

A Pastor's Word from God's Word – Part II
“Was I Disappointed to Wake Up from Surgery and Still Be Here?”
Philippians 1:12–26
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April 2, 2017 • Evening Sermon

In this study I want to look at Philippians 1. It is a great opportunity to preach God's Word this Lord's Day. I'm going to tell you why I would preach on this sermon title after having my open heart surgery. I have a friend named John Piper. After John got prostate cancer it wasn't long after that, that I got it so I picked up his book titled *Don't Waste Your Cancer*. One of the things he talks about in that book is that adversity and trials in life are learning moments and the indication of course for pastors is that we don't really have private lives. Our lives are pretty much on display and while we always need to avoid living to be seen by people we have to realize we are seen by people. Then we have to help people understand that when they see us why we do what we do and how we approach it. So that was my attempt not to waste my open heart surgery and also combine it with not wasting my previous prostate cancer which was about five years earlier and in the treatment for that I found out about having to have the heart surgery for the ascending aortic aneurism. One of the elders I was talking to about this told me that was the Triple A which was kind of inside information there that I had never received so I was grateful for that.

The second reason for this sermon is that I want to be an encourager because I know you face trials and many of them greater than the trials I have faced in life but if the Biblical paradigm is of any help to you then I feel a responsibility to do that pastorally in life. By in large, I am fully committed to expository preaching just working through text of Scripture and if not expository preaching then topical expository preaching like we're doing on revival, expounding a particular text dealing with revival throughout this year. Thirdly, I do believe there are times where thematic preaching that goes back and roots itself in Scripture is appropriate for pastoral reasons. So that is what I'm attempting to do here in this study.

I had not planned to do this study until I had received a particular question a number of times and that was 'Pastor, were you disappointed when you woke up from surgery and you were still here?' After this question I realized I needed to do part two on a pastor's word from God's Word with part one being from the evening study on February 5, 2017, before my surgery. The first part was where I set up a surrender to God's providence but now when God speaks in His providence, how do you address that? So that is why I am doing this one. Immediately I knew on February 5 that I needed to preach the implications of Romans 8:28–30 which says [28] *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. [29] For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. [30] And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.* I need to preach about how to deal with the adversities and tests of life particularly when they are in the context of life and death tests.

Also when I received that question I knew I needed to go to another text and that is the text for this study in Philippians 1. This is to answer, what about when you wake up and I'm going to leave you here, would you be disappointed? I have been chided on this and rightly so because I did a sermon one time on the Lord bringing Lazarus back from the grave. I made the comment in that sermon that I don't buy any books where people write books about dying and

coming back to life and they have the need to tell others about it. The people in the Bible who came back to life didn't write books. So I just don't read them. God reveals to me what I'm going to face, enjoy and have and so I'm just going to rest with that instead of the inclination to elevate other people's "experiences" over God's revelation. So I avoid that temptation.

I also made the comment in that sermon that Lazarus didn't write a book and my guess was that Lazarus was pretty well ticked off that he was raised from the dead. So people say 'see Harry that was a valid question. You are saying Lazarus was disappointed.' Here is how I'm going to get out of this. I think he was disappointed and pretty well ticked off when he came back but remember he had been gone three days. That's long enough to set up housekeeping and to enjoy the presence of the Lord. Three days and then boom you're back! If the Lord had left me there three days and then brought me back I might have been ticked off to tell you the truth. I am not the brightest bulb in the chandelier but when I woke up and the first thing I saw was my wife Cindy, and you expect me to preach a sermon to tell you I was disappointed when I woke up, I am not that dumb. I was glad to see her and my kids and everybody else that I saw.

Now I want to try and put a little more Biblical meat around this. I want to take a moment to review from the first one of a pastor's view part 1. I gave five things from Romans 8:28 particularly when the moments of life and death hang in the balance. I came to grips with this when I received a letter that it was nationally known that only ten percent survive this surgery although that statistic is not true in this area. It's like saying right before you get on a plane that only 1 out of 10 go down in flames. It got me thinking more about the issues we face that deal with life and death and how I should approach that as a man of God, a father, a grandfather, as a believer and as a pastor.

