

The Joy of Living the Jesus-Way

Philippians



PART 2: PROVIDENCE AND CIRCUMSTANCE

By Ricky Stephen

Philippians 1:12-26

Circumstances

Peace is not found in controlling our circumstances, but in not being controlled by them.

Even in hardship, God is at work. Paul writes from prison—with opposition and possible death ahead—yet speaks of joy and contentment.

In Philippians 1:12-16 Paul uses his own response to his circumstances to teach us how to approach our own circumstances.

The joy of living the Jesus way is not being controlled by circumstances, but trusting God is at work.

Paul talks like he has no problems.

Because Paul believes God is at work, even in these circumstances.

The theological term for this conviction is Providence.

Providence is God seeing ahead, acting, and accomplishing His purposes. When we trust providence we get perspective—we rise above our circumstances to see God's providing hand.

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I. Providence And Circumstance

Paul has three problems:

- Paul is in prison—which in the ancient world is more of a holding pen than a place for rehabilitation.
- Paul's rivals are preaching in a way that sharpens their vendetta against him.
- Paul might be executed for treason or disturbing the peace of Rome.

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Paul's three 'problems' and his responses give us three angles on providence.

a. Providence Means God Is At Work In Our Suffering

"I want you to know... what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel." - Philippians 1:12

Paul doesn't say prison is good. He says God is doing something through it.

How providence plays out is mysterious and complex, but Joseph is the clearest example in Scripture. Sold into slavery by his brothers, he ends up saving nations from famine. At the end of the story he says:

"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good..."
- Genesis 50:20

Joseph is careful. The brothers did evil. But God did something good.

We need to be just as careful. Providence does not mean God hurt you so something good could happen.

Some suffering comes from sin—ours or others'. Some comes from the brokenness of the world. As James says, God is not the author of evil (James 1:13).

And some of us never get Joseph's moment. We don't get the explanation. Hebrews 11 reminds us of those heroes of the faith who never got to see their promises from God fulfilled in their lifetime:

¹³ *All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth*
- Hebrews 11:13

So, if you're in the pit, providence is not "find the bright side." Scripture gives us lament. The cross shows us God present in suffering.

And yet—sometimes, like Paul and Joseph, we are blessed to see God at work in our messes. Sometimes we can say: evil was done, and God brought good.

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But even when we can't, providence means this: God is at work in places we cannot yet see or understand.

b. Providence Means God Is At Work On Other People

Paul says of his rivals:

"What does it matter? ... Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice." - Philippians 1:18

Paul, the defender of truth, sounds almost relaxed.

Why?

Because he believes God is at work in people.

In Philippians, the work of God on people is a theme (Philippians 1:6).

"for it is God who works in you..." (Philippians 2:13)

"if on some point you think differently, God will make it clear to you." (Philippians 3:15) Which is Paul saying, if you think differently than me, God will bring you around.

Truth and integrity are still of vital importance. Paul seems relaxed because either these 'rivals' are not preaching heresy or, maybe, because he isn't writing to them directly—he'd have different words for them.

Whatever has Paul relaxed, it is surely trust that God will either judge these rivals or correct them.

It's not all on Paul.

There's a subtle fear underneath a lot of our anxiety about the truth:

"If I don't fix this, everything will fall apart."

Paul doesn't share our fear.

Correction, for him, is not driven by panic. It's participation in what God is already doing.

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As a wise person once said:

“Your spiritual growth [and the spiritual growth of others] is not your project. It’s the Holy Spirit’s project.”

c. Providence Puts Things in the Perspective of Eternity

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

-Philippians 1:21

Paul knows death means being with Christ. He speaks of death as something he would choose, gladly, if given the choice.

Providence isn’t just about what’s happening now—it’s about where everything is going.

God is working, yes. But God has also worked out our salvation through Jesus Christ *already*.

Which gives us a new perspective: the perspective of eternity with Him.

Paul writes elsewhere:

¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. - 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

The pain will not last forever. The disappointment will not last forever. The despair will not last forever.

The joy will last forever. The peace will last forever. The love will last forever.

One day, every tear will be wiped away. Pain will be scrubbed out. Death wiped away (Revelation 21:1-7).

