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Philippians 1:12-18
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Telling Your Story

SERIES: Philippians: A People and A Place Transformed by the Gospel

Human beings are meaning makers. We are people who are wired to make meaning out of our lives, wired to interpret the events that happen to us. The main way that we make meaning out of our lives is by telling stories. Every nation, people group, and culture is like this. Every person is like this. All of you in this room are like this. Life happens and we seek to make meaning of it by telling stories.

This is especially true when it comes to the difficult events that have happened to us. We are wired to make sense out of the difficult happenings of our lives by telling stories about it. The novel *Robinson Crusoe* is a great example of this. *Robinson Crusoe* is the account of a man telling the story of, making sense out of, his very difficult circumstance of being shipwrecked on a remote, cannibal infested island. This book is an adventure story. And if you read the full, unabridged version of the book, you'll discover that the heart of the story isn't so much Crusoe's adventures on a difficult island. The real meaning of the story, the real adventure, is how God used Robinson Crusoe's difficult circumstance to make a Christian man out of him.

I love this story. Next to the true story of the Bible, *Robinson Crusoe* is my favorite story. Lately I've been re-reading the book because my wife and I are strongly considering (I'm the main one pushing this) naming our son Crusoe, or "Cru" for short. I would love to name my son after a character who embarked upon manly adventures, came to love Jesus through his difficult circumstances, and told all about it in a great story.

As I re-read this book, I've been seeing that what makes it such a great story is the fact that it explores all four of the big meaning making questions: the what, why, how, and who questions. A good story asks and answers four questions: "What happened to me?" "Why did this happen to me?" "How do I respond to what happened to me?" And, "Who caused this to happen to me?" Without exploring these four questions, a story is incomplete.

As you and I seek to make sense out of the difficult things that have happened to us, we ask these same four questions by default, sometimes without even knowing it. But, we don't always stick with these questions and explore them all the way through. For

fear or whatever reason, we often stop short of fully grappling with the meaning making questions and therefore stop short of telling our full story. But Robinson Crusoe and the apostle Paul went all the way with these questions.

What makes *Robinson Crusoe* such a great story is also what makes Philippians 1:12-18 a great story. Here we have Paul making sense out of, telling the story of, the difficult events that have happened to him. He addresses these four questions head on. And no matter what it is that's happened to you, whether you've experienced a little or a lot of difficulty, I believe that as we look at how Paul tells the story of what happened to him, you'll be enabled to better tell your story.

A bit of background is needed before we open our Bibles. Here's the situation. It's the year 60 AD. It's now been 10 years since Paul planted the Philippian church. It's been four years since Paul last visited Philippi during his third missionary journey. And a lot has happened in these four years. The Philippians have heard the reports of what's happened to Paul and they are worried. The Philippians, remember, love Paul. They love the pastor who first told them the good news of the gospel. And Paul loves these people too. Best we can tell, the Philippian church is Paul's favorite church.

So, at last, after a lot of waiting and wondering, the Philippians receive a letter from Paul. They receive the letter that, 2,000 years later, we refer to as the book of Philippians. The Christians in Philippi are sitting on the edge of their seats. They're eager to hear about their beloved pastor who they know is suffering as a prisoner in Rome. Quickly, carefully, they open the letter and begin to read. And in the first 11 verses, which we looked at these last two weeks, they read only about themselves. The first 11 verses, the first few paragraphs of parchment, speak only about Paul's concern and affection and prayer for the Philippians. Then they reach verse 12.

I. Question #1: What happened to me?

"I want you to know, brothers,..." We'll stop here for right now. As we seek to make meaning out of the difficult events and seasons of our lives, the first question we need to ask ourselves is, "what happened to me?" The first step in telling our story is to ask the "what?", to face the facts, however difficult they may be,

of what has happened to us. In this verse, Paul doesn't spell out what's happened to him because the Philippians have already heard those reports and been told that story. Different messengers have come their way and filled them in on the details of what's transpired in Paul's life over the last four years.

