

God's Purpose in Our Circumstances

Text: Philippians 2:12-20

By Pastor Trent Boedicker

Our circumstances are always what we wish they would be.

Think of a boy, who jumps out of bed, on the first day of summer vacation. He has big plans! Finally, there are no more assignments, no class meetings, no writing projects or math workbooks to hold him back. He is free, and he has a list of all the fun things he is going to do. First, he is going to ride his bike around the block a couple dozen times. Then he is going to climb the big oak tree in the back yard all the way to the top. After that he plans to kick the soccer ball around in the grass. When he gets bored of that he is going to dig his fishing pole out of the garage and spend the rest of the afternoon at the pond. He may even pack himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich to take along for a picnic. He has been dreaming of this day ever since the weather began to warm up! It's going to be great.

But those dreams are soon crushed as he looks out the window. Clouds have blown in and it starts to rain. We're not talking a slight drizzle. It is a major thunderstorm, the kind that lasts all day long. It is absolutely pouring outside. Puddles are already forming in the yard. The sky is grey and dreary. It is a miserable day. Not even the birds are singing. The boy sits on the couch in the living room, looking out the window, moping. "It's not fair. This is the first day of summer break. There was supposed to be sunshine, blue sky perfect weather. I had plans! Now everything is ruined." His mom tries to cheer him up, and suggests other activities that he can do inside, but he doesn't want to hear it.

But then, something unexpected happens. As he stares out the window, he realizes that thunder and lightning are actually kind of exciting to watch. He is mesmerized. It's almost like nature is putting on its own fireworks show. After a while, the rain begins to let up and he sees the most beautiful rainbow in the sky. "Mom, come quick. You have to see this. It is amazing!" They run out the front door and gaze up at the sky. Maybe this wasn't such a bad way to the start the summer after all. "Just think," his mother tells him. "If it weren't for the storm, we wouldn't have been able to enjoy this rainbow." The day didn't go the way he had planned, but boy learns that something good can result even from the gloomiest circumstances.

Maybe you have come to experience that in your own life. There are times when things don't work out the way we had planned. We have certain ideas and expectations for what life should look like, but then suddenly it all goes sideways, and we find ourselves in circumstances that are less than ideal. Maybe it doesn't seem fair. This isn't how things are supposed to be. We could allow ourselves to become discouraged, and maybe even wonder why God would allow something like this to happen. From our own earthly perspective, there is nothing good that could possibly come from this. But maybe we need to look at our situation from a different perspective. Scripture shows us that God can use even the negative circumstances of our lives to accomplish his purpose. If we allow him to work through the struggles and adversities of our lives, he can bring about something unexpected.

We see that here, in the book of Philippians. One of the reasons the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Philippi was to give them an update on his circumstances. They were eager to hear how his trial was going, and as his friends they were concerned.

Maybe they were discouraged. It didn't seem fair. He was the one who planted the church in their city, and they had seen firsthand his devotion to Christ. He had traveled the world telling others about Jesus, but now he found himself in chains for his faith, waiting to stand trial before the emperor.

They might have worried about his living conditions. Was he getting enough food? Was he being mistreated by the guards who looked after him?

They probably wondered when a verdict would finally be reached. He had already been in prison for several years and they were anxious to know whether the emperor would set him free or sentence him to death.

It didn't seem like Paul's circumstances could be any gloomier than this, at least from a human point of view. But as the apostle wrote to these words, it was clear that he had a very different perspective. He wasn't upset. He was thrilled to see how God was using his situation to further the cause of Christ.

I like the way Steven Runge puts it in his commentary on Philippians. He writes,

Paul's goal in this section is to change the Philippians' perspective on his circumstances. He wants them to see that what appears to be a bad thing is actually a good thing. Why? [Because] God is using it.... If we allow our perspective toward the circumstances to prevail, it can make us utterly useless to God. Frustration can turn to bitterness and hopelessness, making us completely ineffective... The key is to see things from God's perspective. It is only then that we can find the hope, courage, and faith to move forward.¹

Sometimes we are so focused on our problems, the things that have wrong, the plans that have fallen apart, that we fail to see how God's hand is working in our lives. We need to look beyond our circumstances because God can use the bad things of our lives to accomplish something good. This isn't just a cliché or some theoretical idea, but the apostle goes on to show us specific ways that God was using his imprisonment for good.

Our circumstances can create opportunities for us to share our faith.

