

Good Results From Bad Circumstances
Philippians 1:12-26
Part Ten

Last week I shared with you a news clipping entitled “Aid workers face death for spreading Christianity.” For those of you who were not with us last week, let me briefly explain to you a current situation that is taking place in Afghanistan. There are some Christian aid workers in Afghanistan who have been accused by the Taliban’s Ministry for Promotion of Virtue and Vice, of seeking to convert Muslims living in Afghanistan to Christianity. Under Islamic law in the portion of Afghanistan ruled by the Taliban this crime is punishable by death.

So today while we are sitting here in the comfortable confines of this church contemplating what we are going to do after this service these Christian aid workers are in an Afghanistan prison facing the prospect of death.

I told you last week that I did not know what they were thinking but I know what the Apostle would be thinking if he were in a similar situation. I know this because of the passage that we are currently examining.

The passage of scripture that we are currently examining is Phil. 1:12-26. This passage of Scripture briefly outlines for us various circumstances in Paul’s life. The underlying principle of this section of scripture is that human circumstances lie in God’s hands and that God will use those circumstances to advance the gospel. The question we have been asking is, “How did God use Paul’s circumstances to in fact do this?”

In VV. 12-18a Paul explains to us how God was using his present circumstances to accomplish this. The first of Paul’s present circumstances that God used to advance the gospel were his chains (VV. 12-14). We saw this in **VV. 12-14.** The second of Paul’s present circumstances that God used to advance the Gospel were professing Christians who were preaching Christ from impure motives (VV. 15-18). We saw this in **VV. 15-18.**

At the end of **V. 18** when Paul says, “**And I will rejoice**”, we see him no longer looking at his present circumstances but rather we see him beginning to look at his future circumstances. He begins in **VV. 19-20** by looking at his distant future; his ultimate deliverance or ultimate salvation but then he quickly transitions into considering his unfolding crisis and expresses confidence that God will even use his unfolding crisis to advance the gospel. Paul’s unfolding crisis is the third circumstance that God will use to advance the Gospel(VV. 21-26).

As Paul transitions from thinking about his confident expectation of ultimate deliverance to his confident expectation of God using his unfolding crisis to advance the gospel he introduces a very deeply rooted conviction in **V. 21.** Let us read this verse, “**For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.**” This deeply rooted conviction helps us to understand

the various thoughts Paul shares with the Philippians in **VV. 22-26**. Let me read this section of Scripture for you and I will be reading from the NAS.

(22) 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. (23) But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; (24) yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. (25) And convinced of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, (26) so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again.”

What do we see filling the mind of Paul in the midst of his unfolding crisis? Paul in the midst of his unfolding crisis was torn between remaining alive so that he might continue in fruitful labor and dying so that he might go and be with Christ. I don't know what is in the mind of these Christian aid workers in Afghanistan but I do know what was on the mind of the apostle Paul. And I would hope that this morning we might be able to personally identify with Paul's struggle. I would hope that we ourselves can personally identify with how Paul was being torn by two very specific but opposing desires. What were those two desires?

The first desire he highlights in this section of scripture is his desire to live so that he might continue in fruitful labor (V. 22). Let us read **V. 22 “But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me”**

If I were to ask someone in the world the question “Why do you want to continue to live?”, what would they say? They might say, “I want to live because I want to get married.” Another person might say, “I want to live because I want to see my children grow up.” Another person might say, “I want to live because I want to retire and travel and see places I have never seen.” Now certainly these are all very understandable desires but this is not the answer that the Apostle Paul would give. What did he say? **“But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me”** Paul is saying in effect “I want to live because it means that I can continue to do the work of Christ.” What did that specifically mean for the Apostle Paul.

A ministry had been given to the Apostle Paul by God. He was appointed an apostle to the Gentiles, and his heart was burdened to reach them with the Gospel. God had certainly used Paul to in fact accomplish this. There were numerous Gentile churches that he had been instrumental in establishing, and he felt a personal responsibility to continue to care for those fellowships. The church of Philippi was one of those fellowships.

I have asked you what the world would say? I have shared with you what the apostle Paul would say? But how would you answer the question? I would hope that your answer to this question would be more like Paul's than the world's.

I would hope that your answer would go something like this. “I want to live because I

want to encourage my wife or husband in their Christian walk and to assist them in serving our Lord.” “I want to live because I want to help my children and grandchildren to come to know and love Christ.” I want to live because I want to minister the gifts and abilities that the Lord has entrusted to me in the church for the building up of the saints.” “I want to live in order to reach my neighbors, my workmates, my friends and family members with the Gospel of Christ.” Hopefully this is how would respond. Hopefully you would want to live because for you to live is Christ (V. 21).

What is the second desire that Paul introduces in V. 22 that is in conflict with his first desire. The second desire that Paul highlights in this section of scripture is his desire to die so that he might be with Christ (V. 22).

After giving us the reason why he would want to live he says, “..... **I do not know which to choose.**” This statement assumes that we understand the other option that he is contemplating as he approaches his trial and of course this would be the possibility of his death based on V. 21. What did he say in V. 21? **“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain”**

If I were to ask someone in the unsaved world to share with me their thoughts when they contemplate their death what might they say? They might say, “That I have lived a good life, a long life and I have no fear of death. I’m at peace.” Others might say, “I am apprehensive about death because I am really not sure what is going to happen.” Still others might say, “I really don’t want to even think about it because I don’t want to think about leaving my family and friends.” These are the thoughts that the world might have when asked to consider the possibility of their death.

