

Paul's Letter to the Philippians: The Centrality of Jesus
Philippians 1:12-30
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Have you ever heard the statement, *"Your perspective is your reality?"* It's true, you know. You and I can look at the exact same situation and see it very differently based on our perspective. I recently read a book titled, Leadership and Self-Deception. The authors make the point that how we view others in any relationship—whether work colleagues, our spouse or our children, makes all the difference in the world. The book's sub-title is, *"Getting Out of the Box."* When we're in "our box" everything is colored in a way that causes us to see others in a poor light while we view ourselves as blameless. When we're able to step out of our boxes, we see ourselves and others more objectively. It's a powerful concept.

My question for us this morning is, *"What box are you viewing your current circumstances from?"* Are you fixated on how the coronavirus is negatively affecting you and those you love or are you able to focus on its impact on others? Are you lamenting all the quarantine is causing you to miss out on or are you able to see God at work and embrace the new opportunities this season presents? Like many of you, I find maintaining a positive perspective during this season challenging, so I'm not trying to make you feel bad or hold myself up as a paragon of positivity. My hope is that as we look at the Apostle Paul's words in Philippians, we're able to re-focus—to step out of our boxes so we can view what's happening from God's perspective.

As I studied verses 12-30 of Philippians chapter 1, two themes bubbled to the surface that I want us to focus on this morning: **Paul's perspective** and **God's purposes being realized even amidst challenging circumstances**. I encourage you to look for those themes as our passage from Philippians is read.

It's a blessing for me to welcome Bob & Heather Beaty to our service. Bob is the Bishop of our Susquehanna Conference and Heather and their teenage children, Ty and Alana, attend McBIC. Before Heather reads Philippians chapter 1 verses 12-30, I've asked Bob to share some words of greeting with us.

Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. ¹³As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

¹⁵It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²²If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

²⁷Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel ²⁸without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. ²⁹For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, ³⁰since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

As we'll see throughout his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul was able to maintain a positive perspective despite the circumstances in which he found himself. As he wrote this letter, Paul was literally in "a box"—a prison cell, likely in Ephesus—and yet he refused to allow the confines of the box he was in define his perspective. In Acts chapter 16 we read that after planting the church in Philippi, Paul and his traveling companion, Silas, were imprisoned for delivering a slave girl from demonic oppression. The girl's demonization allowed her to earn a great deal of money for her owners by telling people their future, and after Paul commanded the evil spirit to leave her, the girl regained her senses and her ability to predict the future left with the evil spirit. When her owners realized they could no longer make money from her abilities they stirred up a crowd in the city with their claim, "*These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.*" Vv. 20 & 21 As a result, Paul and Silas were stripped and beaten with rods and then

thrown into prison. In prison Paul and Silas sang praises to God and God sent an earthquake that shook the prison and freed them from their chains. You can read the full story in Acts chapter 16,

Paul experienced persecution in Philippi and the followers of Jesus he wrote this letter to, also faced the very real threat of persecution. Paul alludes to their persecution when he wrote, *“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.”* Vv. 27 & 28 Paul wrote this letter from prison, yet he was able to maintain a God-focused kingdom perspective.

- Instead of focusing on his personal discomfort or inconvenience, Paul was able to see God’s kingdom advancing. It enabled him to say, *“What has happened to me has actually served to advance the Gospel.”* v. 12
- Some people tried to take advantage of Paul’s imprisonment by promoting themselves and their own preaching. Paul writes, *“[Some] preach Christ out of selfish ambition, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.”* v. 17 Rather than getting upset about those who were working against him, Paul rejoiced that God’s truth was being preached, even if the preachers’ intended to discredit Paul.
- In verses 18-20 Paul says he will continue to rejoice, because what is happening to him will ultimately lead to his deliverance one way or another. And then he says, *“For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”* This may be the most remarkable statement Paul makes in his letter. Paul’s perspective was that whether he lives or dies, he wins. If he lives, he’ll continue working for Jesus and if he dies, he’ll be in Jesus’ presence. That, my friends, is great perspective to have.
- Paul concludes by trying to transfer his perspective to the Philippians. In v. 29 he says, *“For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.”* Paul’s God-focused Kingdom perspective allows him to believe that in suffering we’re not just enduring abuse and pain, we’re following in the footsteps of our master, Jesus. From this perspective suffering is a privilege we share with our savior.