That was the case for Paul. In verses 12-13 he says,

¹² 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,

I sure one of the biggest challenges for Paul, while he was in prison, was not being able to spend time with people. All throughout his ministry, during his missionary travels, he enjoyed mingling with the crowds in the marketplace, striking up a conversation with those who were coming and going, meeting lots of new people, telling them about Jesus. But now he was confined in his quarters, no longer free to come and go as he pleased. We might wonder how effective his witness would be under these circumstances. How could he share the good news with others while he was in chains? Wouldn't this destroy his ministry? Not at all. As a matter of fact, he tells us that he gained a whole new audience.

His testimony had become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard. This was an elite unit of soldiers stationed in Rome. If you were serving in the Roman army this would have been one of the most sought after and coveted positions. They wore the fancy uniforms and received higher pay. They spent time in the palace providing security for the imperial family. They were the bodyguards of the emperor. From time to time they were also given special assignments, like guarding prisoners who were sent to Rome from the provinces to stand trial in the highest court of the empire. They were rugged men, trained warriors, who had seen combat, and they didn't back down from anyone.

These were the soldiers responsible for the apostle Paul. They took turns keeping watch at his residence. First thing in the morning, a new soldier showed up to begin his shift. He was chained to the apostle all day long until the evening when a new soldier showed up to take his place. There was always someone on duty, keeping a watchful eye on their prisoner, although I'm sure they quickly discovered that Paul was unlike any prisoner they had ever met. We can imagine the conversations they must have had.

[soldier] "What are you in for: treason, robbery, murder?"

[Paul] "No, I am on trial for my faith in Jesus?"

[soldier] "Who's Jesus? Never heard of him."

[Paul] "I'd be happy to tell you all about him. He is my Savior. He died on a cross for us. I was once lost, but now I am found. I was once a sinner, but now I've been forgiven by his grace. And you can have him in your life as well"

These soldiers were a captive audience, who were stuck with him for hours at a time. At first, they might have laughed and made fun of him. "This guy Paul is crazy." But over time they got to know him and saw that his faith was genuine and real. They were impressed by his devotion to the Lord, that he was willing to die for his faith. He took an interest in their lives, and offered to pray for them. That's not something you see every day, a prisoner who cares about his captors. They wanted to know more, and how they could find the peace that he had. Some of them became believers. But he would have never had the opportunity to witness to these men, if he had not ended up a prisoner in Rome.

God put him in the right place at the right moment to change the eternal destiny of these soldiers. And they were the only ones who benefited from his circumstances. He says that "...it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ." Think of the people he met during this period of his life: governors, kings, royal

officials, lawyers... The list goes on and on, and every one of them had a chance to hear the good news. Not all of them believed, but the seed was planted. Paul could have never come up with a better strategy for spreading the gospel than this. If people were saved, as a result of his imprisonment, it was more than worth it.

In **2 Timothy 2:9–10 (NLT)** he writes,

⁹ And because I preach this Good News, I am suffering and have been chained like a criminal. But the word of God cannot be chained. ¹⁰ So I am willing to endure anything if it will bring salvation and eternal glory in Christ Jesus to those God has chosen.

Don't ever think that your circumstances are hindering you from sharing your faith. God puts us in the right place at the right time to impact the people around us. It might be the family who lives across the street, or the person who works beside you, or the other parents in your child's soccer team.

And maybe it takes the difficulties that we face to get their attention. They've heard you talk about the Lord, but were never willing to listen. Now that they see how Christ sustains you through the trials of life, they realize that your faith is genuine, and real, and they want to know more.

I can't help but think about the last six months of my mother life. She spent most of that time in and out of the hospital, in Lima and Columbus, and then in a nursing home. These were not good circumstances at all, and it was certainly not where she would have chosen to be, but she became a witness for Christ everywhere she went. She had us print copies of some of the poems she had written, and she was able to talk to the doctors and nurses and her visitors about the Lord. Who knows how many lives were touched as a result?

If our ultimate purpose is to lead others to Christ, we can see our circumstances in a whole new light. Who are the people right now in your life who need to hear about Jesus? How has your situation created new opportunities to witness to them? Even now while we are isolated in our homes, we are able to impact others. It might be as you call to check on a neighbor, or it could be the grandchild who has been far from the Lord but has recently started to ask questions. It might be sharing the link on Facebook to a sermon. Rather than saying, "I don't want to be in this situation," ask the Lord to show how you can point others to Jesus.

Our circumstances can also help us inspire other believers.

Look at verse 14. *"...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..."*

When Paul was first taken into custody, he may have wondered how his brothers and sisters in Christ would respond. Here was a leader of the Christian movement, thrown into prison, and

placed on trial for his faith. This had the potential to send a shockwave of fear throughout the churches, sending believers into hiding, keeping them silent lest they suffer the same fate. But that wasn't the case.

