

LIVING ABOVE OUR CIRCUMSTANCES
PHILIPPIANS 1:1-10

INTRODUCTION

The primary reason why we are doing an outside service again is that we realize that we have been experiencing another surge in corona virus infections, and many among us are trying to avoid exposure to that disease, especially those of us who have underlying health challenges. A recent Barna survey (*Christianity Today*, 11;20/2021) found that one-third of “practicing Christians” have stopped joining corporate worship altogether, largely because of the corona virus. These people also report high levels of anxiety and depression.

As we approach the second anniversary of the Covid plague, we all had hoped that we would be done with it by now. Yet the death toll in this country continues to rise--- at last check it was 900,000. This pandemic has had significant negative effects beyond the death toll. The economy has been negatively affected. Our kids’ education has been hurt. Needed medical procedures and checkups have been delayed.

Then there are the mental health effects. Everything from depression to anxiety to suicide to PTSD is on the rise. A recent survey of 1320 mental health therapists found that they cannot keep up with the demand. A licensed clinical social worker from Longmeadow, MA, commented, “**All the therapists I know have experienced a demand for therapy that is like nothing they have experienced before.**” (*New York Times*, 12/16/2021)

By a couple of standards of measure Nevada has been more severely impacted than any other state in the nation. It experienced the highest percentage of job losses. According to the National Center for Health Statistics (Nov. 2020) it also had the highest level of depression, with 34% of adults reporting symptoms of depression. Personal health columnist for the *New York Times* (*NYT*, 2/2/2022), Jane Brody, observed this past week, “**...many people remain crippled by despair over the death of loved ones, as well as lost jobs, businesses, housing, income and even sleep. How, so many of us wonder, are we supposed to cope with so many obstacles blocking our way forward?**”

We could add to this mix a possible war between Russia and the Ukraine, the national political divide, the crime wave, and our own individual challenges. All of these are difficult situations that make it a challenge for us to live above our circumstances. How is it possible to live above our circumstances. The little New Testament book of Philippians contains some wise advice.

I.

So, then, we are going to begin by examining the first two verses of the New Testament Book of Philippians as we consider THE CHALLENGE OF CIRCUMSTANCES. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE CHALLENGE OF CIRCUMSTANCES) Philippians #1 vv. 1& 2 (which are found on p. 980 in the black Bibles under many of the chairs) read, **“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”**

Paul, originally named Saul, was from Tarsus in Asia Minor. He was a religious Jew who was sent as a young person to study in Jerusalem under the most famous rabbi of the day, a man named Gamaliel. He joined in with the persecution of the first Christians in and around Jerusalem. This rising star in the strictest sect of the religious Jews was sent to Damascus with authorization to arrest Jews who had become followers of Jesus. Along the way, as the story is told in Acts #9, he had a dramatic encounter with Jesus. He was struck blind in this supernatural encounter and was told that he had to stop persecuting Christians. The risen Christ told Paul that he should start promoting the Christian gospel, especially among Gentiles. Paul went off to Arabia for a time to rethink his theology. Upon his return to Jerusalem he was treated with suspicion by other Christians. But a church leader by the name of Barnabas took him under his wing and encouraged Paul’s development as a leader.

While Barnabas and Saul--- soon known as Paul--- were planting a church in Antioch in what is today Syria, the Holy Spirit somehow communicated with the Christians that they should send Barnabas and Paul on an evangelistic expedition. (FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY) So they sailed first to the island of Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean where they did some preaching. Then they sailed north and went inland into Asia Minor, preaching at various cities along the way.

Upon their return to Antioch they gave a report about their first trip. After a while they were going to head out on their second missionary trip when Paul and Barnabas had a dispute about whether they should bring John Mark along with them. So the two leaders split up. Paul took Silas with him on this second missionary journey. (SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY) Paul and Silas travelled on land to revisit churches that Paul had previously been involved in starting in Asia Minor. As they headed further west, the Holy Spirit called them to cross into Europe. That is where the story picks up in Acts #16, which we heard read earlier.