Here are the five things I brought out in that study. One is that adversity/tests/trials are a gift from God for lifelong learning. That is why He tells us to count it all joy when you encounter various trials knowing that the trying of your faith produces endurance, endurance character and character hope (James 1:2-3). Adversity is part of God's lifelong development program in our life. Scripture tells us that we don't go through things that are not common to man. Secondly, we are told that when we are in the trial God will make the way of escape (I Corinthians 10:13). Thirdly, God is at work in this to develop us and grow us. Tests and adversity in life are there to accomplish three things. One, a test tells you what you know. Two, a test tells you what you don't know. Three, a test tells you what you need to learn. There is much that God taught me through this process for which I'm grateful.

The second of the five things is that in the midst of a test I want my life to be a right witness, a right response. I don't want to put out a facade. I want to deal with things honestly and transparently but ultimately I want my life to be a witness that Christ, the One I have my faith in, is sufficient and that I believe His promises. One promise being that He is not telling me all things are good but He is telling me He works all things together for good. I don't want to practice in the name of faith, denial, thinking, 'this really isn't happening to me' or 'I'm going to stomp around to Jesus and shout out what the answer will be to this test.'

Whenever we see the glimpses of God's providence that are benevolently experienced we are supposed to lift up a testimony of praise but when it goes the other direction God is doing something providentially that we don't know but now we have to trust Him in that. He never told us there wouldn't trials and adversity in life once we came to know Him but He does tell us that even in those moments He is doing something and He wants us to trust Him in it. When we face the trials of life we want our life to be 'Yes, God I trust You. What'er' my God ordains is

right.' Now everything is not right in a broken world but what God ordains for us is right in terms of how He is living.

I'd like to give an illustration from a family I had the dear privilege to pastor in Charlotte, North Carolina. I have their permission to share this but not the permission to share their names. This is a wonderful couple. When they came to our church, they came from a Wesley Armenian background so they were grappling with this reformed faith and the sovereignty of God. The wife was very articulate, insightful and when she had an opinion she was sure you needed to hear that opinion. I would give her something to read and she would come back and give me her opinion on it of whether I was wrong or right. So we would get together and talk about. God in His providence allowed me to receive a phone call that I will never forget from them that their dear 11 year old boy was diagnosed with a brain tumor. We prayed together and asked God to deliver him. God did give him some time here that many children at that point would not have but eventually He took him home. I remember as a pastor being with this couple in the hospital room in the closing hours when God was going to bring this dear young boy home. This sweet boy loved Jesus so much and even though he was only 11 years old he had the maturity of a 50 year old.

As I was sitting there with them I will never forget two things that happened. One was a chaplain that came in and I'm sure he was trying to comfort the family and was well meaning but then he said to the couple, 'Listen, as we go through this I want you to know that God is not involved in this. Now God will help you on the other side of this but this is one of those things that God is not involved in.' It was at that moment that this wife became a rock reared Calvinist. She said to the chaplain, "You may be trying to comfort me but I get no comfort from that. I've got to believe my God's hand is here and I'm going to trust Him. I don't know how I'm going to bear up emotionally but He's not absent. He hasn't blinked and this is not apart from Him. My God is at work for He takes and He gives. He gives and He takes and I'm asking Him for the faith to bless His Name."

Then moments later as this dear boy was struggling to live, she put her arms around him and said "God, is calling you home. You don't need to stay for me. He's calling you. You go. We'll meet you later." Within five minutes the struggle ceased and this dear, covenant child who had owned faith in Christ went to glory. There weren't many meetings I had with these parents after that because they weren't going to play the game of denial but they were informed by the truth of their trust in God. Now, I cannot tell you the number of people they have ministered to for the glory and grace of God. So we want a right witness with God.

The third thing is here is what you can know when you face adversity. One is that God is sovereign. God does not say all things are good but He works them together for good. Two, God will be with you and not forsake you. Though all else will forsake you He will not forsake you, even in the valley of the shadow of death. Three, He will strengthen you and sustain you. As your days are so shall your strength be. At this moment you may look at the day of death and think how will He ever sustain me, but the day is not here yet. When the dying day comes the dying grace will come for the believer. The fourth thing you know is that God loves you and His love is relentless and unstoppable no matter what the adversity in life. Five, God's promises are sure in Christ and irrevocable. This leads me to the fourth thing I shared in the part one study.

