

Abounding in Love: *living immersed in God's loving purpose for our lives*

Last time, I began an exploration of the Apostle Paul's heart and mind as revealed in his letter to the Philippian church, seeking to understand more of how he found joy, contentment, and even peace in the midst of such trying circumstances. Today we will continue looking at Paul's letter to the Philippians to discover more of what contributed to Paul's remarkably hopeful outlook on life.

We have previously seen how Paul is full of joy because of the strength of his conviction that he belongs to Jesus Christ, and his celebration of his brothers and sisters as fellow saints with him. Paul showed how he saw his life, and his reality, in a vastly different manner from everyone around him. And the reason for his drastically different perspective was his identity and relationship with Jesus Christ.

In verse 6, Paul turns his attention to his Philippian friends. He wants to encourage them and he wants to show them his vision. He wants to take them to where he is, not physically, of course, given that he's in prison, but spiritually. He wants them to come to know their own reality as Paul does.

So he reveals his confidence. Confidence? From the man whose life is withering away in a Roman prison? Yes, Paul is confident. It is a strange verb to use given his circumstances, and I have always found this puzzling, yet fascinating. We live in a world where self-esteem, and self-confidence, is greatly lacking in many people. If you go into any bookstore or library, you will find an abundance of self-help resources to assist you in maximizing your potential and improving yourself. Many of us are in school for that very reason. Many of us have even found considerable success so far, but let me ask us this: how many of us are confident, truly confident as Paul is, in our identity, in our vocation, in our value, in our future?

I'm guessing not many of us. Certainly many of the Philippian Christians, though they did not face the same difficult circumstances Paul was facing, did not share this confidence.

Therefore, it is important to consider what Paul is telling us here. First, his confidence is rooted in a specific future outcome that informs his present and is anchored in the past. That past anchor is Jesus Christ and what he has already accomplished for us. The present is the trial in which Paul finds himself. And the future outcome is that on the day of Christ we will be presented to him pure and blameless, having produced a harvest of righteousness that comes through Christ.

So what is Paul's confidence? His confidence is his conviction that God will bring to completion the work he started in us. Paul is not interested in finding a silver lining in his circumstances, at least not in the way that we usually understand it. He is not advocating for the Philippians to be confident that he'll be released, that he would be spared suffering, and as we will see, he's not even advocating for his vindication before fellow Christians. His concern is the work of God in the Philippians to bring them to holiness and righteousness. And his confidence is not in anything that he possesses, but exclusively on Jesus Christ and his faithfulness. We shall shortly see why Paul thinks this is worth being confident about.

Having surprised his hearers by being so upbeat about his circumstances, Paul reveals his heart to them, and in so doing, demonstrates how his confidence in God's work in his life has been rewarded. Paul's heart overflows with the love of Jesus Christ; and he is confident in the appropriateness of this love, for he is glad that he has fellowship on the journey of discipleship. Paul never loses sight of just where the true treasure is, because he has given his whole life to seeing others come into the life that he has found. And when follow Paul's example, we are reflecting the heart of God, which is overflowing abundance of grace and mercy. God came down to us, not only to rescue us, but to fellowship with us and live in a relationship with us. When we exercise this same heart towards others it is evidence that we are close to God's heart. And that gives us cause for joy, for we are becoming what we were always meant to be.

This love, this presence of God in our lives, also leads us to greater knowledge and understanding of His will. Paul's prayer for the Philippians reflects his desire to see them come to know God as he has, which includes the wisdom and discernment that comes with being in step with Holy Spirit. Every day we are faced with a bewildering set of choices. What to eat, what to wear, what to say. More importantly, we face bigger decisions like whether we should take that job, whether we should marry that person, whether we should move to another country. And these are complex decisions with many factors. We look for guidance, and unfortunately Paul does not give us a clear how-to-guide for acquiring this discernment, but he tells us that knowing God's love is the crucial thing in cultivating this wisdom.

More importantly, Paul's prayer reveals to us what is actually "best"; best is not defined in terms of that which brings us to being presented pure and blameless before God on the final day. In a similar manner to our earlier discussion of what Paul is confident in, Paul doesn't think of what is best in the same way that most of us would think of it. We would likely think of what is best for us in terms of that which makes us happy, makes us fulfilled, makes us feel worthy and valuable, gives us a sense of self-importance, or in less ambitious terms, that which keeps us from suffering, pain, and discomfort.

But Paul sees what is "best" in terms of the purpose and end he earlier outlined for us. Our salvation is brought to completion when we can stand before God pure and blameless, because God has been working in us to produce a harvest of righteousness. Now we will see later what that is, but for now, we would be well served by inviting ourselves to shift our attention from what is best for our desires, but to what is best for the glory and praise of God.

And what is best for the glory and praise of God? When we are truly in line with God on this matter, we discover that it also has the power to give us the affirmation we have always been looking for. On the subject of what we are to do to "feel good about ourselves", C.S. Lewis offers us this corrective perspective:

"When I look into this matter, I was shocked to find such different Christians as Milton, Johnson and Thomas Aquinas taking heavenly glory quite frankly in the sense of fame or good report. But not fame conferred by our fellow creatures—fame with God, approval or (I might say) "appreciation" by God. And then, when I had thought it over, I saw that this view was scriptural; nothing can eliminate from the parable the divine accolade, "Well done, thou good

and faithful servant.” With that, a good deal of what I had been thinking all my life fell down like a house of cards. I suddenly remembered that no one can enter heaven except as a child; and nothing is so obvious in a child—not in a conceited child, but in a good child—as its great and undisguised pleasure in being praised...Apparently what I had mistaken for humility had, all these years, prevented me from understanding what is the humblest, the most childlike, the most creaturely of pleasures...the pleasure of a...child before its father, a pupil before his teacher, a creature before its Creator. (*The Weight of Glory*, p.8-9)

The tragic irony in what so many of us pursue for self-satisfaction in life is not that those things are bad or evil, although sometimes they are. The tragedy is that we forsake the most secure, the most certain, the most inexhaustible source of affirmation, appreciation and praise. The wonderful thing about the Christian life is that if we live for the praise and glory of God, He will praise US! How incredible is that! And He has promised that he will change us and re-create us, so that we can truly live in holiness and righteousness, that we may be pleasing to Him.

Paul has discovered what he has always longed for. Even in his days before he became a Christian, he was motivated by this drive to please God, but it was forged in anger, hatred, pride and self-righteousness. But when he saw God as He really is in Jesus Christ, Paul discovered that in spite of the terrible things he had done, God was not only sparing him but giving him what he had always most truly wanted, and there was nothing the world could do to take that away from him. How could he not be grateful? How could he not rejoice? How could he ever see his discipleship as a burden?

And brothers and sisters, this is what Jesus wants for give us. To know Him through participating in his love for others, and to receive the greatest gift we have always longed for, to be known and appreciated by praised by none other than our Creator and Savior. And that is a life worthy of our confident participation. That is the best life we can live.

Samuel Lau, New Hope Bible Fellowship Worship Service, Sunday September 29, 2019