Since we aren't as familiar with those details, let me review for you what's happened to Paul since he'd last seen the Philippians. After Paul was last spotted in Philippi, he got in a boat and sailed to Asia to visit some of his churches and friends there. After a short stay, Paul traveled towards Jerusalem. Along the way, Paul was warned several times that very difficult events would happen to him in Jerusalem. Yet Paul felt called to carry on with his plans. Once he reached Jerusalem, Paul was falsely accused by his own people. Paul was then beat up and almost killed by an angry mob. Next, he was arrested, put in chains and imprisoned. Because Paul was a Roman citizen, he escaped a flogging and was given a trial. At his trial he was again falsely accused. At his trial, as the book of Acts tells us, Paul was nearly "torn to pieces" by the violent crowd.

While Paul was being transferred to another prison, he barely escaped an assassination plot headed up by 40 men who had vowed to not eat or drink until they'd killed him. Paul then suffered through a long prison sentence in Judea and several times made his defense to a series of corrupt leaders. Finally, Paul was put on a ship headed to Rome, where his case would be tried before Caesar, before Caesar Nero, the most brutal of all Roman Caesars. While en route to Rome, in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, Paul's ship ran into a huge storm and was shipwrecked. Everybody on the ship jumped overboard and miraculously made it safely to a nearby island. Once the crew reached land, Paul got to work helping build a fire to keep his captors and the other shivering prisoners warm. As Paul went to put more wood on the fire, a snake jumped out and bit him. Then Paul did what any man would do—he got angry and threw the snake into the fire. Finally, after a few months of being stranded on this island, Paul reached Rome. He was dragged into the world's largest city as a prisoner. He was put in chains and put under guard.

That's what happened to Paul. Now, let me ask, what's happened to you? What's the most difficult thing that's ever happened to you? Your story might not be as difficult and dramatic as Paul's, but if you've been alive for more than a day or two, you've had some difficult events and seasons of life happen to you. I'm not talking about difficult things that've happened to you out of your own poor decisions. This text isn't

addressing that. This text addresses the difficulties that we didn't make happen, but that simply happened *to us*—that accident, the abuse, the miscarriage, the misfortune, the depression, or that death. In a room this size, I'm sure many of you have had some very difficult, perhaps unspeakable, things happen to you. Maybe even very recently.

As I preach this sermon I'm conscious that though I've suffered some, I've suffered little compared to many of you. So please know that I know that. Know that my heart is tender as I speak to you today. Let me give you a few seconds to think about this, maybe even to write a few things down: What's happened to you?

Until we're able to look at and tell the good, the bad, and the ugly "what" of what's happened to us, we'll be living with an incomplete story.

Robinson Crusoe is a good story because it begins with the "what," the honest account of what happened to Robinson Crusoe. Near the beginning of the book we read: "September 30th, 1659. I, poor miserable Robinson Crusoe, being shipwrecked, during a dreadful storm, came on shore on this dismal unfortunate island, which I called the Island of Despair; all the rest of the ship's company being drowned and myself almost dead." That's pretty honest storytelling. The adjectives say it all: poor, miserable, shipwrecked, dreadful, dismal, despair, drowned, dead. Robinson Crusoe and the apostle Paul both give us a good story because they're both honest about the shipwrecks that've happened to them.

The people who you admire most in your life are probably people who you've seen demonstrate this—the ability to face the shipwrecks that've happened to them, the courage to explore that wreckage and to tell that story. That's the first step in telling our story. And the body of Christ is the best place for you take this first step, the best place for you to make some safe relationships and begin to speak your story.

II. Question #2: Why did this happen to me?

As Paul writes out verse 18 of this letter, he's already told the story of what happened to him. As he writes from his prison cell, he knows the Philippians already know the "what" of what happened, but they don't know the "why." "Why has our beloved pastor been beaten, shipwrecked, and imprisoned? Why God? Why did this happen?"

In telling our stories, the second question we have to ask is "why did this happen to me?" We move from the "what" to the "why." And as we ask the

deeper “why” question the healing begins to go deeper and we begin to see the redemptive results of what’s happened to us.

“...that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear” (vv. 12b–14).

What’s happened to Paul has advanced the gospel. This is the opposite of how we think a story ought to be told. We would think that the story is basically over at this point. The gospel preacher is chained up in prison, the gospel preacher has had a setback, therefore the gospel’s had a setback and it’s time to write “the end” to this story.

But that’s not how this story goes. The gospel is advancing. Paul uses a military term here, the term for the advancement of an army. Paul reports that the message that Jesus is King of the whole world is gaining ground, moving forward, advancing towards victory. To grasp what a radical thing this was to say in that day we need to do a little history here.