The other insight I observe from this passage is that Paul’s God-focused kingdom

perspective allowed him to recognize where God was at work even in the most difficult circumstances. Pause and think about this with me for a minute. Paul was the leading evangelist and church planter in the 1st Century. After meeting Jesus on the Damascus Road and having his life radically transformed, he gave his life to traveling from place to place preaching the Gospel of Jesus, planting churches and discipling followers of Jesus. Can you imagine how difficult it was for him to be contained in a prison cell? He wanted to preach and see people come to Christ; he wanted to plant churches; he wanted to see cities and nations transformed by Jesus, just like his own life was transformed. He was undoubtedly praying fervently and asking others to pray that he would be released from prison so he could get on with the work of advancing Jesus' kingdom, but still, Paul languished in prison. And spending time in prison wasn't new to Paul. He was imprisoned in Philippi, in Ephesus, in Jerusalem and in Rome and possibly other places as well. And yet he was able to embrace a perspective that viewed even his imprisonment as serving to advance God's purposes.

Paul says his imprisonment has helped accomplish God's purposes in the following ways: Paul's prison guards and everyone else who came in contact with him knew that he was in chains for Jesus; followers of Jesus in Ephesus have been emboldened to speak more courageously, because of Paul's example; more people are preaching; and, Paul's imprisonment has led more people to pray.

Paul's perspective was amazing. Despite his personal hardship, he was able to see how his imprisonment was advancing the spread of the Gospel. We're not literally imprisoned—though to some of us it may feel like it—and we're not being persecuted and abused, but there are parallels between Paul's circumstances and ours. As I studied our passage today, I was reminded of two passages of Scripture I want to share with you. I believe these scriptures are especially appropriate for us. The first is found in Romans chapter 8 and I'd like you—wherever you are—to read these words aloud with me...

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. If God is for us, who can be against us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

We often think we have a clear sense of the circumstances in which God could best fulfill his purposes in and through us...and those circumstances usually look a lot like us being happy, comfortable, successful and treated well by others. 😊 But God's promise to us is that He will work out his purposes for the good of those who love Him in any circumstance.

I'm also reminded of words God spoke through the Prophet Isaiah, recorded in Isaiah chapter 55 verses 8-11:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

Those verses frequently make me pause when I pray, because what I think I want and what I think is best isn't always what God wants. Take the coronavirus health crisis as an example. None of us like the fallout from the current lock-down we're in—the inability to interact with friends and family members like we'd prefer, the restrictions on work and doing normal activities, the loss of income many are experiencing and the anxiety surrounding people getting sick and dying. But God is at work. People are stepping up and serving others. Communities are rallying together to meet needs. Churches are setting aside differences they have and unifying around loving their communities with Jesus' love. And I've received several recent emails from missionaries we support in Thailand reporting how God is working in amazing ways in that country in the midst of the coronavirus—a country, which a decade or two ago, had virtually no Christians in it.

Brothers and sisters, God is at work in our midst. I encourage us—like the Apostle Paul—not to allow the restrictions we find ourselves in to confine us to a box where we're fixated on our discomfort and doing all we can to get out from under these circumstances. Instead, embrace a perspective that views life from God's perspective that seeks to serve and bless others and takes note of ways that God is working to accomplish his purposes.

I encourage you to quiet your hearts and allow God to speak to you as Hersh leads us in worship.

Hersh

I invite you to posture your hearts for prayer as I pray the truths we explored today over you...

Lord Jesus, I thank you that the coronavirus came as no surprise to you—it didn't catch you off guard. I thank you that even amidst the coronavirus we can see you working out your purposes in our lives, in the lives of those we love and in our world. Father, I pray that you would bless us with your perspective. Allow us to get out of the boxes of our own hardship so we can sympathize with the needs of others and so we can see you at work. We thank you that even in these circumstances we can rejoice in you and in all you're doing.

Jesus, I thank you that we can say with the Apostle Paul, "*For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*" As long as we live on this earth, we'll live for you and when we die and leave this earth, we'll be with you. That understanding helps put everything in perspective. Jesus, we commit ourselves to you today. We repeat the truths of Isaiah chapter 55—our thoughts are not your thoughts and our ways are not your ways. We thank you for the promise that your Word doesn't return to you empty, but it accomplishes your purposes. We thank you for your promise that in all things, you work for the good of those who love you. We submit ourselves and our loved ones to you today knowing you love us and you're working on our behalf. It's in Jesus' name we pray, AMEN!