(PHILIPPI ANCIENT) It was about 51 AD when Paul and Silas and two additional Christian leaders--- Luke and Timothy--- came to Philippi and sought to establish a church in that city in what is today Greece. They did not stay there very long, but a good church congregation was established. Two years later they visited the city again. At the end of Paul’s third missionary journey Paul was arrested in Jerusalem for supposedly causing a riot. He was held in Caesarea, the capital of Judea, for two years. He then made a legal appeal to have his case heard in Rome. So in about 61 AD Paul found himself under house arrest in the capital of the Roman Empire. It was from there that he wrote this letter to the Christians at Philippi.

The last two verses of Acts #28 provide a brief summary of this first Roman imprisonment. (ACTS 23:30-31: **“He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, 31 proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.”** So Paul apparently lived in his own rented quarters but was probably chained to a Roman guard.

What prompted Paul to write to the church at Philippi was that the Christians there heard about his imprisonment. (PROJECTOR OFF) They sent a guy named Epaphroditus to see how he was doing, to encourage him, and to give him some money. While Epaphroditus was with Paul in Rome, he got very sick. Word of this reached Philippi. Paul decided to send back Epaphroditus to Philippi with this letter. Timothy, who had been with Paul during the first visit to Philippi, was with Paul, too.

In v. 1 Paul calls the Christians at Philippi “saints.” In some of our church traditions we are inclined to think of saints as some breed of super-duper Christians. Paul refers to all of the Christians in Philippi as saints. That indeed is consistent with the New Testament usage of the term. The Greek word for “saint” means “holy one.” In God’s eyes one who has trusted in Jesus is a saint. That truth is foundational to our ability to live above our circumstances. At times we may feel like dirt. We may not feel very holy, and our behavior may not be very holy. But there is encouragement that comes from realizing that God’s evaluation of our position is different. We are saints, if we have truly trusted in Jesus.

Paul makes special mention of the overseers and deacons. The Greek word for “overseer” is *episkopos*, which is sometimes translated as “bishop.” We get the word “episcopal” from it. In the New Testament “overseer” and “elder” are used interchangeably. “Overseer” stresses the function of the man in this church office, while the word “elder” stresses his character.

It is significant that the word “overseer” in v. 1 is plural. There is not one letter in the New Testament written to a church that is addressed to an elder or a pastor. Pastoring is a responsibility of an elder. But the leaders of a church in the New Testament are always referred to in the plural as elders. First Timothy #5 v. 17 does envision the possibility that some elders may be involved in full time Christian ministry. But the responsibility for leadership in the churches in the New Testament did not rest with a single man. It was always a group of men. That is why we are governed by a board of elders in this church.

II.

After wishing these Philippian Christians peace and grace, Paul in vv. 3-6 provides the first principle that will help us to live above our circumstances. He talks about **THE NEED TO FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE.** (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE NEED TO FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE) The apostle writes, **“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, 4 always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, 5**

because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ..."

There were many negatives that Paul could have focused upon. He could have thought about and talked about his upcoming trial, which potentially could have resulted in a sentence of death. He could have talked about his imprisonment. He could have complained about the restrictions placed upon his ministry. He could have talked about the fact that several people had deserted him. He could have focused upon his own health challenges.

But instead he focused attention on the positives. Notice v. 3: **"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you..."** These positive memories caused Paul to give thanks to God and to be joyful. According to v. 5 these positive memories have to do with the participation of these Philippian Christians with him in the proclamation of the gospel.

The word for "participation" here is more often translated as "fellowship." We may think of fellowship as what we do after the service in the foyer. That may involve fellowship. But Biblical fellowship is primarily a partnership based on a common bond. The original Greek word *koinonia* was used to describe business partnerships. Two fishermen might decide to buy a boat together and have their own fishing business. They were said to be in *koinonia*. They were working together and jointly invested to see their vision brought to reality.

These Philippian Christians had become partners with the gospel and with Paul from the time that they had first believed. That fellowship in the gospel continued as these believers grew, as Lydia provided housing for Paul and his companions, as the missionaries and Philippians prayed for each other, as the Philippian Christians occasionally sent financial support to Paul, and as now again they sent a gift and a representative to encourage him. Together they were part of a common cause.

