

Philippians 1:12-18

Understanding the Furtherance of the Gospel

But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel – v. 12

Some of you that are at least my age or older may recall a book that became a bestseller back in the 1950's. It was entitled *The Power of Positive Thinking* by Norman Vincent Peale. This book was as famous then as *The Purpose Driven Life* has become in our day. Peale was not a minister that was renowned for his orthodoxy. In fact one review I found of his sermons noted that he never expounded a Biblical text in any sermon he preached. His book on positive thinking, as I understand it, amounted to pop psychology with a religious tint and was designed to be a self-help kind of book that would enable people to think more positively about things and thus be better equipped to cope with life.

I bring up the book and its title because there might be some in broader Christian circles that would be tempted to think that the Apostle Paul exemplifies this power of positive thinking. Here was a man in prison, after all, who would say in effect *it doesn't matter that I'm in jail the gospel is still advancing*. A few verses later you'll find him saying in effect – *it doesn't matter if they put me to death – to die is gain!*

Do we find in Paul a man who simply learned how to view the glass as half full rather than half empty? Do we see in him a man who mastered a discipline in thinking so that he could somehow psyche himself into seeing the bright side of everything even when circumstances around him were abysmal?

I don't think that was Paul at all. He did not simply master the power of some form of pop psychology that could be called *positive thinking* but he did master the power of what could better be called *gospel thinking*. Gospel thinking is not simply positive thinking; in fact gospel thinking begins in the negative mode. It begins with the honesty of acknowledging the guilt of sin and it leads to the sinner's mouth being stopped before God because his sin is inexcusable and only after a sinner perceives his hopeless and helpless condition does he then find meaning in the positive message that he is saved by grace through faith in Christ and that not of himself, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast.

Now our text makes it plain that the Apostle Paul did think in a certain way and he did interpret the circumstances of life in a certain way. It also makes plain that Paul wanted the saints at Philippi to think the way that he, Paul, thought. Notice how v. 12 begins *But I would ye should understand, brethren*. So he's addressing their understanding. There is something that he wants them to know. You could say, based on what follows, that Paul wants them not merely to know something factually but he wants them to be able to interpret something accurately.

He wants them to be able to accurately interpret the things that had happened to him. *I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me – and now*

comes the interpretation of those things that happened to Paul – *the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel*. The gospel is advancing – the kingdom of Christ is making gains – the church is being built. To borrow a phrase from the book of Acts – the word of God is increasing. The thing that would have made Paul’s statement seem incredible to the Philippians would have been the fact that Paul, the most prominent preacher of the gospel, was under arrest and was at that moment in jail.

What do you mean, Paul? – they might have asked. How can you say the gospel is being furthered when you’ve been restricted. Paul – you’ve been all over the Gentile world. You’ve taken the gospel to many places. You’ve been instrumental in planting churches, you’ve seen many great things happen for the advancement of the cause of Christ – but now you’re restricted – now you can’t go anywhere – you are no longer engaged in planting churches. You are, instead, awaiting trial and yet you say that the things that have happened to you have fallen out unto the furtherance of the gospel? Have you been misled, Paul, by some pop-psychologist that has tricked you into drifting out of reality so you can confine yourself to thinking only happy thoughts whether they are true or not?

I think you would agree that this statement in v. 12 begs for an explanation. But I think in contemplating the text this morning we need to do more than simply consider an explanation for a highly unusual statement given its setting. I think what we need to do is bring the truth of this text to our own lives in such a way that you can say and I can say that *the things which have happened unto me have fallen out unto the furtherance of the gospel*.

Is that true of you? Is that how you view your life? Should it be the way you view your life? That’s the way I want to ponder the text this morning. I want you to think of it in terms of aligning your life with it.

The things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.

How do we align our lives with this text so that this text speaks not only with reference to Paul but it speaks with reference to you? Consider with me, first of all, that if you would align your life with this text:

I. You Must Understand that Things are not What They Appear

This is why we walk by faith and not by sight. You remember the definition of faith given to you in Heb. 11:1 *Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*. We have a tendency to assign a false ultimate reality to the things we see and to assign a less than reality to things we don’t see. This is why Paul says in 2Cor. 4:18 that our afflictions are only light in comparison to our eternal weight of glory *While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen [are] temporal; but the things which are not seen [are] eternal*.

