

Seeing the Bigger Picture

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Scripture Focus: Philippians 1:12-26

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Lesson Summary: In the midst of difficulty, we Christians can seek to honor Christ regardless of the outcome even as we celebrate the good that God is working through the situation.

Encounter the Text

¹²Now 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.¹

As Paul pushes into this new section of his letter to the Philippians, he offers testimony that sheds light on his situation. While hints are littered throughout verse 12 and the beginning of verse 13 concerning what has happened to him, the tail end of verse 13 makes things plain: Paul is “in chains for Christ”. Paul, it seems, is in prison. Though the letter itself does not name the site of Paul’s imprisonment or its timing in his ministry, Philippians has traditionally been understood to have been written by Paul while under house arrest in Rome - a theory that lines up with the end of the Book of Acts. More recent scholarship has offered other theories about just where Paul was imprisoned. In my mind, the traditional site of Rome is sufficiently convincing.

More important than the where of Paul’s imprisonment is the effect of his chains on both Paul himself and the people around him. Verse 12 intimates that the Philippians assumed that Paul’s imprisonment was bad for the faith (note how Paul is correcting this line of thought). After all, the Apostle to the Gentiles and one of the most prolific evangelists in the church was being kept from his ministry! Indeed, Paul himself might have stewed in frustration for this very reason. Yet, Paul’s outlook is positive despite his circumstances. Why? Because he is able to see the bigger picture of how God is working through his imprisonment.

As verses 12-14 progress, Paul offers two examples of how his imprisonment has “actually served to advance the gospel”:

- Paul’s story and the reason for his imprisonment (his allegiance to Jesus) have become well known throughout the entire palace guard and many others. (verse 13)
- Other Christians have been encouraged by Paul’s example to share the gospel more confidently. (verse 14)

Have you ever gone through a difficult patch in life and found out after the fact that some kind of good came out of it? That’s what is happening here, only Paul sees the good happening in real time rather than just in retrospect. Of course, the good doesn’t justify or nullify the bad. Nor does it mean that God approves of the bad or that we should remain in bad situations because God can work through them. Rather, it means nothing is beyond God’s redeeming touch.

¹ All scripture taken from NIV unless otherwise noted.

Ultimately, we don't know how Paul came to realize the good that God was working through his imprisonment. Had he come to a point in his faith where he purposefully looked for God's good in the difficult patches of life? Or, was he pleasantly surprised to discover God working in the midst of his frustration? However Paul came to recognize the good God was doing, he displays the attitude of a person who is aware of a bigger picture. Surely, Paul would have preferred to minister freely. Yet, he also knows that God is not bound by his chains. Instead, the gospel advances despite and even through Paul's imprisonment. Paul's dedication to the gospel rather than his own comfort or productivity or glory allows him to applaud God's work even when things are going poorly.

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.

Paul has just told the Philippians in verse 14 that other Christians have been encouraged to speak God's word boldly because of his example. What good news! Here in verse 15, though, we find that this emboldened witness is something of a mixed bag. Some preach the gospel from a place of love and goodwill and affirm Paul's defense of the gospel from the confines of captivity. These are folks whom Paul can unabashedly encourage and applaud. Others, however, are preaching Christ from less than pure motives. These problematic preachers, Paul says in verse 15, are driven by envy and rivalry - apparently directed at Paul himself. Later, in verse 17 he says these same folks are trying to stir up trouble for him while he is in chains. Ultimately, we don't know exactly what was going on, as Paul doesn't elaborate on the matter. In this, reading the letters of the New Testament is a bit like hearing only one side of a phone conversation. We can piece things together pretty well, but we're missing the voice of the other person and key information shared between both speakers. That lack of information means we're in the dark on some points of the conversation and have to make educated guesses as we piece things together. A good guess here may be that the problem preachers are attacking Paul's credibility. Note that the goodwill preachers affirm that Paul is imprisoned for the defense of the gospel (verse 16). This seems to suggest that the problem preachers disagreed with a positive assessment of Paul's chains. If this is the case, the problem preachers may well have argued that Paul was not so much as an ambassador as an embarrassment. Team such an attitude with envy, rivalry, and selfish ambition, and it may be that these folks were aggrandizing themselves at Paul's expense and, as one commentator puts it, seeking to "[rub] salt in his wounds".²

Regardless of what exactly is going on with the problem preachers, Paul once again shows an ability to see the bigger picture in the midst of difficulty. We have already seen him model this attitude in the less-than-ideal situation of being imprisoned. Now, we see him model the same with jerks. These folks are trying to make Paul's life harder (see verse 17), and we might excuse him for holding this against them. But, Paul sees that despite their poor motives, the problem preachers are preaching the true gospel. This being the case, he can rejoice because the great cause of his life - the advance of the gospel - is being furthered even if it means that he himself experiences hardship along the way.

² Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 78.

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.

To this point, Paul has related the effects of his chains on the palace guard and surrounding Christian community. Here, in verses 18b-25, he turns attention to himself. He has already rejoiced over the gospel's advance despite this meaning he had to deal with problematic people. Now, he tells the Philippians that he will continue to rejoice, this time because he is confident that "what has happened to [him] will turn out for [his] deliverance" (verse 19). This talk of deliverance (which can also be translated as vindication or salvation) is a quote from Job. In that book, a righteous man's friends argue that he must have sinned to warrant the extreme hardship and difficulty he has experienced in life. When Job talks about deliverance, he is talking about being vindicated before God despite what humans say. Though Paul isn't completely clear on his own use of the phrase (is he referencing deliverance/vindication by the human or heavenly court?), I lean toward the latter.³ As the passage continues, we'll find that Paul doesn't seem completely sure that he will be released. Moreover, the very next thing he says has to do with not being ashamed and honoring Christ whether by life or by death. Paul, it seems, is concerned with God's view of the situation rather than that of a human court. His "eager" hope and expectation is that he will conduct himself well according to God's viewpoint.

Importantly, Paul doesn't put confidence in his own steam as he considers his Christ-honoring conduct. Instead, he is confident that he will bear up well under the pressure because of the Philippians' prayers and the help given by the Holy Spirit (verse 19). The NIV translates the part about the Holy Spirit as "God's provision of the Spirit". Literally, the Greek speaks of "the provision of the Spirit", which can refer to either God's provision or the provision given by the Spirit himself. I prefer the latter translation (the ESV takes this course as well). When Paul thinks about conducting himself well in his literal and figurative trial, he looks beyond himself to divine help and values prayers on his behalf.

As Paul talks about God-honoring conduct, another thing to see is that he doesn't reserve this kind of action for the tough points in life. Instead, he hopes that "*now as always* Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death" (verse 20; emphasis mine). Paul's entire life has been given over to honoring Jesus, and the present moment, complete with its difficulties, is an extension of the same. Knowing this about Paul helps us understand his next words in verse 21, which are some of his most famous: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." "To live is Christ" is a beautiful way of saying that Jesus takes up the whole horizon of Paul's life. In part, this means that his life is devoted to serving Jesus - see verse 22, which says as much ("to go on living will mean fruitful labor for me"). Yet, our lives in Christ are not only a matter of work. In Mark 3:14-15, we hear these words about Christ choosing the apostles: "He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons." So often we read something like this and jump straight to the part about being sent out, preaching, and casting out demons.

³ Garland has a good discussion on this, see p. 202.

Before any of that, though, scripture tells us that Jesus chose the apostles *to be with him*. Of course, our being with Jesus looks different than it did for the twelve, who knew him in the flesh. At the same time, Christ is present to us through his Spirit (the Holy Spirit), and relationality is a definite part of the Christian experience. When Paul equates living with Christ, I think that he is saying that his entire life, both in relationship and service, bends toward Jesus. The other part of the saying - “to die is gain” - is the other side of a life lived to Christ. To die and be with Jesus for people who live their lives toward Jesus can only be understood as gain!

