

Gospel Friendship | Paul's Letter to the Philippians

The Main Thing

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Philippians 1.12-26

Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, ¹³ so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; ¹⁶ the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; ¹⁷ the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. ¹⁸ 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, ¹⁹ for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, ²⁰ according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 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 Convinced of this, I know that I will 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.

Last week we began to look at the topic of friendship in St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians.

Our point is that while we ARE drawn to friendship, we also see dangers in it – we know it'll cost us time and energy and TIME! (Who has extra TIME?!) “And if I give my heart to other people, I may lose ‘the real me’ and I MAY just get my heart broken!” BUT, we ALSO see that our true self will never emerge without the help of others and without risking and it requires GIVING our time and attention to others.

The Gospel, however, the basic message of Christianity, tells us that because God gave HIS heart IN Jesus Christ – out of that ultimate cost and vulnerability came LIFE and forgiveness and friendship. And when we receive that (by faith) it instills the security we need to be able to RISK and become vulnerable with others. God's sacrifice enables ours!

Today we see how that played out for the writer of this amazing letter. He was writing from a jail cell ...and yet he was astoundingly free. The apostle Paul was free to be honest with people, to risk, to endure heartache and betrayal and to SOMEHOW maintain this amazingly resilient and even joyous outlook. His approach is somehow utterly realistic (no denial or fakeness) and yet real security and peace and JOY (which is a huge theme to look for in this letter).

Paul's able to "keep the main thing the main thing" (as we say) and that's the secret (later he uses that word, Ch. 4) it's the secret that sustains him. Let's look at how he does it: 1) Two Things Which Cannot Be the Main Thing 2) The One Thing That MUST Be and 3) Some of the Results When This IS the FOCUS

We're all trying to be efficient – we're all trying to maximize our lives and spend our money and time and energies on what really matters. We KNOW that part of this quest is a matter of focus. So, we use our wireless devices or our old-fashioned datebooks and DayTimers to keep us FOCUSED!

Maybe you've been reading about the controversy at the New York Stock Exchange with trades that beat out the other trades by Nano-seconds and just that miniscule edge can mean millions of dollars and we're all aware of this in this incredibly fast paced world... We recognize our need to keep the main thing the main thing...but...who can define the main thing?

And this is where Paul, especially in these "prison letters" can help us. Paul has to slow down...like when a person is hospitalized or on retreat – and as a man in prison, he reflects on the MAIN THING!

And, in the course of his written reflection, Paul rules out a couple things. Two factors that OFTEN vie for our attention as being ultimate and Paul rules them out and sets them aside. The first is our present circumstances. Whatever we're "going through" or whatever the present crisis – the urgent – Paul says, "As important as the urgent seems – it is just NOT the ultimate thing!"

Apparently, Paul's Philippian friends have sent someone to see how Paul is doing because they've heard he was in prison. And they assume that this is an exclusively and ULTIMATELY bad thing? He's incarcerated!

But for Paul, while incarceration is never a pleasant thing, it's not an ULTIMATE thing! He is there in the cause of Christ and the Good News and he trusts that the God of the Good News is ruling in these circumstances...and Paul's actually seeing it. At least two good results have surfaced.

First, the Praetorian Guard is all abuzz with the news of Paul's arrest and they're all asking questions. If this is a prison in Rome as most scholars think, the elite guards (special forces) in that place are coming to check out this famous revolutionary, Paul.

"He was once a Jewish Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, the archenemy of all Christians but miraculously, as the story goes, he was changed and NOW, he's become willing to die for this Jesus of Nazareth whom Paul calls 'the Christ'".

"And did you know, he's right here in OUR prison?"

"Ya' don't say! I've heard of that guy – he's making a big stir in the whole Mediterranean World... and ya' say he's RIGHT here?"

"Yep!"

"Well, what crime did he commit?"

"He...uh...he insists that this Jesus IS the Christ and that after Rome put Him to death – the punishment didn't stick."

"Huh?!"

"Yeah, that this Jesus Christ rose from the dead and is alive."

"Really?!"

"Yeah, why don't you go ask him about it? He's right down there in Cell #12"

So, in this way...Paul and his crimes against the Empire are being made known in this elite circle and they're telling their friends and they're telling their friends and so on and so on... : "so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else..."

How could God get His message into this very exclusive but also influential class of people? Well, this letter shows that He is the Lord of circumstances!

The second result of Paul's bad circumstances was the positive impact it was having on timid Christians. It was literally "en-couraging" them – imparting courage to the Christians in that town. They were checking out this Paul and seeing that God's grace was sustaining the man. He looked like a regular guy (just like them all) but he's facing the iron fist of Roman Rule with composure and peace.

And Christians are concluding, “Hmmm, this God can not only raise the dead but can sustain His people in very stressful moments – THIS GOD CAN BE TRUSTED! And watching Paul helps me know that Paul’s God will sustain me. I need not fear! I can be bold!”

And the whole picture shows us not to get hung up on our own present circumstances – whatever is the urgent need of the moment is a part of a much bigger picture...and Paul wants his friends to see that their God brings good even out of the worst stuff.

Then Paul further narrows the field – not only are circumstances not ULTIMATE but also people and their intentions and their purposes – these ALSO are not the main thing.

