

**INTRODUCTION**

“Perspective”, according to Dr. Webster, can be defined as “*the capacity to view things in their true relations or relative importance.*” That is the perfect application of the term to the normal Christian life in this fallen world, but only when the believer holds to the biblical understanding of both the “true relations” of the Christian faith and the “relative importance” of the assorted highs and lows which will be experienced during his or her lifetime.

Living the by-faith Christian life in “perfect perspective” – confident that God is at work for the believer’s blessing and His own glory, no matter what that believer’s present circumstances – is a spiritual discipline. If we are overwhelmed by our circumstances we are not fully trusting God. We are not, as Marv encouraged us last week, “walking with the Lord” by faith. We are instead “walking by sight”, within the narrow confines of our own understanding, which is often tyrannized by the immediacy of our circumstances. This leads not to personal peace, but to anxiety and uncertainty.

When describing Himself as the “Good Shepherd”, Jesus said “*I have come that they [His sheep] may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly*” (**John 10:10**). Later, while depicting Himself as the “True Vine”, He said “*These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full*” (**John 15:11**). Over the centuries many Christians have misinterpreted these statements to mean that Jesus was promising those who would follow him lives of abundance and joy without suffering and sorrow. In so doing, they have ensured for themselves “disappointment with God” whenever the twists and turns of life bring about hard knocks and tough times and, especially, when their prayers for deliverance – often claiming what Jesus never promised – are not answered to their liking.

“God’s Word makes it clear that trouble in this life is certain to come. Believers are not exempt from the common problems and difficulties all people face.”

- John MacArthur: *Philippians*

In the introduction of his commentary on **Philippians** Warren W. Wiersbe lists four “thieves” which can rob Christians of their joy in Christ.

- circumstances
  
- people
  
- things
  
- worry

Dr. Wiersbe calls them “joy stealers”, and that is just what they are, and what they often do – but only if we let them! Confident acceptance – contentment, even – with the promises and provision of God in the face of the inevitable uncomfortable circumstances and difficult people in our lives, the tyranny of things we bring on ourselves, and the resultant anxieties about circumstances, people and our stuff does NOT come naturally. It must be learned. But this “confident acceptance” WILL come, if we mature and develop spiritually “*more and more in knowledge and discernment*”, as Paul prayed his friends in Philippi would (**Philippians 1:9**). In this morning’s text Paul will offer testimony regarding his own confidence in God’s sovereignty and faithfulness even while he himself is languishing in prison. Let us pray.

### LESSON: **Philippians 1:12-26**

1. Remember, what we call the “book” of **Philippians** is a actually personal letter from Paul, who is under house arrest in Rome to distant friends eager to hear how he is faring. In the verses we have just read, he alludes to his recent past (v.12), describes his present circumstances (v.13-18), and shares his musings about his uncertain future (v.19-26).
  - a. Paul sums up his recent past experiences – referring most likely to those recorded in **Acts 21:17 – 28:31**, starting with his arrest in Jerusalem and including a harrowing shipwreck off the coast of Malta – with a direct simplicity which reveals his focused understanding of the Christian life: “*the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel*”.

“Put yourself in the shoes of the Philippian Christians for a few minutes. It had been at least four years since they had seen Paul; they had heard rumors of the things that had happened to him, and they were worried.

“At last news arrived from Rome and with that news a letter. The letter was written by Paul. At least he was alive. How eagerly they would have read it.

“You can imagine them reading through the first eleven verses of the letter where the references are only to themselves. Perhaps they read these rather quickly the first time, hurrying on in the letter until they received news about Paul himself.

“And here is some news. Many of the rumors they had heard were true, after all. Many unfortunate things had actually happened to Paul. He was still in chains. The future was still uncertain. Yet something else is true also. All of these things have really served to advance the gospel, and for that Paul rejoices. In one deft sentence Paul shifts the legitimate interest of the Philippians from himself to the great undeterred purposes of God in history.”

- James Montgomery Boice: *Philippians*

“One factor had, in reality, controlled the past. As Paul looks back he can see it and it is something that is always true. It happens not just for apostles and special people. It is true for every believer, for in each and every case ‘*He who began a good word in you will bring*

it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (**Philippians 1:6**). God rules. The pressures of life are the hands of the Potter who is also our Father (**Isaiah 64:8**); the fires of life are the hands of the Refiner (**Malachi 3:3**). He does not abandon the perfecting process to others; nor is He ever, in His sovereign greatness, knocked off course by the malpractice of evil men or by the weakness of good men.”

- J.A. Motyer: *The Message of Philippians*

- b. Having deliberately set his report within the paradigm of the Christian worldview, Paul now directs the attention of his readers to his present situation from the past events which had brought him to it.

- (1) Yes, he is in chains – literally. Although as a Roman citizen he had been permitted to arrange for private housing, he would have been physically chained to a rotating company of guardsmen. But, Paul indicates, each of these men had learned – by spending time alone with him and over-hearing his conversations with the visitors he was permitted, no doubt -- that Paul saw himself not as a prisoner of the Empire, but as a man whose “*chains are in Christ*” (v.13). He did not dwell on the adverse effect his suffering had on himself; he focused how God could use his suffering for the proclamation of the gospel to his captors and could honestly rejoice to know that the message of Christ was going forth beyond the walls of his private prison. His confidence in God’s sovereignty over his personal predicament had been transferred to “*most of the brethren in the Lord*” in the form of boldness for their preaching ministries (v.14).

