

Shawnee Presbyterian Church Service
Pastoral Message
April 26, 2020

Hello people. This is Dave Cornell coming to you by way of You Tube or FB.

I think it appropriate by way of introduction to let you know that when Steve Clemmons passed on my offer to occasionally fill in when Shawnee had a need, we hardly realized what a pleasant worship experience this would be. So, as we begin today, Heather and I wish to thank you all for the warm welcome you have extended to us in our monthly visits to worship with you.

Today, while we cannot 'see' any of you, as we worship God together, "alone", I hope that the words of Jesus recorded in John 4:24 will resonate in our souls - 'that God is Spirit, and those who seek to worship Him must worship in spirit and truth'. May what we lack in interpersonal fellowship today be made up for by the reality of His matchless presence.

Now with that in mind, let's direct our thoughts to Psalm 65 as our call to worship:

CALL TO WORSHIP: from Psalm 65

Leader: There will be silence before You, and praise in Zion, O God. And to you the vow will be performed.

People: O You who hear prayer, to You all men come.

Leader: Iniquities prevail against me; as for our transgressions, You forgive them.

People: How blessed is the one whom you choose and bring near to dwell in your courts. We will be satisfied with the goodness of Your house, your holy temple.

May we be satisfied with the goodness of God's presence.

Our prayer of confession is taken from the Book of Common Worship, p88. Please join your heart as I lead:

UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION;

O Lord God, our sins are too heavy to carry, too real to hide, and too deep to undo. Forgive what our lips tremble to name, what our hearts can no longer bear, and what has become for us a consuming fire of judgment. Set us free from a past that we cannot change; open to us a future in which we can be changed; and grant us grace to grow more and more in your likeness and image, through Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Amen.

From the PCUSA Book of Common Worship
Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993; p. 88

ASSURANCE OF PARDON:

Isaiah provides a wonderful assurance of pardon in the 53rd chapter, v6

Leader: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Is. 53:6)

People: The Lord's name be praised!

Now, as all of you know, we find ourselves in the midst of a serious national emergency. No doubt, many are reflecting on this, many are anxious, some are panicking, and there is no shortage of gloom. The circumstances are ominous.

Our greatest need is to think from God's perspective, and to help us do that I'd like to consider a passage today which provides encouragement. It comes from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi.

Please listen as Paul helps the Christians in Philippi understand the significance of the adversity he is undergoing. I will be reading from Phil. 1:12-18

SCRIPTURE LESSON Philippians 1:12-18

12 I want you to know, brethren, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, **13** so that it has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard[a] and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ; **14** and most of the brethren have been made confident in the Lord because of my imprisonment, and are much more bold to speak the word of God without fear.

15 Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. **16** The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel; **17** the former proclaim Christ out of partisanship, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. **18** What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in that I rejoice.

Amen.

SERMON "Lord of the Circumstances"

Paul is in Rome, and he wrote this letter from some type of imprisonment, likely house arrest. It was written in part as a thank you for a gift from a congregation he loved.

But things don't look great. After being arrested in Jerusalem several years earlier, He had appealed to Caesar to adjudicate his case. That decision will be final. Paul's life depends on it. From a human perspective, there is great cause for worry.

Ah, Perspective. We all have one. What matters is if it the correct one. There is a good illustration of perspective called 'Another Camera Angle' in a book Kent Crockett wrote, *Once I was Blind but Now I Squint. I love that title.*

Here it is:

"You are sitting in your living room watching a football game on television. The referee throws a penalty flag against your team. You yell, 'Hey ref! Are you blind? That wasn't a penalty!' You know he made an incorrect call because you watched the play from your point of view.

Then the camera shows a replay, from a different angle. When you view the play from another vantage point, you discover that the referee actually did make the correct call. You were mistaken because you couldn't see the entire picture from your limited perspective.

Friends, to get the right perspective in life, we need to view our circumstances from God's point of view. That is what Paul does here. And, if we will look at our situation, whatever it may be- covid, finances, age, employment, children, from His perspective, it will help us to accurately interpret what happens to us.

Now Paul doesn't tell us details of his living arrangement. They aren't important. He doesn't dwell on any hardship. He is not resentful at Roman justice. What he does is outline the significance of his imprisonment from God's perspective.