Rather than going underground, most Christians were actually inspired to imitate Paul's example. They weren't afraid of what people might do to them, but found the courage to share the gospel. They were on fire for the Lord, emboldened to live out their faith, ready to face whatever challenges were waiting for them. If the Lord was with Paul through all of his afflictions, they knew God would walk beside them as well whatever challenges they might face.

Instead of demoralizing the church, believers were willing to step up and stand in the gap and carry on the ministry while Paul was in prison. It was the exact opposite of what you might have expected.

Now there were some whose motives were in the wrong place. He mentions one group who were preaching the gospel out of selfish ambition. Apparently, they were jealous of Paul and they were trying to shine the spotlight on themselves. But he didn't let that bother him. Paul didn't care who got the credit, as long as the good news of Jesus Christ was being proclaimed.

Think about some of the people who have been an inspiration to you in your walk with the Lord. There are men and women who have lived in such a way that you've wanted to follow their example. Maybe it was the way they handled adversity, or their devotion to Christ through every season of life. Maybe it was the way they drew close to the Lord in prayer, or their unswerving conviction.

When I was a student at Grace Bible College, I always enjoyed hearing missionaries speak in chapel. There were always different ones preparing to head overseas, or those who back in the states for home assignment for a year. I remember listening to a missionary who had spent decades serving the Lord in Congo. It inspiring to hear the passion in his voice. He was an elderly man but was on fire for the Lord. You could sense his love for the people of that country, and his devotion to God. Here was someone who had been willing to set aside earthly comforts in order to follow Christ all the way to the other side of the world. That spoke to me. It made me want to follow Christ, with the same abandon, not necessarily to Africa but to wherever God was leading me.

It is through examples like this that God's people find the courage and inspiration to live out our faith. Paul's example inspired the people of his day. Others have inspired us. Hopefully our example will inspire the next generation.

In 1 Thessalonians 1:6–8 (NIV84) Paul writes,

⁶ You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. ⁷ And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸ The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere...

Paul was excited to hear the report about that group of believers. They had seen his example, and were inspired to follow Christ through the trials and tribulations of life. And they, in turn, had become an example to those around them.

Maybe this is one of the things God is doing through the circumstances you are facing. There are people in your life who are encouraged by the way that you handle adversity. Oh, we're not perfect. We get discouraged like anyone else. But your faith is what sustains you through the trials of life. Maybe it's your children or grandchildren who are learning what it means to follow Christ by watching you. Maybe it is someone who has sat next to you in a Bible Study. You may never realize the impact that you have on others. But in order to have that kind of impact, we have to be willing to follow the Lord through the good times and the bad. No one wants to endure trials and tribulations. But if the Lord can use those circumstances to encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ in their struggles, then maybe it helps us to gain a deeper perspective of what it's all about.

I had a chance to talk to two of our graduates this week. I am so proud of how the Lord has been working in their lives. Both of them have been involved in our youth group and have volunteered the past few years to help with Vacation Bible School. This is such a special milestone in their lives, and we were excited for them. But I know this was a challenging year for them. The circumstances of their senior year were not what they hoped for. There were special events they didn't get to share with their friends. I imagine how difficult this must be. But I also know that character is formed through adversity, and through all of this they have grown stronger. I'm sure the way they handled this will be inspiration to the classes that are following them. Those younger students will be able to look to their example and say, "let's face our challenges with the same courage and determination as the class of 2020."

Who are the people who inspire you to follow Christ? What is it about their example that fills you with the courage to press on through the challenges of life? How are you inspiring other Christians with your example?

In **Philippians 3:17** (NASB95) Paul writes, "*Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.*" Are we demonstrating that kind of example to those who are watching us?

Keeping Perspective –

All of us have been going through difficult circumstances, the past few months, things we would rather not have to endure. I don't know why this is happening, or how it has affected you, or what else you might have going on in your life. But I do know that God can use the negative circumstance of our lives to accomplish something good. We don't always have a say in what happens in our lives. But we do get to choose how we respond.

We can allow these things to crush our spirits, and become bitter, pessimistic people. Or we can trust that somehow in some way our circumstances will turn out for the greater progress of the gospel.

We don't have to look for answer or try to figure it out, we can simply press on in the strength of the Lord knowing that he is good.

One day, we may come to understand how it all fits together to accomplish his purpose. But in the meantime we will endure, following Christ through all the seasons of life.

^{i i} Runge, S. E. (2011). [*High Definition Commentary: Philippians*](#) (Php 1:12–17). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.