“What is Paul saying here? He is saying that the principle which he sees as governing all history, and which has governed his own immediate past, must also be put to work in making our present decisions. That principle is that God directs His government of His people towards the day of Christ’s glory. Paul perceives that God turns events to *advance the gospel*, and he himself make his daily decisions according to what he sees what will best and most *proclaim Christ*. There is not difference in fact, only a different way of saying the same thing: one factor runs through all – Christ and His glory.”

- Motyer: *Ibid.*

- (3) Some of these men, Paul admits, have taken on a new fervency for the preaching of the gospel from motives not altogether honourable, but that doesn’t seem to phase him. All he knows is that, whatever their motivation – honourable or otherwise – “*Christ is preached, and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice*” (v.15-18). Such a completely selfless outlook we regard as possible only for the truly extraordinary Christian – a “super Christian” like Paul. This is partially true, for Paul, it seems clear, was an extraordinary Christian. But let’s get our ducks in a row here. It wasn’t that Paul was willing to live a life completely dedicated to the lordship of Jesus Christ because he was an extraordinary Christian. *Paul was an extraordinary Christian because he was willing to live a life completely dedicated to the lordship of Jesus Christ.* Get it? Paul himself will explain further in v.21.

- c. In v.19 Paul turns his attention to the future, and we see immediately that the same fervency for the glory of Christ which qualifies his present circumstances also fuels his hopes and aspirations. The “deliverance” he confidently expects in v.19 is NOT specific to his release from custody or rescue from the sword of the executioner. He makes this clear in v.20. The Greek noun translated as “deliverance” is *soteria* and is used throughout the New Testament in reference to the “salvation” of believers from God’s wrath on the day of judgment. It has been incorporated by Bible scholars into the term *soteriology* – the Christian doctrine of salvation.

“Like Job of old, he speaks of his vindication in the heavenly court, his final salvation. This is assured whether he receives a favourable or an unfavourable verdict before Caesar’s tribunal, the same confidence he expresses in **2 Timothy 4:8** regarding the award of ‘*the Lord, the righteous judge*’.

- F.F. Bruce: *Philippians* (New International Biblical Commentary series)

“Paul faces the same possibilities as we all do: he will either die or live. He is not a ‘know-it-all’ as he approaches the future. Even to his eye it remains uncharted. But his mind is made up on one thing: let the future bring what it will, *Christ will be honoured*. He leaves no uncertainty on this score: *...now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.*”

- Motyer: *op. cit.*

- (1) Beginning in v.22 we are reminded again that this is, after all, a personal letter – so personal at this point that Paul allows his readers a glimpse into his mind and heart. He becomes almost wistful as he weighs the possible outcomes of his present circumstances, probing his conflicted feelings – the “what-if’s?” – about what he has written in v.21. Yes, he is prepared, even eager, to move from this life. He has grown weary from the opposition and hardships he has faced these past twenty years. He is an old man now, and all the traveling has fairly worn him out. And that “thorn in the flesh” (**2 Corinthians 12:7-9**) is really starting to bother him. He is ready – even eager – to leave this life for the next, *which is far better* (v.23). Yet Paul is also certain that the continuation of his earthly life will provide him with opportunities for “*fruitful labour*” in the world, as always, for the glory of God, but also for the benefit of his friends in Philippi.
- (2) By v.24 his mind is made up. Were it in his power to choose, he would extend his life and continue his work for the benefit of his friends at Philippi! For the aged, weary, beat-up apostle, this choice is the sacrificial one, based entirely on his selfless assessment of what would be best NOT for him, but for others. By v.25 Paul seems to have convinced himself that this – an extension of his earthly life – will come to pass. The “vision” of the joy his physical return to Philippi would bring to the church there seems to delight the old apostle. We can almost see Paul smiling as he pens the words!

(1) Paul bluntly explains his theology of hope in v.21 with the bold declaration which has been set to memory by millions of Christians all around the world for centuries: ***For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*** In yet another “single deft sentence”, Paul has captured the essence of the by-faith Christian life when it is understood and exercised in “perfect perspective”: **Christ the center of my life!**

NOT me at the center. NOT my opinions, or my personal convictions at the center. NOT my sincere concerns about this or that at the center. NOT my “felt needs” at the center. **CHRIST THE CENTER!**

The center of my plans! The center of my thoughts and intentions! The center of my ambitions! The center of my relationships with my family, my neighbors, my fellow workers, my friends, even my enemies! **In my life, Lord** -- no matter what I’m thinking or planning or doing, no matter to whom I am speaking or with whom I am living, no matter where I am or where I’m going – **be glorified!** Right here and now: in this quiet place; in this dreadful mess; in this ordinary day; in this uncertain moment; in this desperate situation. *Be the center!* **Be glorified today!** *Amen.*