In giving us this perspective, Paul provides take away's we can use to navigate our adversity. These takeaways are also called convictions which Christians hold, and hold on to.

The first takeaway is that for the Christian

1. God is Lord of our circumstances, and Lord over them.

That means circumstances are more than happenstances.

And we begin to gain that perspective when we recognize who is actually in charge of life. Is it me, or God?

When we share the perspective that God has our good, and His plans, in sync at all times, it becomes a core conviction toward **dealing successfully with adversity.**

This perspective continues to inform us as Paul talks about how these circumstances have contributed to the advance of the gospel. It seems he is referencing the daily shift changes of elite soldiers who have been assigned to guard him, and therefore be close enough for conversation.

Imagine being one on one with this great apostle, one of the greatest minds the world has ever known, and one who personally met the living Jesus on the road to Damascus.

Each of these soldiers would likely have had the gospel presented to them by Paul in riveting terms. It is not a stretch to surmise that at least some of them became followers of Jesus. Paul actually implies that, and according to him most of them knew about the unusual prisoner with the compelling message of God's love and forgiveness. This message was about a Jesus who rose from the dead, after voluntarily atoning for our sins, and it made much more sense than the luxury and harshness they were used to.

So here is a second take away.

2. My part in God's plans may come disguised as adversity.

I probably will not like it, and Paul must have struggled with this also, but now he is actually rejoicing in how God has coordinated His plans with the apostle's troubles.

He knows, and we also need to know, that adversity is not punitive. They are God given opportunities, not limitations.

This perspective continues with Paul's sense of identity, of who he is in Christ. In two of his letters Paul calls himself the prisoner of Christ Jesus. Other places he calls himself the bondservant, or 'doulos', of Christ, a fascinating study in itself. Here, in v13, he terms his jailing an imprisonment 'in the cause of Christ'. Clearly, Paul sees himself as being in prison for Christ's purposes, and God has merely used the authorities as instruments of His will. Paul believes he is a prisoner of Christ, in the widest sense of that phrase.

Takeaway #3 is that

3. Paul's identity as a captive of Christ assures Him of God's care in the midst of human trouble.

What I am and have in Christ can never be lost. God tells us in Romans 8 that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

Finally, Paul informs his readers that the net result of his imprisonment is that the Christians in Rome are encouraged in their faith. Yes, some are involved for selfish motives, and some are hoping Paul has more trouble. But for the most part Paul's jailing has resulted in Christ being exalted. And that is what Paul is all about.

So Paul was focused on what God was doing and was going to do, not what He had not done. Paul was optimistic, not resentful.

Thus, there is this fourth takeaway:

4. God uses, among other things, bad people and evil situations to accomplish His purposes.

Each of us can think of difficult people, trying times, and frightening situations which we've lived through.

Heather and I have certainly passed through some serious times, and know many other believers who have also. In each of these God has proved Himself faithful and unchangingly merciful. He still is.

Remember that God is not under the circumstances, He is Lord over them. Nothing is outside of His control and all things, even bad things, work together for the good of those who are followers of Christ. Said again, God uses bad men and evil situations to shape the lives of His children.

It is in the midst of these things, and in his joy to know that God was weaving his seeming distress and the gospel together, that Paul writes to encourage the believers in Philippi.

So maybe we should...

5. Do what Paul did. Take a little time and write a letter or email to someone who you know could use some encouragement

Write for the express purpose of encouraging someone else. Ask God to place that person in your mind, and just contact them for the pure purpose of encouraging them.

I have a book in my library called "Dark Threads the Weaver Needs". The title is taken from the idea that in a rich tapestry there are threads of various colors. The reds and blacks and other strong dark hues, as seen from the back side, or by

themselves, do not seem particularly appealing. But placed side by side with the golds and blues and others, they create a majestic and beautiful fabric.

Robert Cook once said, "if you haven't given people hope, you haven't given them anything." People are looking for hope, and one element in that is that God is a specialist in using dark threads to make beautiful fabrics. In life and in lives, He is the great Weaver.

And now may the grace of the God who is Lord over the circumstances be with your spirit. Amen