Fourthly, is He will be with you, His power will uphold you and you by His grace can dismiss all fear. By His grace you can eradicate anxiety and by His grace He will put the balm of Gilead upon the concerns of your heart and soul. I remember thinking of what Cindy would face if the Lord called me home. I thought about the church of Jesus Christ at Briarwood and

what they would face if God called me home. I thought of all those things and then I realized God has certainly allowed me to be used but He certainly is not dependent upon me. In fact, it may be a promotion for Cindy if the Lord takes me home. That may be one more thing she doesn't have to worry about. Things will go well with or without me. Do you all realize how much my wife has to do to get me out the front door every morning? God's promises, presence and power not only remove the anxieties but they calm our concerns.

Fifthly and finally, it is not faith to be irresponsible in the days of adversity. 'I believe God is going to deliver me so I'm not going to do what I need to do to take care of my wife or my children or my grandchildren or share my pastoral insight to my elders who the Lord has entrusted the care of this congregation to. I don't need to do that because I have confidence about what God's going to do.' When God delivers me He may deliver me into His presence or He may deliver me back here but if He delivers me from here to Him I need to have been responsible. It's not a statement of my faith not to deal with the fact that His deliverance may be to bring me to glory, therefore I need to do that. So I had a wonderful time meeting with Cindy and I gave her some suggestions if the Lord were to take me home. Some asked me if the Lord took me home would I want my spouse to get remarried and I'm not going to go into that area with you but men I'd encourage you not to ask your wife that question.

Secondly, before I went into surgery, I also had a wonderful time in my study talking with my three children just going back over the things that God had taught me in life, letting them know the history of their family, what God had done and how He had done it and I didn't want to leave without them know some things about their family that I had not taken the time to tell them. We talked about where they could be going as they moved into the future as well. Thirdly, that is the way Jacob did it with his sons and that is the way I think it's right to do. Then I sat down with the team of leaders/elders here at Briarwood and shared my heart with them. I think those are the kind of things that God calls us to do so that when we step into these matters of tests that are life and death that we have made clear our hearts to those whom the Lord leaves here as well as fulfill our calling to speak words of truth.

I will give you one passage of a man that did that in Scripture and then I'll close with a couple of comments. Let's look at Philippians 1. Here Paul is in prison and this is his first Roman imprisonment. He is facing the possibility of a death sentence so this is how I want you to think of this as we read this particular section of Scripture. Philippians 1:12-13 says *[12] I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, [13] so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.*

Paul is under a death threat so he wants to make sure the brothers know this now in case the Lord takes him home. Paul wants them to know two things. One is that He is in prison for Christ and yet they will hear all kinds of reports as to why he is there like he is a traitor or something. He will not bow to the maxim that Caesar is Lord for he is going to say Jesus is Lord. He wants them to know he is in prison because he has been faithful to Christ in preaching the Gospel. The second thing he wants them to know is that God is using this situation Paul is for His glory. There are soldiers in Caesar's imperial guard that know Christ because Paul was put there. That's Paul's way of saying he has a government supported, fully paid prison ministry. He has not only led his prison guards to Christ but it's gone all the way to the imperial guard. Then Paul will later say that some of Caesar's household will come to know Christ. Paul saw this imprisonment as part of God's plan and not an opportunity to throw a pity party and think God didn't love him. He not only saw it in the sovereignty of God but he saw it practically

as he told them about those he was able to lead to Christ who he may have never gotten the opportunity to talk to had he not been in prison.

So having developed that perspective for the brothers he goes on to say in Philippians 1:14, *[14] And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.* So because of what God is doing with Paul's imprisonment, sustaining him and using him, some brothers were waffling a bit under the threat of persecution and now they have become bold to share their faith. So he has even raised up more witnesses from the brothers of a bold confession of faith, thinking if God can sustain Paul in prison and use him then God can do the same thing for them. So the brothers are encouraged. He gives them three things – God is sovereign, God is at work as people are getting saved at the prison and up the ladder but thirdly, there were brothers faltering under persecution that have now been encouraged and strengthened.