Paul adds in v. 6 that he is confident that their participation in the gospel will continue and that they will mature, not because of who they are but because of who God is. He began the good work in them. God does not leave projects half-finished. He brings them to completion, although this completion will never be completely reached until the day of Christ when He returns. (1 JOHN 3:2) As the Apostle John says in 1 John #3 v. 2, **"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."**

Paul could have had a different attitude toward his experiences at Philippi. He could have dwelt on the physical and psychological pain that he suffered there. (PROJECTOR OFF) He could have thought about the embarrassment and humiliation that he and Silas experienced in being dragged by a screaming multitude to the city officials. He could have remembered the pain of the beating that they received and the discomfort of the stocks into which they were put in the inner prison. He could have meditated on the

injustice that was done to them in being punished without trial in violation of the right that belonged to Paul and Silas as Roman citizens. He could have spent time thinking about how he was going to see that those Philippian magistrates got the punishment that they deserved. He could have busied himself by searching online to find the best trial lawyer available. Memories of Philippi could have made Paul angry or embarrassed or depressed. But they did not..

Paul concentrated on the positive things. He remembered the salvation experiences of Lydia and the jailer. He thought about the growth of the Philippian church. He dwelt on the past financial support which he had received from the Philippians, and he focused on God, who was sure to one day bring them to maturity.

One thing that we can do to live above our circumstances is to focus on the positive--- to remember that which is worth remembering. After we go through difficult experiences--- personal crises as well as worldwide pandemics, we make choices about the focus of our attention. If we dwell on injustices, embarrassments, losses, failures, or difficulties, it will be tough to experience the joy that Paul experienced. But if we concentrate on the positive things and remain confident that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love Him (Romans 8:28), then we can experience joy. We can live above our circumstances.

As a congregation we may have missed out on some amount of fellowship because of lockdowns and fewer in-person meetings, but we have also learned how to have Zoom meetings and parking lot services, which extend our outreach. On Friday I met a church neighbor who said that she had missed hearing our outdoor services, to which she enjoyed listening.

Life goes better for everyone who maintains a positive attitude. Christians have an extra advantage in that we can trust in a sovereign God who is truly there and who truly cares for us. We can trust that there is a divine purpose to the trials that we endure. We can also know that if we die tomorrow, we are going to heaven, where we will be rewarded for our faithfulness.

Wallace Johnson was understandably upset when at forty years of age he was fired from his job at a saw mill where he had worked for many years. But he was a Christian man, and he trusted that God had a purpose in it and that good would come from it. He chose to focus on the positive. According to Johnson's own testimony, **"When I told my wife what had happened, she asked me what I was going to do. I replied, 'I'm going to mortgage our little home and go into the building business.' My first venture was the construction of two small buildings. Within five years I was a multimillionaire! At the time it happened, I didn't understand why I was fired. Later I saw that it was God's unerring and wondrous plan to get me into the way of His choosing."** Johnson is best known for being the primary builder of Holiday Inn motels. He lived above his circumstances. Living above our circumstances doesn't necessarily mean that we will become wealthy, but it does mean that we will more likely get in the place where He can use us.

III.

In vv. 7 & 8 then we come to THE NEED TO APPRECIATE FELLOWSHIP.

(PROJECTOR ON--- THE NEED TO APPRECIATE FELLOWSHIP) This is the second principle in this passage that explains Paul's ability to live above his circumstances. The apostle writes, **"It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. 8 For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus."**

The phrase "defense and confirmation of the gospel" is a reference to Paul's coming trial. The results of that trial would have a direct effect on the church at Philippi, because Philippi was a Roman colony. It had a large number of Roman citizens, and its government was based upon the Roman model and closely followed Roman law. The decision made in this case would affect the way that Christians would be treated there. Besides their genuine concern for Paul, the Philippians had a personal stake in the outcome of this trial.

The basis that all of these Christians had with each other involved grace. The gospel itself involves salvation by grace through faith. In v. 2 Paul also mentioned grace. The basic meaning of the word in the New Testament is "unmerited favor." In v. 7 Paul says to the Philippian Christians **"you are all partakers with me of grace."** Several times in the New Testament Paul used this phrase to describe the responsibility that God had given him to be an apostle. He sees this as a tremendous responsibility and honor that he does not deserve. Thus in this context God's unmerited favor seems to refer to God's making him an apostle.