So, Paul can face his circumstances without being controlled by them. Not because they are small but because God is at work, and God has the final word.

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II. Reconnect With Purpose

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Providence is the good news—God is at work. But Paul also shows us a way to live within that truth: reconnect with purpose.

Philippians is a letter written from a real situation. The church has sent Paul help while he's in prison. Naturally, they want to know: *How is Paul doing?*

Paul doesn't seem to care how Paul is doing, though.

Paul cares about how the Gospel is doing.

Viktor Frankl, reflecting on his years in concentration camps, observed that those who endured suffering often had a *why*—someone to love, something to live for. As Friedrich Nietzsche put it:

"He who has a why to live for can endure almost any how."[1]

Purpose doesn't remove suffering, but it gives us a way to bear it.

Suffering tends to collapse our world inward. Pain draws all our attention to ourselves. The psalmist can say, "darkness is my only friend." (Psalm 88:18) But those who find a way to look beyond themselves—even briefly—step out of the dark cave of their suffering.

The same task can feel like a burden or a calling. Making a meal can feel like one more demand or an act of love.

Writing a sermon can feel like pressure or participation in God's work.

You don't have to force this. There is space to rest, to lament, to heal.

But often, purpose helps us heal.

What is your God given purpose?

How can you reconnect with your purpose?

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III. Be With And For Other People

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A large part of our purpose is other people.

Many near death experiences end with people citing they've been 'sent back'—not for themselves, but for others.

Facing possible execution, Paul lays out the logic:

- if he dies, he gains Christ—which is better for him.
- If he lives, he continues fruitful work—which is better for others.

He, perhaps cheekily, hums and haws and says:

I'll stay for you.

Why?

Because his life is not his own. Because he wants to be like Jesus—who did not count His equality with God as something to be grasped (Philippians 2:6). Paul is showing us what it means to follow his own advice:

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition... value others above yourselves.” - Philippians 2:3-4

Humility, as it's often summarized, is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less. [2]

Pastors often cite how it is a gift to be with other people in their problems. Sometimes, because it helps them forget their own problems—forgetting is a good long step in the direction of bliss.

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But more goes on when we are with and for each other, even at our worst, David Hansen writes:

"When you are with people at times like [a stillborn birth], when you experience God's presence so powerfully that it is impossible not to believe in Him, your souls become bound in a depth of experience that changes you all, forever. You become integrally grateful to these people... We become brothers and sisters because our souls are forged together within the same womb and we emerge from the same womb of suffering.

These memories, these relationships, all these brothers and sisters are the 'treasures in heaven' Jesus refers to."[3]

God At Work In Our Circumstances—In Us

Paul, in the middle of suffering, says he will continue to rejoice. He is confident that through the Philippians' prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to him will lead to deliverance (Philippians 1:18-19).

Paul is not defined by his circumstances—God is at work in them. He is at work in the Philippians as they pray. He is at work in Paul through the indwelling Spirit of Jesus Christ.

The real treasure is this shared life: God working through His people. Small acts of grace—a meal left on a doorstep, a prayer spoken, a hand on a shoulder—become signs of heaven breaking in.

God finishes what He starts. So, our peace is not found in controlling circumstances, but in trusting the God who is at work within them and within us.

ENDNOTES

[1] From Frederick Nietzsche's *Twilight of Idols* quote it in Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, pg. 76.

[2] A popular paraphrase of C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, Book 3, Ch. 8 "The Great Sin".

[3] David Hansen, *The Art of Pastoring*, pg 76

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Discussion

Open Up

Paul's circumstances are really piled on—prison, rivals and possible execution—what are some of your legendary 'bad day' moments?

Dig In - Read Philippians 1:12-16

- What do you find particularly helpful about how Paul reads and lives through these circumstances?
- What does Paul seem most concerned about? How does his concern challenge you?

Live It Out

- Do you have a pain or difficulty God has done something good in and through? Share a story.
- If you're still in a pain or difficulty, what are some of the ways you wish community would show up for you? What do people need to stop saying?
- What places of life do you feel you are losing connection to your purpose in? How can you reconnect those areas to your purpose?

Prayer

Take time to pray for each others' requests, especially that God would open our eyes to the way He is at work in our lives.