Now Paul did not want the Philippians to interpret life especially did he not want them to interpret the kingdom of Christ based on what the carnal eye saw in Paul's circumstances. Note the word *rather* in our text. *The things which happened unto me have fallen out rather...* You could interpret that word as meaning *instead of* or *contrary to* – so that the verse might be interpreted to mean this: *the things which happened unto me have contrary to how they appear or contrary to what you might think, have contributed to the advancement of the gospel.*

And so we're taught to read the things we see through the lens of spiritual truths that are not visible to fleshly eye. This is what is said of Moses in Heb. 11:27 *By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible.* If you are going to align your own life, then, with the advancing of the gospel then you too must learn to see the things that are invisible. What unseen things, then, could lead Paul to say that the gospel was being furthered, even when it appeared the gospel was being stifled?

There was certainly the unseen truth that Christ is in glory seated at the right hand of God the Father with all authority committed to him. And though such a scene is not visible to the fleshly eye it is nevertheless the truth of God. Christ himself made the statement before he was seen ascending into heaven. And though he is unseen by and large, there have been flashes of his glory. Stephen saw him standing to receive him shortly before he was put to death. And Paul was blinded by his glory in such a way that has led some commentators to think that Paul's eyes were permanently damaged. John saw him in his glory on the isle of Patmos and such was the radiant splendor of that glory that he fell at his feet as a dead man.

And it is through God's word that we see him in his glory the way Paul saw him on the Damascus road or the way John saw him on the isle of Patmos or the way Isaiah saw him in Isaiah 6 or the way Daniel and Ezekiel saw him in ways that defy description. It is through the Bible that we see the unseen things and we not only see them but we're taught how to interpret them.

We're taught, for example, that Christ did not take his position at the right hand of his Father in glory until he had by himself purged our sins (Heb. 1:3). You've heard, haven't you, the phrase that is applied to politics and economics that there are certain things – companies or corporations that are *too big to fail*. And the question that naturally arises in many minds is that if they're too big to fail then why do they fail? And the comeback is that the consequences of their failure are so great that the government, which itself is viewed as failing, must prop up these failing corporations.

If I could borrow that political and economic phrase and apply it to spiritual things I would say that Christ is too big to fail. And this is not to say that Christ needs to be propped up by the church so that he doesn't fail – no, what it means, rather, is that he's too powerful to fail and he's too faithful to fail and he's paid too high a price for his followers to fail. One may wonder about the wisdom and the ability of a government deeply in debt

to become the surety or that guarantor of large businesses but you need never wonder whether or not Christ will fail to be the surety for those he has redeemed. He has, after all conquered death itself and he has successfully taken out of the way anything and everything that could come between us and God. Sin had ruled over us but Christ has broken sin's dominion. The fear of death held us in bondage but Christ has delivered us from the bondage of the fear of death. The devil once laid claim to us but Christ was manifested to destroy the works of the devil. The standard of perfect righteousness had once disqualified us for heaven but Christ has given us his righteousness.

These are the things that Paul could see so clearly even from a Roman prison. And his perception of the unseen truths of the gospel enabled him to say that the things that had happened unto him had fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel. And I think we should note here that it is precisely at the times when things appear to be failing that the gospel in fact makes its greatest advances.

Christ's atoning death teaches us that. Didn't Christ's death have the stamp of failure upon it? *We trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel* the dejected disciples say on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:21). Their hopes had been raised high by Jesus. He had given every indication that he was the promised Messiah. He taught as no other man taught; he performed miracles and he won every debate he entered against the Pharisees. Not one of them could silence Christ but he had left their mouths stopped on many occasions but in the end he failed because he was apprehended and executed and not just executed but executed in the most ignominious way conceivable, he was crucified.