At the time Paul wrote Philippians, Caesar was being worshipped as a god and savior throughout the whole Roman empire. A historian from the 1st century wrote about how this first came about 45 years before the birth of Jesus, when Julius Caesar returned from a victorious battle and was given divine status. He writes:

“Then Caesar hastened to Rome. Victor of all civil wars he was feared and celebrated like no one before him; therefore all kinds of exaggerated honors were created and bestowed upon him, even superhuman ones: offerings, celebrations, sacrifices and statues in all temples and public places in each of the provinces, for every community and for all the kings allied with Rome. The inscriptions of the statues were various; on some of them he [Caesar] wore an oak wreath as the savior of the native country...His person was pronounced sacred and it was decreed that he could dispatch his official functions from a throne of ivory and gold; the city annually had to celebrate the days of his victories; priests had to offer public prayers for him...and the administrators had to swear an oath...not to resist any command of Caesar. To honor his birth the month Quintilis was renamed Iulius (July), furthermore, numerous temples were to be built to him as a god.”

Whenever a new Caesar took the throne in Rome this event would be announced by using the word “gospel.” A new Caesar would rise to power and it would be announced to the people in this way, “hear the gospel, hear the good news: Julius (or Nero or whomever)

is Caesar, Julius sits on the throne. Celebrate this gospel.” Paul is chained up in Caesar’s prison and he makes a radical claim. He says, “There’s a different gospel, there’s true good news: Jesus is the true God, Savior, and King! Jesus sits on the throne! And this gospel is advancing!”

Paul’s telling the Philippian church that this message is advancing not in spite of, but precisely because of, what has happened to him. As Paul tells his story, he’s saying that “why” prison happened to him is for the advancement of the gospel. And this very well might be why some difficult things have happened to you.

There are two different audiences who are blessed by Paul’s difficulty. First, look at verse 13. The message of Jesus has advanced among “the whole imperial guard.” The imperial guard was a regiment of about 9,000 soldiers stationed in Rome. Paul is saying that this whole group has caught wind of the fact that Paul’s imprisonment is for Christ.

How did this happen? Well, we know that prisoner Paul would’ve been guarded by being chained to one of these Roman soldiers for six hours at a time. Imagine being chained to Paul for six hours! If you were chained to me for six hours you’d hear me talk about five things: Jesus, my wife, my work, mountain biking, and Ultimate Fighting. Imagine what you’d hear if you were chained to Paul? Do you know how interesting that would be? If you were chained to Paul, sure you’d hear all about Jesus, but you’d also hear a lot of other things. Paul was a normal guy who’d talk to you about the friends he missed. He’d tell you about how beautiful the coast is near Philippi. He’d tell you the story of the snake that bit him on the island. And he’d do what all guys do when they run out of things to say, he’d show off all his scars.

Through these conversations, the true gospel is spreading to the whole imperial guard. The way this worked is that an individual guard would watch over Paul for his six hour shift. Then a new guard would come and shackle up with Paul for another six hours. And Paul would begin, again, to very naturally find ways to advance the message of Jesus with each new guard. Over time, the story of Paul’s life and the story of Jesus began to circulate among a large number of the guards. They’d ponder what Paul had said, they’d talk about it at the water cooler and after work at the pub. The guards began to learn that Paul wasn’t in chains because of committing a crime, he was in chains because of his commitment to Christ. And this reality began to change them, just like when Paul was a prisoner in Philippi and the

jailer was transformed by what Paul shared about Jesus.

Look at what's happened here. Paul's prison has become a pulpit. Paul's now reaching people with the gospel that he would've never come into contact with before. These imperial guards would never step inside a church. They'd never join a community group. But they'd listen to the man in chains.

What's your prison? Friends, your prison might be your best pulpit. Who are you chained to? Your chains might be your best opportunity for advancing the gospel—perhaps among people who will never hear it anywhere else. I know that for me when I was the only Christian on my college football team my freshman season, I felt pretty chained. That season, every afternoon for four hours, I was chained to guys who were older than me, bigger than me, and who didn't like Jesus. I imagine Paul's prison guards looked a lot like these guys. But throughout the course of that difficult season, as I told my story to Chris and Therman, and as I found ways to speak of Jesus with Casey and Alex, I saw the gospel advance a few yards. Often the difficult places of our lives turn out to be the best place for doing ministry.