The Philippian Christians have shared in this apostleship in that they have supported Paul financially and in prayer. Now they have sent a representative to encourage him. They have also gone on to grow as Christians and to preach the gospel that Paul brought to them. Paul is a prisoner hundreds of miles away from Philippi, but he experiences joy from the knowledge that he has supporters in Philippi. He does not feel alone, and he is not alone. He has supporters who are fellow participants in the same cause. Through his own prayers and written encouragement he has a continuing role with them.

We can endure much when we are convinced that we are joint participants in a cause that is worthy of our suffering. Major Sullivan Ballou of the Union Army wrote a letter to his wife Sarah a few days before the Battle of Bull Run near Manassas, Virginia, in July of 1861. In his letter he wrote, **"I have no misgivings about or lack of confidence in the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. I know how strongly American civilization now leans on the triumph of the Government, and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and suffering of the Revolution. And I am willing, perfectly willing, to lay down all my joys in this life to help maintain this Government and to pay that debt... Sarah, my love for you is deathless: it seems to bind me with mighty cables that nothing but**

Omnipotence could break, and yet my love for country comes over me like a strong wind and bears me irresistibly on, with all these chains to the battle-field. ...If I do not [return], my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you... ...do not mourn me dead: think I am gone, and wait for me, for we shall meet again..."

Major Ballou was killed at the Battle of Bull Run. But he did not live under his circumstances, because he was convinced that he was a joint participant in a cause that was much greater than himself. If we are truly Christians, then we need to realize that we are part of a greater cause than any human army. We can be confident that our field general is working out a plan that will ultimately have benefit for us. The realization that we have fellowship with others who are part of the same cause can help us to live above our circumstances. Do you have that sense of being part of the cause of Christ with other believers? If you don't, maybe you need to get more involved with other Christians or with some kind of ministry. Perhaps you need to check out our music ministry or our children's ministry or Good News Club or our prison ministry.

As we become committed to the cause of Christ, the appreciation of this fellowship--- this joint participation in the gospel--- increases. Many of us sense it when we gather on Sunday morning. Many of us sense it who are involved in these various ministries. Our missionaries describe their partnership with us, especially among those of us who regularly pray for them and keep up communications with them. It helps them to live above their circumstances to know that they have fellowship with Christians back home who support them in prayer and with finances. There are a significant number of prisoners in Nevada jails and prisons who have connections with us in various ways. I get letters from some of them describing how much those connections and our prayers mean to them.

In order to stay above our circumstances we need to focus on the positive and realize that we have support from fellow Christians. We are not alone. If we are walking with the Lord, we can have joy that comes from knowing that we are participants with other believers in a common cause.

IV.

The joy of positive remembrance and the joy of present fellowship are accompanied by **THE NEED TO HAVE CONCERN FOR OTHERS.** (IV. THE NEED TO HAVE CONCERN FOR OTHERS) Paul may have been a prisoner. But he could still write letters, and he could still pray. That is what he does in vv. 9-11: **"And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, 10 so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."**

The Philippian church was a loving church. But Paul wanted these Christians to become even better lovers. This love was to be combined with knowledge and depth of insight, or discernment. Love without knowledge and discernment is sentimentalism. It is blind

love. Discernment adds depth and quality to love. Discernment is a sign of growth. It is the proper outworking of knowledge.

When my boys were toddlers, they thought that anything on wheels was a car. A semi would go by, and they would point and say "car." Gradually they began to recognize that big things on four or six or eight or sixteen wheels are trucks. Then they began to recognize that some cars are called pickups and some are called vans. Later they recognized that some trucks are trash trucks and some are fire trucks and some are dump trucks. All of this increasing discernment was a sign of growth.

Paul implies in v. 10 that as we mature, we will be able to discern what is best. That is one goal that we as parents have for our children. As a good father I have tried to teach my boys that it is best to cheer for sports teams that are from Wisconsin. That has been a challenging task in that they often hear mistaken input from others around them. As parents we also try to help our children to develop discernment in what they watch and read and listen to.