Now Paul gives a fourth thing that happens from his imprisonment in Philippians 1:15–18a which says *[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 selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. [18a] What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.*

The fourth thing he tells them about is that there are some who preach Christ thinking they will mount up the evidence to keep me in prison in hopes to bring a lethal indictment against me. They are preaching it out of rivalry. Paul also tells them that this doesn't make him mad. He doesn't care why they are doing it as long as Jesus is being preached. Praise the Lord as long as Jesus is being preached. You are probably thinking if they don't believe what they preach then their preaching isn't working, is it? Wrong! The power is not in the preacher and I can tell you that every time I preach. The power is in the Word and the Gospel. The preacher may not believe it and God uses it if he says the right things.

It is what happened when Spurgeon was converted. There was a painter testing the acoustics where he was painting by saying 'The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' and Spurgeon was converted. I can tell you a time that happened in my life. The Alliance Youth Fellowship was having a retreat and I was 16 years old. I did not want to go on this Saturday retreat. My parents never asked me if I wanted to go or even asked me if I wanted to go to church at all. Those were decisions made at 'headquarters' and given down to me. My dad told me I was going to get to drive the car Saturday and I thought 'great' but then he told me where I was going to drive it and it was to this retreat in Ashbury, North Carolina. I thought ok I'll somehow survive this because I'll get to drive the car and all. I didn't know there were going to be people there to help us learn how to share the Gospel. I got there and sure enough they trained us to share the Gospel at this retreat. The other thing I didn't know was that these students who trained us were going to take us door to door to share the Gospel with the surrounding community.

I want you to know two things here. One is God answers prayers for unbelievers and I'm a living example of that. I was an unbeliever at this time and as we walked up to that first door I prayed 'God, please let no one be home when we get there.' We got up there and nobody was home. God answered my prayer. He told me 'I'm going to start this and then you're going to take over to tell them about Jesus and that's what we're going to do.' We went to the second house and I prayed 'God, please let no one be there.' God heard my second prayer. Unfortunately we went to a third house and at that moment the prayers of unbelievers had run

out in capital. Someone answered the door, invited us in, the guy started us off and then said 'Ike has a few things he wants to share with you.' I had memorized it so I just spit it right out that we're sinners, we can't save ourselves, God sent His Son to die on the cross for our sins and by the way you can become a Christian as a gift if you'll just receive Him by faith, you wouldn't want to do that would you?' He said, 'Yeah' and the guy said to me, 'Pray with him.' I don't know whether the man was converted or not but I was just as lost as I could be.

So Paul is saying here that they may not know what they are preaching but if they are preaching the Gospel then let them preach it. Notice how he is able to set his theology – God is sovereign. Then he begins to interpret what is happening from that filter and begins to affirm it. So let's look further in Philippians 1.

Philippians 1:18 says [18] *What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice.* Rejoice in what? Paul will rejoice in prison. I believe this is why prisoners get converted in the Philippian jail and imperial guards and Caesar's household get converted in a Roman jail because when Paul walks in the jail he doesn't have a pity party but he has a praise meeting for the glory of God. Paul, Silas and everyone else praise the Lord because they see the hand of God. They do not determine God's love for them by circumstances for they interpret their circumstances from God's love for them. They read the circumstances from the greatness of God and His love. Paul goes on to give some reasons for his rejoicing even though he has already given reasons for rejoicing.

Philippians 1:19–21 says [19] *for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, [20] as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.* (The deliverance is not that Paul is going to get freed but it is whether he is delivered by life or death Christ will be honored in him, regardless. Paul is rejoicing because Christ is enough.) [21] *For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*

This is the platform that Paul was given and that was either in life or death Paul was to honor Christ. Also that he would not be ashamed of this and that with full courage now as always Christ would be honored in his body. To live is Jesus and to die is gain. Why is it that Paul can rejoice whether he is delivered by death or unto further life? It is because his life was not defined by this world. It was defined by Jesus. That is why I love Matthew 6:33 which is a verse God granted to me as a life verse.