Now, look at verse 14. Here we have Paul reporting that what's happened to him has also advanced the gospel among a second audience. Fellow believers have become more bold and fearless in preaching Christ as a result of Paul's imprisonment. This sounds strange doesn't it? You'd think that as the Christians in Rome learned that Paul's in prison because of his preaching, that they'd grow more timid in their own preaching for fear of ending up like Paul. But the opposite has happened.

It sounds strange, but Christian history is full of stories like this. To tell just one story, I think of the Auca 5. Many of you know this story of the five missionary men and their families, headed up by Jim Elliot, who 50 years ago took the gospel to a violent Indian tribe in the remote jungles of Ecuador. Just as they were beginning to make what looked like major progress with this tribe, the five missionary men were slaughtered, were speared, by the tribespeople they were seeking to love with the gospel. And you would think that after hearing this news less people would sign up to be missionaries and less people would boldly speak the Word. But, you know what? Because of what happened to the Auca 5, a whole generation of Christians from across the globe were inspired to step up and live a life that counts by more boldly advancing the gospel. Many people say that what happened to the Auca 5 resulted in more people signing up to be foreign missionaries than any other event in Christian history.

And many of these missionaries are now following in the footsteps of the Auca 5 and dying as martyrs. Do you know that we've had more Christian martyrs in the last century than in all the previous centuries combined? And

do you know that because of the ministry of these martyrs and because of the ministry of very ordinary Christians like you and me who are living out the gospel in the difficult places of our lives, this last century has also been the greatest period of gospel advancement since the resurrection of Christ? Right now, more people are being transformed by Christ than ever before.

Why did prison happen to Paul? It happened to advance the gospel. Why did your prison and chains happen to you? If you're telling your story right, you'll see that it has something to do with the advancement of the gospel.

III. Question #3: How do I respond to what happened to me?

Now we come to the third big meaning making question: how do I respond to what happened to me? And I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this because, though this is an important question, it's not the most important one. Paul asks the "how" question in verse 18, but before we get there let me first read and say something about vv. 15–17.

"Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice."

This is what's going on. A lot of Christians in Rome have begun to boldly preach Christ as a result of what's happened to Paul. Most of them are doing this out of good motives. But a number of these "brothers," as Paul calls them, are preaching Christ out of envy, rivalry, and insincerity.

Have you ever heard somebody say, "We just need to get back to doing church like the early church. If we were like them things would be so much more healthy"? This text shows us that that's a silly thing to say. The early church had problems just like we do.

So Paul reports that some early church believers are preaching Christ with messed up motives. Now it's very important to see that these people were still preaching the gospel. Their motives were wrong, but their message wasn't. If these individuals had been preaching a false, incorrect gospel Paul would've said what he said in chapter 1 of Galatians, **"Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed."**

The best way I can think to illustrate what's going on here in Rome is with Richard Simmons.

Richard Simmons has a great message of calling people to lose weight and be healthy, but the whole way he goes about it is just ridiculous. Richard Simmons' message is good, but his motives are to get attention and fame by looking like a fruitcake. This is what Paul is dealing with in Rome, a bunch of little Richard Simmons running around preaching a good message, but doing it in short shorts, spandex, and bad hair. Some Christian preachers are like this: good message, but bad hair and insincere motives.

How does Paul respond? As he reports to the Philippians, how does Paul respond to the Richard Simmons preachers *and* to the whole story of shipwreck and imprisonment that's happened to him?

“What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice” (v. 18). Paul rejoices. Paul responds to all of what's happened to him with joy. There are two ways we can respond to what's happened to us. We can let what's happened make us bitter or make us better. Paul chose to become better, to respond to what happened to him with joy. Here Paul is modeling for the Philippian church, a church that very likely was to soon face some significant suffering, he models for them the way to answer the “how” question.

Now, this isn't a difficulty-ignoring, superficial joy. Paul isn't hanging out in prison with a bright orange T-shirt that he bought from his local Christian bookstore that says, “Make the Rejoice Choice.” Paul's response to what's happened is a deep joy that doesn't ignore the pain and difficulties he's experienced, it's just that the difficulty has been eclipsed by the joy of seeing Christ preached.