As Christians we also need to develop a discerning love for others. As a pastor I occasionally have people come along from outside the church asking for money. I might give such people a few bucks and express some measure of compassion for them. But a discerning love, I think, is going to be more careful about giving out cash. Some people asking for money may go out and spend it on drugs or booze. A wiser love would perhaps result in getting them some groceries or going to the gas station and filling up their tank. So I rarely give out money to outsiders.

In a similar way there are a lot of community groups and national groups that approach us as a church and as individuals seeking contributions for their causes. Many of them are worthy causes, and we may choose to give some of them something. But a discerning love, I believe, will result in giving primarily to Christian causes. We may see value in giving to some secular causes. A discerning love will also ask questions about how much money organizations spend on administrative expenses. It will check on ratings by watchdog groups like Charity Navigator.

Paul here prays that the Philippian Christians will experience a growing love that is accompanied by discernment that will produce wise decisions and judgments which will in turn result in godly character. This godly character is described as being pure and blameless and filled with the fruit of righteousness. This growth in character will be reflected in a concern for others. Paul could have been absorbed by his own difficult circumstances. Yet, by God's grace, and as a result of spiritual maturity, he was able to have concern for others. The ultimate goal of our lives, he reminds us, is the praise and glory of God.

Paul was a man who lived above his circumstances. He focused on the positive, and he meditated on the fellowship that he had with other believers. The joy which that produced enabled him to take his eyes off of his own situation and to be concerned for others. In the midst of the challenging circumstances that we may be facing, we would

do well to learn from his example. Focus on the positive, appreciate the fellowship that we have with fellow believers, have concern for others.

Paul Brand (PAUL BRAND) was a Christian doctor who worked in India for many years. Christian writer Philip Yancey once visited his work and was especially impressed by a leprosy patient named Sadan. Yancey writes, **“He looked like a miniature version of Gandhi: skinny, balding, perched cross legged on the edge of a bed. He now lives in his own home and has a wife and a good job. But in a high-pitched, singsong voice he told me wrenching stories of past rejection: the classmates who made fun of him in school, the driver who kicked him---literally, with his shoe---off a public bus, the many employers who refused to hire him, the hospitals that turned him away.**

“‘I can still remember when Dr. Brand took my infected, ulcerated feet in his hands,’ said Sadan. ‘I had been to many doctors over the years. A few had examined my hands and feet from a distance, but Dr. Brand and his wife were the first medical workers who dared to touch me.’

“Sadan then recounted the elaborate medical procedures---tendon transfers, nerve strippings, toe amputations, and cataract removal---performed by Brand and his wife (an ophthalmologist). His past life was a catalogue of suffering. But as we sipped our last cup of tea, just before leaving to catch a plane to England, Sadan made this astonishing statement: ‘Still, I must say that I am now happy that I had this disease. Apart from leprosy, I would have been a normal man with a normal family, chasing wealth and a higher position in society. I would never have known such wonderful people as Dr. Paul and Dr. Margaret, and I would never have known the God who lives in them.’”

Sadan learned to live above his circumstances by focusing on the positive and appreciating the fellowship that he had with others. Foundational to that positive thinking and that fellowship with others was knowing God through a relationship with Jesus Christ. If there is no God and if we humans are merely the result of chance interactions of matter in a purposeless universe, then we are ultimately victims of our circumstances, and there is not a lot in the end to be positive about. But because there is a sovereign God whom it is possible to know by virtue of a relationship with Jesus Christ, we can live above our circumstances. For we know that they are part of the sovereign plan of a loving God.

We are only given one opportunity to pass through this earthly life. The stakes are too great, the cause is too awesome, the God we serve is too powerful for us to muck around with complaining about our circumstances in life. We have to decide whether we believe that God is truly sovereign over our lives and our circumstances. We have to decide whether or not we believe He has a purpose for our lives. If we decide that He does, then we can live above our circumstances. We can focus on the positive. We can appreciate our fellowship with fellow believers. And we can get our focus on serving others.