Matthew 6:33 says [33] *But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.* God, please don't let me seek things that have Jesus added. Be patient with me because I so easily get distracted and detoured but please keep working with me that I might seek You and Your Kingdom. Things? Whatever you bring it has to be for Him and His Kingdom. They are added. Please don't let me live for the things with Jesus and His Kingdom being added. The reason I make that prayer is because of how weak I am and I need that in my life. That is why I write that verse every time I write something because I need to be reminded of it. I need to be reminded that my life is not defined by the zeroes in my bank account, the square footage of my house or whatever it is for those things are things that God has given to me for my life but my life must be Jesus. Then those things don't become our life but become instruments to use for Christ who is our life.

I generally listen to other people's sermons and recently I heard one in which I loved the guy who preached it but in it he railed against people who had a house that he said was too large. A couple came to me with this sermon and said 'What do we do, we feel convicted by the size of

our house?’ I said, ‘What are you doing with your house?’ I want to tell you why I asked them this. I do think that perhaps there are houses that are probably too big for some people but there is nowhere in the Bible that says anyone with a house that has this many square feet is in sin. So my question isn’t how big your house is and how much of it do you own but how much of you is owned by that house? And do you use that house for Him or do you use that for your life? I have met people with small houses that are in idolatry and I’ve met people with big houses that are in idolatry. I have met people with not many zeroes in their bank account that worship money and I’ve met people with many zeroes in their bank account and worship money. I have met people who don’t worship those things. The point is not how much I have but does it have me. God, please let Jesus have me and when that happens it will be obvious.

I think there is a point in time when we can intentionally make a decision that even when we get a raise that we’re not going to automatically raise our standard of living because my wife and I just figure that is more money to give to the Lord’s work. We are just going to try and adopt a standard of living in light of what it means to be in the Kingdom, serving the Lord, in Birmingham, in this congregation and help us live in the context of that. Then everything belongs to Him, over it, above it and below and try to work from that setting but I would never stand before someone and say ‘if you really love Jesus here is how much money you’ll spend and how much you’re not.’ That is something I believe you deal with before God and the ultimate issue is whether Christ is your life or not and that is what Paul is saying.

When Paul got to a test of a prison that imprisoned his life with a possible verdict to take his life he said ‘if He delivers me through death the praise the Lord (for he’ll be in God’s presence in heaven) and if He delivers me by life, by keeping me here, then praise the Lord. Why? It is because this is life for to me to live is Christ and to die is gain. Then Paul concludes with Philippians 1:22–26 which says [22] *If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. [23] I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. [24] But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. [25] Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, [26] so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.*

Paul says ultimately he wants to be with the Lord for that’s far better but immediately if God says ‘no I’m not going to take your life in this prison for I’m going to set you free’ then He has some stuff yet for Paul to do for the sake of others. God will want him to go to Philippi, Ephesus, Corinth and other stuff for him to still do. Paul says that will not disappoint him either because he knows that God has him here for a reason. What is his reason? It is to know Him, to make Him known and to help His people grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ.

So Harry were you disappointed when you woke up from surgery and you were still here? No, and that’s God’s sovereign answer. I’m not disappointed for I have a job to do. Now God, help me do it. If He left me here to do it then He’ll be with me and by God’s grace we can do it and serve Him together. Let’s pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we could be together in Your Word. I thank You so much for my brothers and sisters in Christ for I am overwhelmed and the Psalmist words fill my soul. [6] *The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance* (Psalm 16:6). So dear God would You allow us to embrace the tests of life with confidence in Your relentless love and then as You deliver us with the answers of those tests, would You allow us to walk

rejoicing for to live is Christ, to be with You that's glorious, but to be here for You O that is rejoicing. So Father, whether by life or by death we would not be ashamed but Christ will be exalted that we will not put Him to dishonor but our lives in the midst of a broken world would become a platform to declare 'Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised, my Rock, my Shelter,' Amen.