It’s hard to tell exactly what was happening for Paul but it seems that some local Christian preachers were maybe sort of intimidated by Paul being in their town – it may have been like if you were the king of your local basketball court and everyone thought you were great but then LeBron James shows up and everyone’s attention shifts to him. But then LeBron gets injured and stops coming to your court. And then, you start sort of badmouthing LeBron even as you’re still trying to promote basketball.

So these guys hear that Paul is in jail and while they’re preaching the same message as Paul preached they also sort of slander him behind his back...hoping to take his place as the top preacher.

And these guys are preaching the right message but for the wrong motives and for Paul – that’s not the best-case-scenario but... it’s not ultimate.

For Paul, motives are a really big deal. He knows that it’s not ok to obey God for the wrong reasons. Take giving for instance: it’s not ok to give your tithe with a stingy, begrudging attitude because God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor 7.9).

But having the right motives and the wrong message was WORSE for Paul than having the right message with jealous motives.

Imagine if you had a deadly disease and would soon die from it but there was a vaccine that would cure you. Two doctors come into the room. The first has a grumpy scowl on her face and she doesn’t want to be there – BUT SHE HAS THE RIGHT VACCINE.

The other doctor is kind and generous and very warm-hearted and concerned but you know with 100% certainty that she has the wrong medication in her syringe. Which of the two doctors do you want to administer the injection?

And for Paul, the Gospel is just that: it’s the cure for the ills of the world. It is the MAIN THING. It is the focus of his life and it is the focus of all of human history and the focal point of all that God

is doing in the world. It's God's cure to make everything right and new in the world.

In the letter to the Galatians (ch 1) the problem was the opposite. People were apparently well intentioned but they had the wrong medication. They were telling people that if they would believe in Jesus Christ they would be restored to God... as long as they were also circumcised...and ate kosher.

And in THAT letter, Paul tells those well intentioned people that they were accursed! They had smiles on their face and warm, glowing, sincere hearts and they had poison in the syringe!

The Gospel/Good News is that God has given us a Champion to stand for us, to fight and triumph for us. Jesus Christ is that Champion and HE HAS WON THE BATTLE. He kept all the Law for me and He accepted the penalty for MY DISOBEDIENCE.

He trades places with me – He is treated like the criminal and I am treated like the Beloved Son. And it's given to me as a gift. Unearned. Undeserved.

I don't qualify for it. I don't undergo a ritual or even make promises or commitments or vows to GET it. I receive it – it's not MY promise to God – it's GOD'S promise to me.

And when Paul saw those well meaning, sincere, rosy-faced crackpots in the Galatian churches walking around with HUMAN EFFORT in their syringes Paul said, "these sincere people are sincerely WRONG and they're utterly deadly!"

But here, these folks are the scowling, jealous doctors with the one true CURE in their syringe. And Paul says, "Well, I wish they had good motives but sincerity won't restore us to God – only God can do that and THAT'S what these preachers are saying so... so "what then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice." (18)

For Paul, this was the ultimate thing – that God had stepped into the Fallen World. God had Himself, in Jesus Christ, God had assumed the mission which Adam had abandoned. And in the Last Adam, the New Man, Jesus Christ, the obedient Adam – God was reclaiming the world and God had begun to make all things NEW. This is not the doing of people who are clawing toward heaven – the Tower of Babel is a failed experiment! We can NOT get to God, HE MUST COME TO US and in Jesus Christ He did!

This is the ULTIMATE thing – the magnificent obsession. This is the Good News that changes everything. It turned imprisonment into something positive. It overshadowed jealousy and made it only secondary...and for Paul this was even more ULTIMATE than death itself!

So how will it work out in your life? If you are believing this, what kind of results can you expect to see and experience? We'll see a lot of these results as the letter unfolds but let's look at just a

few:

1) There are tremendous resources here against the torment of fear. If I am believing the Gospel and this is the lens through which I see life, then the things that people fear most lose their power. Here Paul is incarcerated (that's something people dread). He's a victim (as it were) of some sort of smear campaign (and that would REALLY hurt!). And he even contemplates death – but he is so astoundingly composed. It's like he's choosing the red shirt or the blue shirt.

“To live means that I will represent Christ and the Good News to YOU and to the world. To die means the final fruit of the Good News will be enjoyed in my own experience i.e. I will be in the actual, immediate presence of Christ.”

He has lost his fear of life and lost his fear of death... and lost his fear of everything else! This is one of the delightful benefits of the Main Thing being the focus of our lives. Believing the Good News wilts fear. I begin to see that even out of the worst stuff, the Gospel brings unimagined beauty. Huge comfort.

2) Both at the start and finish of this passage the word “progress” is used (vv. 12 and 25) and this is an ongoing hope and expectation for people who believe the Gospel – we can anticipate movement and growth. We keep on believing and God does actually bring change – joy, stability, hope, confidence, courage into our lives.

3) Last, we become doctrinal without being doctrinaire. We insist on the Good News as ultimate. We see that mixing in “human effort” into the syringe is deadly BUT we are not making our own doctrinal purity something that makes God like us or makes us superior over other people – that would be self negating; it would be another way to add our own human effort to the medicine.

We are insistent on only ONE thing and that is that God has won the day. Jesus Christ is the Prince of Glory and His life, death and resurrection is God's great cure – with no help from us.

To look at that and to “survey” it (as the song says) is to be focused on what is the measure of all things and is truly, infinitely enthralling.