And so it appeared to the fleshly eye that he failed. But we have the benefit of the New Testament that teaches us that when it appeared he failed he actually in truth succeeded. He did redeem Israel and he redeemed spiritual Israel at the very moment those Emmaus road disciples thought he failed.

But now let's shift our attention back to the Apostle Paul in that Roman prison. It is true that Paul accomplished much when he had freedom to go about where ever the Lord led him. He led souls to Christ – he planted churches – he then revisited those churches and encouraged those that were in those churches. But then he went to Jerusalem against the better judgment of many. And in Jerusalem he accomplished nothing but to make the Jews so angry that they went about to kill him and would have killed him had not the pagan Romans rescued him. He remained under house arrest for years and had to appeal to Caesar in order to escape the plot of the Jews to take his life.

And so he travels to Rome and nearly perishes in a shipwreck and eventually he's placed in custody in such a way that he's chained to a guard. And just like Christ before him the Jews would have had occasion to think that they had at last put away the one who had been menacing them with all his preaching about Jesus of Nazareth.

And yet we must ask ourselves where would the gospel advance more? Would it advance more when Paul was out and about preaching and establishing churches or would the groundwork for its greatest advancement be laid by Paul writing the letters that he would

write from prison? I think you know the answer. Through those letters that would be written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and that would be inscripturated and preserved the gospel would advance through the corridors of time right up to the present hour and beyond into the future.

And so we conclude that Paul is right – the things that happened to him did fall out rather to the furtherance of the gospel. And if you would align yourself with the truth of that text in such a way that the gospel is furthered through you, then you must understand that things are not what they appear to the carnal eye. Nor can it be said that the things we've been considering are only true of a renowned Apostle. Paul himself broadens the application way beyond himself when he writes to the Romans that *all things work together for good*. Do you see how he broadens the application beyond his own circumstances? He also broadens the application beyond his own person when he writes *all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose*.

But let me try to bring this issue of the text closer to home. You must, to be sure, learn to understand that things are not what they appear. You must master gospel thinking which teaches you to view every circumstance in life through the lens of what Christ has accomplished and where Christ is seated and what Christ is now doing. But we can go further than that by saying that if you would align your life with the truth of our text:

II. You Must Understand that Your Mission Never Ends

Did Paul's mission end by his movement being restricted and his freedom impaired? Did he write to the Philippians and say to them *pardon me, I've been forced to take an involuntary leave of absence*? You never see a hint of that kind of thinking in this epistle. In fact you see the very opposite.

My bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places he writes in v. 13. Another English version puts it this way: *it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ*. Listen to these words from a blog article on this text:

Although the Philippian Christians might have expected otherwise, the apostle's time behind bars was not hindering his ministry but rather advancing it. The "whole imperial guard," in fact, had become aware that his imprisonment resulted from following Jesus Christ above all other lords, including the Caesar. Paul would have been supervised in four hour shifts by different members of the imperial guard, which was the famous Praetorian Guard, tasked with protecting the emperor and other important officials in ancient Rome. The apostle was chained directly to these soldiers even though he was allowed to stay in his own residence and received visitors, giving him ample opportunity to share the gospel with his guards. Word undoubtedly spread rapidly about this strange Jew from Tarsus who believed that a crucified rabble-rouser in backward Palestine was in fact the Creator and Lord of all.

Paul had not taken a leave of absence. Paul had not retired. Paul had not excused himself from Christian service on the basis that his circumstances had become difficult and he was being treated unfairly. He did not reason that as soon as his unjust treatment was rectified he would resume his life's work of ministering the gospel.

And the thing we must note here is that this phenomenon that we're considering was not unique to Paul. You remember some while back when we studied the book of Acts? There's a certain portion in Acts that I find myself returning to over and over again. It's Acts 8. It describes Paul before he was converted. He's having Christians arrested – he's consenting to their deaths and we're told in Acts 8:1 that the Christians were scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.

