Philippi were very concerned about Paul and his circumstances. When they had learned he was a prisoner, they had collected a love offering for him. They sent Epaphroditus to take it to him, and told Epaphroditus to stay with Paul and minister to him as long as he needed him! Aware of their ongoing concern, Paul was now concerned about them and wanted to ease their minds.

Now think about Paul’s circumstances for a minute. Luke tells us in Acts 21 – 28 that Paul had gone to Jerusalem, been mobbed in the temple and arrested by the Romans. Then he had narrowly escaped a Jewish death plot, and had been in prison in Caesarea for two years. He was shipwrecked en route to Rome after he had exercised his right as a Roman citizen to appeal to Caesar. Some of the Jews in Rome apparently did not receive him well when he got there. On top of all that, he was under house arrest, facing the possibility of execution at any time!

Yet in the midst of all these things, Paul assured the Philippians that God was working through his own difficult circumstances to accomplish God’s purpose.

How in the world could he say that?

God’s work through circumstances

Well, look at how he laid out his argument.

First of all, he told them in v. 12 that his circumstances had **really served to advance the gospel**.

How? He pointed out two ways.

First, the fact that it had become clear to everyone that he was **in chains for Christ** had become a powerful witness to **the whole palace guard**. Now Paul didn’t tell us whether any of the soldiers had put their faith in Christ, but his imprisonment no doubt opened the door of opportunity for Paul to share the gospel with them. And church history tells us that in the early centuries when many Christians faced martyrdom, often the soldiers who led them to their deaths became Christians because of how the martyrs faced their deaths for the sake of Christ.

But that wasn’t the only way Paul’s circumstances had advanced the gospel. He went on to say that because of his imprisonment, **most of the brothers in the Lord** (and sisters, too) had **been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly** (1:13-14). In other words, Paul’s circumstances had fostered a holy boldness in them as they shared the gospel.

Paul went on to admit that some were preaching Christ **out of envy and rivalry**, while others were doing so **out of goodwill and love** (1:15-17). But for Paul, what was important was that either way, *Christ was preached*, and that made him rejoice (1:18)!

Paul’s attitude and understanding here point us to some important truths about how God works through our circumstances.

The first is that *Paul was more concerned with the advancement of God's purpose than with his own welfare*. And we should be as well. Now there's nothing inherently wrong with being concerned about our own welfare. That's a natural human instinct and response. But when placed alongside God's purpose, our welfare pales in comparison. That's why Christian martyrs have been willing to lay down their lives, and missionaries and ministers and other Christians have been willing to sacrifice and spend themselves for the kingdom of God. God's purpose must take priority over our own welfare! And we can have that attitude knowing that as Jesus told us in the Sermon on the Mount, when we seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, God will provide us with everything we need to do his will (Matthew 6:33).

The second is that just as it was true for Paul, *our circumstances often provide unique opportunities for witness* (1:12-13), a witness that's often more powerful and effective than it might otherwise be. In the 1700s in colonial Virginia, there was a Baptist preacher named John Waller. In his early life before his conversion, he was so wicked that he was known as "Swearing John Waller" and "the Devil's Adjutant." He was chosen to sit on the grand jury that was prosecuting Baptist preacher Rev. Lewis Craig for his preaching. As Craig made his defense, the Holy Spirit used his address to convict Waller. Waller was converted, and became a powerful Baptist preacher. In the following years, he spent 113 days in four different Virginia jails and was repeatedly scourged for his preaching. Who knows how God used his circumstances as he preached throughout the South?²

But that's not all we see from what Paul has said here. It's also true that *God often uses our response to circumstances to encourage others who face similar situations* (1:14-15). When they see how God has helped us and has worked through our circumstances, they gain a deeper confidence that God will help them too.

Years ago, I was preaching revival services in a rural church in Columbus County. There was a gentleman there who looked very frail. Though it was September and still warm, he wore a flannel shirt every night. We had supper with him and his family in their home one evening. I learned that he had been a builder, but was very ill with leukemia, and probably wasn't going to make it. Yet he had an incredible attitude. He was present every night (back when revival meetings went all week long). And we learned that when he would have to be a patient here at New Hanover hospital, the staff often called on him to talk with other patients going through similar situations to encourage them and help them deal with their emotional and spiritual struggles. Elbert would never have had the chance to talk with most of those folks otherwise, and he had a powerful witness and ministry to the medical staff and other patients in the midst of his very difficult circumstances.

Participating in God's purpose

Now Paul wasn't done yet. He continued his argument in vv. 19-26 by assuring the Philippian church that **the help given through the Spirit of Jesus Christ** in response to their prayers would lead to his deliverance (1:19). His experience and expectation remind us that *our prayers play an important role in working out God's purpose*. Prayer is about so much more than we often realize. We sometimes approach prayer primarily or exclusively as a way to get what we need or want. But biblical prayer has a much different purpose and focus. Someone has said: "Prayer is not getting man's will done in heaven, but getting God's will done on earth." When we engage in genuine biblical prayer, the Holy Spirit works in us to make us more like Christ, so that we come to pray as he would, praying for God's will. That's what praying in Jesus' name is really all about—praying with his authority on the assumption that this is what he would ask for

if he were offering the prayer! And what did he pray to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane at that most crucial time just before his arrest? **“Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done”** (Luke 22:42).

Desiring Christ’s exaltation

Now because Paul was more concerned with God’s purpose than his own welfare, and because he knew that God was working out his purpose to advance the gospel through his circumstances, he wanted more than anything else for Christ to be exalted in him, whether by his life or his death (1:20). He summed it up by saying, **“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain”** (1:21). He was torn between wanting **to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far** and staying on in the body laboring for the kingdom. He knew that staying on was what the Philippians needed to help them progress in the faith, so he anticipated that God would deliver him from his imprisonment, resulting in their joy and progress.

It can be the same for us. *Understanding that God uses our circumstances encourages our desire for Christ to be exalted in us.* It becomes our supreme desire!

Fanny Crosby, the blind author of so many beloved hymns, said as she reflected on her blindness since infancy that she thanked God for her blindness. She put it this way: “If perfect earthly sight were offered me tomorrow I would not accept it. I might not have sung hymns to the praise of God if I had been distracted by the beautiful and interesting things about me.”³

So what about us? *Like Paul, we can be sure that God is working out his purpose through our circumstances.*

The question is, will we submit to him as he uses them?

†MEG

¹ Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version® (1984 edition).

² <http://famousamericans.net/johnwaller/> (accessed 10-12-2017).

³ http://www.eaec.org/faithhallfame/fanny_crosby.htm (accessed 10-12-2017)