Verse 22b starts something of an odd thought process in which Paul says he doesn’t know whether he should choose life or death. But, does he really have a choice? Ultimately, the verdict in his trial is out of his hands. I think this talk is more hypothetical than anything else. I once heard a pastor tell the story of a young mother struggling with cancer who called him late into the evening to discuss her situation. At this point in the sickness, the cancer had progressed, and she was exhausted from the treatment regimen. When she called, she was very much grappling with the increasingly likely possibility of death. As she did, she wanted to live for her children, but she also was tired and had come to a point where she also wanted to depart and be with Christ. That last sentiment made her feel guilty. The pastor helped her think through all of this and ultimately helped her put down the feelings of guilt. Now, ultimately, this mother didn’t have any say over whether the cancer progressed or receded. She did, however, find herself in a space where life and death were both real possibilities, and she was torn between the two. I suspect something similar is happening with Paul. With life and death both real possibilities, he is unsure how to view the situation. Importantly, Paul isn’t talking about sabotaging the trial or literally choosing death. He has already said that life will mean more fruitful labor for him, and he’ll go on to say that God can use him in continued ministry to the Philippians. In the end, it may be helpful to view this section from the vantage point of the example it sets for the Philippians. As Paul contemplates the possibility of death, he knows that it is “better by far” “to depart and be with Christ.” At the same time, there is still useful ministry to pursue, especially for the sake of the Philippians. This in mind, Melick notes, “The practical dilemma, therefore, consisted of whether Paul would choose his own preference [to be with Christ] or remain to benefit others.”⁴ In the end, Paul is convinced he will survive the trial so that he can continue his ministry. In chapter 2, Paul will call the Philippians to look to others’ good, and it may be that he is modeling that very attitude here as he relates his own difficult thought process.

Apply the Text

In this passage, we see Paul modeling several attitudes and behaviors that are part of Christian maturity. These include:

- Seeing the bigger picture in the midst of difficulty
- Living toward Christ
- Viewing death from the standpoint of Christ’s victory
- Serving others

Let’s take a look at each in turn.

Beginning with seeing the bigger picture, Paul displays the remarkable ability to see God working in and through his own difficult circumstances. As we mentioned earlier, this doesn’t make bad things good or mean

⁴ Melick, 85.

that God approves of bad things. Nor does it mean that we should stay in bad situations as if doing so is somehow holy. It does mean, however, that nothing is beyond God's redeeming activity. So often when things become difficult, we can't see beyond the horizon of our pain or frustration. Yet, what if God really is big enough to work even here? Can we lift our eyes long enough to look for his activity? Do we pray that God will give us insight into the bigger picture and show us reasons to rejoice even in our difficulties? As Christians, we don't seek out pain. We do, however, affirm that God is big enough to work good regardless of the circumstances.

As for living toward Christ, Paul sums up his life in saying, "To live is Christ..." That's great for an apostle whose whole life revolves around a special calling. But, what about the rest of us? Remember here that we Christians are all saints, which means that we are all set apart for God's purposes. This is as true for the parent caring for small children and the engineer as it is for the preacher in the pulpit. Actually, the whole point of the preacher and other "full-time" ministers is to equip so-called "regular" Christians to live toward Christ in the nitty gritty of everyday life (see Ephesians 4:11-13). Paul calls us elsewhere to do everything - even to the point of eating and drinking - to the glory of God. To live toward Christ means that we seek to honor him in all circumstances. That is a goal that all of us can embrace.

Moving now to how we view death, note that Paul doesn't fear or worry over it. Instead, he sees death as taking a step toward knowing Christ more fully. Ultimately, we're not quite sure what this looks like. It does seem, however, that Christians who die before the second coming will be with Christ in a fuller sense than we now experience. Then, at the second coming, 1 Thessalonians 4 tells us that Christ will bring those who have already died with him and that they will be first to be clothed in bodies immortal. In all of this, Paul understands Christ's resurrection as extending beyond Christ himself to his people. Because Christ conquered death, so also shall we through him!

As for serving others, we'll get to that more fully next week. For now, let's just note that Paul sees his life as a matter of service to both Jesus and others. Indeed, our service to Jesus very often leads us to serve those around us. Paul embraces this servant identity. We'll visit the mechanics of service soon as Paul turns to the topic of Christian community in chapter 2.

Resources:

In past studies of Philippians, I have consulted the following resources, which no doubt inform what I have written above. If you would like to find an approachable commentary on the book, I'd start with Garland, Still, or Melick.

Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians, 40th Anniversary Edition*

Markus Bockmuehl, Black's New Testament Commentary, Volume 11, *The Epistle to the Philippians*

Gordon D. Fee, The New International Commentary on the New Testament: *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*

David E. Garland, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 12: *Philippians*

Morna D. Hooker, The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 11: *The Letter to the Philippians*

Richard Melick, Jr., The New American Bible Commentary, Volume 32: *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*

Todd D. Still, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: *Philippians and Philemon*

Jerry L. Sumney, *Philippians: A Greek Student's Intermediate Reader*