But what were the thoughts of Paul when he considered death? He not only had no fear he had a wonderful expectation of immediately entering into the presence of Christ. For the Apostle Paul death would be gain.

I have asked you what the world would say? I have shared with you what the apostle Paul would say? But how would you answer the question? I would hope that your answer to this question would be more like Paul’s than the world’s.

Hopefully the thought of your death would be more focused on what you would be moving toward rather than what you are leaving behind. Hopefully the prospect of death would not be difficult for you because death for you would be considered gain (V. 21).

Living has advantages and dying has advantages and these conflicting desires are pressing very hard upon Paul. Look at V. 23 **“But I am hard pressed from both directions**” Why are these two options pressing so hard upon him? The two options of living and dying are pressing hard upon Paul because he is not simply weighing two opposing academic possibilities but a choice between what is better for him personally and what is more necessary for the Philippians. How do we know this? Let us continue to read the end of V. 23 and then V. 24.

VV. 23,24 “But I am hard pressed from both directions having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; (24) yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.” If he were to die he believed that he would immediately enter into the presence of Christ but if he were to live he believed it would be better for the Philippians.

I don't know what is filling the minds of the Christian aid workers who are now in prison but I know what would be filling the mind of the Apostle Paul if he were in that prison with them. As he would think of the possibility of being released he would be immediately be filled with all kinds of thoughts about various ministry opportunities that he would enjoy. But as soon as his mind drifted back to the possibility of his execution, he would immediately be filled with thoughts of going to be with Christ. But he couldn't enjoy both, at least not at the same time. Therefore he tells the Philippians that he was torn between these opposing desires.

Some of you might have heard about Franco Gonzales. He is an illegal alien from Hidalgo, Mexico working as a dishwasher here in Southern California. A few days ago while at a bus stop an armored truck drove by and when it was in front of him the back doors of the truck came open and a bag containing \$203,000 fell off the truck. He had a choice facing him. He could return the money or he could keep the money. These two options put him under stress. He was hard pressed from both directions.

How do we know this? He has shared with people that he was. After picking up the money he took it home with him and kept it overnight. And during the course of the night he wrestled with the pros and cons of keeping the money or returning the money. He finally decided to return the money. This of course was a wonderful thing for him to do. Certainly he made the right choice. But I would hope that there would not be a single professing believer here this weekend who would, under similar circumstances, struggle with the decision to return the money. But very much in contrast with this I certainly would expect every professing believer here this morning to struggle with their desire to remain in the world so that you can be engaged in Christian service over against your desire to depart and to be with Christ.

Now let me ask you a question. Why does Paul debate before the Philippians in this epistle his personal preference in circumstances whose outcome he cannot control? The outcome is really in the hands of the Roman courts. So why does he do this? Paul debates his personal preference in circumstances because he wants to serve as a model for the Philippian church (Phil. 3:17; 4:9). Listen to **Phil. 3:17 “Brethren join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.”** And again we see this in **Phil. 4:9 “The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things; and the God of peace shall be with you.”** Paul wants to be an example that the Philippians could follow and that is why he is debating the various options and his personal preferences before them.

Let me ask you this question, “What is Paul's personal preference between living or

dying?” His personal preference was to die. What did Paul say about his death? It “was very much better.”

But what did he choose. Though dying was Paul’s personal preference his choice was to live (VV. 25,26). Paul’s debate before the Philippians served as an example because it allowed them to see that though his preference was to die and be with Christ his personal choice was to live in order to serve them. His personal choice was that he would “remain and continue with them for their progress and joy in the faith.”

Let us read **VV. 24-26** ““(24) **Yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake, (25) and convinced of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, (26) so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again.**”

Why did he think he was going to remain on in the flesh? The reason why he felt he would continue on in the flesh was not because he had some kind of special revelation but rather because of his personal conviction that the Philippians needed him (V. 25). In effect in **V. 25** he is telling the Philippians, “I would prefer to die and be with Christ but because of my love and concern for you if it were my choice to make I would choose to remain.”

And what does Paul see the result of his remaining and continuing to serve the Philippians would be? Listen to **V. 26** “**So that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again.**” We cannot in any way when reading this be led to believe that Paul is seeking to direct any personal attention to himself when he speaks about their proud confidence in him. Certainly they will be excited about seeing Paul if this happens. Certainly they should esteem Paul for his faithfulness. But all the praise for whatever they might see in Paul’s life should be directed to Christ. This is why Paul adds the phrase “may abound in Christ Jesus.”

CONCLUSION

Phil. 1:12-26 outlines for us the circumstances of Paul’s life. The underlying principle of this section of Scripture is that God will use our circumstances to advance the Gospel. Paul wants the Philippians to understand this so that they would know that he is doing well and rejoicing. He is rejoicing in the midst of his chains. He is rejoicing even when the gospel is being preached by his opponents out of impure motives. And as he looks to the future he will continue to rejoice not because he sees himself going into Christ’s presence which would be better for him. But more importantly he sees himself being able to continue to advance the gospel and this would be better for the Philippians.

What a great attitude..... the attitude of Christ.....