How are you responding to what's happened to you? Are you becoming bitter or better? Can you look down at your chains with joy? We don't arrive at a response like this overnight. It takes time. That's how it happens in *Robinson Crusoe*. You have to turn many pages, you have to read through many months of grief and wrestling with God until you hear the shipwrecked Robinson Crusoe say:

“I worked my mind up, not only to a resignation to the will of God in the present disposition of my circumstances, but even to a sincere thankfulness for my condition...I enjoyed so many mercies which I had no reason to have expected in that place, that I ought never more to repine at my condition, but to rejoice, and to give daily thanks.

IV. Question #4: Who caused this to happen to me?

Now we come to the fourth and final meaning making question. The “what” question is important; you've got to start there. The “why” question is a deep

one. So's the “how” question. But you haven't finished telling your story until you've asked the “who” question, until you've asked, “who caused this to happen?”

You are telling your story, but who is writing your story? Paul knew who was writing his story. Do you see the four most important words of this whole passage? They're in verse 16: “I am put here.” As Paul makes sense of what's happened to him, he's gone the whole way. He's asked all the questions and he's concluded, “I am put here.” Who put him there? God did. Who's in charge of all that's happened to Paul? God is.

Friends, this might be difficult for some of you, but have you asked this question? Have you asked the “who” question? This was a difficult question for me to ask when years ago a diagnosis I didn't like was announced to me. Do you know that though what has happened to you may have been incredibly difficult, painful, shameful, or traumatic, involving much evil and wrong, in some good and mysterious way, God put you there? Like Paul, can you recite Romans 8:28 on good days *and* on very bad days? **“For we know that all things work together for good, for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.”** In the Greek, the “all” of “all things” means, “all.”

When you think of this “who” question, what gives you more comfort? To believe that you wound up in a difficult place, but although God was watching it all and loved you very much, he wasn't powerful enough to stop what happened? *Or* is their more comfort in believing what Paul believed—that God is all loving and fully sovereign, fully in control of every inch and second of your life and that though he might put you in a difficult place that you don't understand, you can trust him?

The answer to the “who” question didn't haunt or disturb Paul. It comforted him. It caused him to rejoice. You can look throughout all of Paul's letters and you'll never find a single place where he doesn't acknowledge that all the difficulties of his life have been a part of God's wise purpose and plan. Paul knew more suffering than probably any of us will ever know, and yet he rejoiced to say “I am put here.”

I want to be that kind of man. As I make sense out of what happened, what's happening, and what will happen in my life, I want to answer the “who” question the way Paul did. Will I be this kind of a man when future suffering and difficulty come my way? I hope so. As I prepare to become a father in the next couple of weeks, I've been thinking a lot about all the difficult things that could happen to my

son or to my wife or to me. Some of those thoughts have really scared me. But it's my prayer that whatever might come my way that I would be a man who answers the "who" question like Paul.

Joseph was also a man who explored the "who" question. Remember Joseph? In the book of Genesis, as Joseph looked back on what happened to him when his 10 brothers betrayed him and sold him into slavery, when decades later he came face to face with his betraying brothers, this is how he told his story: "do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life...it was not you who sent me here, but God...As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."

Paul and Joseph, who stand on opposite ends of our Bibles, both of these men were unjustly put in a foreign prison, yet both of them didn't hesitate to say, "I am put here, God put me here." Only Christianity lets you say that. Only Christianity gives you a good, loving, fully sovereign God who skillfully writes the stories of our lives. Only Christianity gives you a fully good and fully sovereign Storyteller. Paul and Joseph knew this Storyteller.

CONCLUSION

And so did someone else. The apostle Paul is in prison telling his story while he awaits a fair Roman trial. But the whole reason Paul's in prison is because of the one who never got a fair trial. What happened to him? He was crucified. Why did it happen? To save sinners like Joseph, Paul, you and me. How did he respond to what happened to him? He endured the cross with joy, as Hebrews 12:2 says. Who put him there? God did. As Isaiah 53 says, **"He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed...the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all...it was the will of the Lord to crush him."**

The reason that Paul could say "I am put here" in prison is because Jesus could say "I am put here" on the cross.

Friends, God wrote Jesus' story. He wrote Paul's story. And he's writing your story. The passage that we've looked at this morning doesn't contain a single command. And so I don't leave you with any commands. I just leave you with one invitation: be a person who asks all four of the meaning making questions. Many of us only ask the what, why, and how questions, but we stop short of the "who" question. I invite you to ask the "who" question. Because there is great comfort in being able to tell your story and say "I am put here."