You would think that the ministries of those un-named Christians would have been suspended. You would have thought that they would have needed to retreat and regroup and then make new plans as to how they might get out the message of Christ. Instead we read of them in v. 4 *Therefore they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word.*

And let me remind you of something that I stressed often when we studied the book of Acts. Those scattered Christians didn't do what they did because they were more knowledgeable than others or because they had more courage than others. The source of their zeal is traceable to their simple belief that the Savior they served was risen from the dead. There were no "Evangelism Explosion" seminars. They were not graduates of Bible institutes. They were quite simply the recipients of salvation. They understood with the simplicity of a child-like faith that Christ died for their sins and the proof of Christ's atoning death was found in the fact that Christ was alive.

So what you find in those early Christians is the very natural and spontaneous action of those that believed with all their hearts that Christ had come and Christ had died and Christ was risen from the dead. It was in a sense the same kind of action that characterized the recipients of Christ's miracles that are recorded in the gospels. Can you keep a miracle a secret if your sight has been restored? Can you keep a miracle a secret if you've been delivered from demons? Can you keep a miracle a secret if you've been brought back from the grave? Or – in our case – can you keep a miracle a secret if you've been saved from sin?

Those early Christians couldn't – Paul couldn't. You and I shouldn't. And so the lesson becomes plain that our mission doesn't end until we're called home or Christ comes again. And there are no circumstances in life that end our mission. Circumstances may alter the way that your mission is executed but circumstances never bring our mission to an end. Your stage in life doesn't bring your mission to an end. One of the things I've come to realize the closer I get to retirement age is that those that are retired seem to have a common point of view that retirement is not all it's cracked up to be. One of the factors, I believe, that makes retirement difficult is a loss of a sense of purpose. There is always a sense of purpose when your laboring to provide for your family and contributing to the

advancement of your employer. And when retirement comes, all that is lost. Let me stress the point, therefore, that there is no retirement when it comes to the service of Christ. Your mission doesn't end when you retire from your place of employment. Your mission during your employment was not merely to earn money and provide for your family. Your mission in your employment is to serve Christ. That doesn't end when your job ends. It may take a different form – indeed it may open doors that otherwise wouldn't be open but the mission continues.

So if you find your movements restricted – you still have the mission of giving out the gospel. If you find yourself in prison – the mission is the same. If you find yourself in the hospital then take the gospel there. If the gospel becomes banned by the authorities that be then you consider that you have a higher authority – the authority of heaven beyond which there is no court of appeal. That authority says take the gospel to the ends of the world.

And I've come to believe that the most effective way to convey the truth of the gospel is not so much through training programs. I don't dismiss training programs for evangelism outright, I simply recognize that nothing conveys the gospel more effectively than a Christian who keeps such close communion with his Savior that he learns to speak of him as naturally and as spontaneously as you would speak to someone else of a friend.

I love the way a method of evangelism is conveyed to us by a single verse in Paul's letter to Philemon. In v. 6 of that epistle we read *That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.* Do you see how simple that is? This doesn't require a kind of training in which you learn to say certain things and then equip yourself to respond to certain critical arguments in a certain way.

The effectual communication of your faith is actually much more simple than that. All you're doing is openly and unashamedly confessing Christ as the source of every blessing you enjoy. Every good gift and every perfect gift comes to you through him. And every trial and every challenge in life is ministered to you by him and is designed for his glory and your good.

I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel our text says. How do you align your life with such a statement? You do so by understanding that where the advancement of the gospel is concerned things are not what they often times appear to be to the carnal eye. And you understand that your mission never ends.

I had thought to bring out a third point which would be that you must understand that the things that happen to you have an aim that goes beyond you. I think I'll save that point for our Wednesday prayer meeting discussion. Verse 14: *And many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.* Paul may have been stifled but others through Paul's circumstances were emboldened.

Let me close this morning by simply raising the question for your consideration: do you see yourself as being aligned with this text? Do you interpret the circumstances of your life

in such a way that you can say *the things that happen unto me contribute to the furtherance of the* gospel. Is that true of you? You should see yourself that way. It is as true of you as it is for any Christian that all that Christ puts you through is with the aim of furthering his cause.

You should align yourself with the truth of the text, therefore, by understanding that things are not what they appear to be to the eye of flesh and your mission does not end and the things that happen to you have purposes that go way beyond you.