

Sermon: **Circumstances: *Things Happen***

Text: Philippians 1:12-30

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Things happen. We all know that to be an uncontrollable fact of life.

I'm not sure that the phrase, *things happen*, is grammatically correct. Spell check didn't like it. It noted: *Verb confusion. Consider revising. Whatever...* grammatically correct or not... in reality, things *do* happen! Things in and of themselves may not do anything, but they sure can get in the way and mess things up. They can make life difficult. I'm not sure of verb confusion, but I do know that some things that happen can bring life confusion and I'd often like to consider revising them when they happen.

Things happen. Good things; bad things. But the important thing is to keep the main thing, the main thing.

Circumstances. It's a compound word made up of two Latin words – *circum*, meaning “round about”; and *stare*, meaning “to stand”. Circumstances are “the things that stand all around us”.

Circumstances may be nonessential things or peripheral issues, but they can have a strong and determining effect on our lives.

It all begs this question. How much of your life is shaped by circumstances? To what extent is your life directed and determined by all the things that stand around you; by the things that just happen? To what extent are you a product of things that happen or a victim of circumstances.

It can be very subtle and casual, but we can easily bounce along in life and as a result get bounced around by all sorts of circumstances, till we are no longer grounded or centered in any one thing. We fail to actively follow a straight course by not taking the responsibility to determine the direction of our lives and the focus of our interests and purposes. Our lives are fragmented and, as a result, complicated. Confusion sets in as we become more and more disoriented and disintegrated. It gets discouraging and can ultimately be defeating.

Rick Warren, popular west coast pastor, wrote a best-selling book several years ago titled *The Purpose Driven Life*. In a TV interview he was asked why he thought his book became such a sensation so quickly. He said that he had not written anything new or anything that many others had not already written even better. But the book seemed to strike the raw nerve of what people of this particular generation are feeling... like they are coming apart with no real purpose in life.

In our text, we have a kind of window into Paul's life. We get a glimpse of his mind set, his heart focus and what he really lives for. He chronicles the past, the present and the future of his life.

1. The Past *I want you to know that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel.*

He's not eager for his readers simply to know what has happened to him. He wants them to know that what has happened has actually helped spread the gospel.

What has happened to him? He doesn't elaborate. His readers knew well how he had been the object of deceitful and malicious vilification and injustice. He writes this letter from prison.

Paul had been subjected to some pretty grim circumstances and a lot of bad things had happened to him. But he doesn't elaborate on all these things. Rather, he speaks in an un-dramatic way about it all without a complaint. He seems to be able to absorb it all without resentment or bitterness.

When you love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind, and you love your neighbor as yourself, not living simply for yourself, you can absorb a lot without hurting your psyche.

I want you to know, Paul says, not so much about my sufferings, but that what has happened to me has actually helped spread the gospel.

He explains. *It has become known throughout the imperial guards and the whole Roman public that my imprisonment is for Christ.* Now, clearly, this wasn't a public stunt contrived by Paul to get attention. But it did bring the whole subject of Jesus Christ and who he is and what his message is about, before the authorities and the public. Plus, it served to make other followers of Jesus more confident, emboldening them to freely share what they knew and had come to experience in Jesus Christ.

In short, Paul is saying, *This is not about me; it is about Jesus Christ. All the things that have happened to me are circumstantial. They are only things that have stood around me on the periphery of my life. The core issue is that the good news of Christ is being broadcast all around. In that I rejoice.*

2. The Present Paul goes on to relate the fact that that many are proclaiming the Gospel, some from envy and rivalry, and others from good will. Some are doing ministry out of love, and others out of selfish ambition. Apparently there was a lot of crazy competition among those who supported Paul and those who opposed him.

But, Paul says, what does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true, and in that I rejoice.

Now this is not to suggest that motives do not matter. They do; extremely so. We must honestly assess our own motives before God. But we must be very careful about judging the motives of others. Paul is not about to go there. It's been wisely noted that you cannot prosecute an attitude. Trying to interpret the motives of others, or worse, imputing motives to others is dangerous and destructive. Only God is the discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

So Paul doesn't delve into the motives of others or try to counsel us as to who we should approve and who we should avoid. There is great grace in silence. There is often great wisdom in silence. Paul just rejoices in the fact that Christ is being preached. If people's ears are open to the truth, they will hear the message of Jesus.

Just as Paul has not been overcome by circumstances, he will not be sidetracked by the wrongful motives of others. Be thankful when God uses people you don't care for.

In short, Paul is saying, *This is not about me or about who supports me or who opposes me; it is about Jesus Christ. The main thing is that Christ is being proclaimed and people are hearing about Jesus. In that I rejoice.*

3. The Future *And I will continue to rejoice.*

Like all of us, Paul cannot chart the future. He can't determine what may or may not happen. His life is in danger. The question of life or death is an immediate issue for him.

He does a kind of soliloquy here. He's not sure what he really prefers. To die is to be with Christ. To live on will be to continue his ministry to his readers and others. He seems convinced that he will live on for a while. But either way, he determines, *My eager expectation and hope is that I will not be put to shame in any way but that by my speaking with all boldness Christ will be exalted, whether by my life or by my death. For me to live is Christ; to die is gain.*

That may be easily said, but remember, you cannot die for Christ if you have not lived for Christ.

In short, Paul is saying, *This is not about me or whether I will live or die. It is about Christ being exalted in any event. In that I will rejoice.*

Wow! Talk about a true servant of Jesus Christ. What a person of Christian perspective and principle. I'm sure that what Paul tells us was easier told than experienced. But he wants us to know what his deep and supreme desire in life is and accordingly why he is rejoicing.

All the stuff that has happened to him in the past has actually helped to spread the gospel. And in spite of what is happening presently with regard to the mixed motives of others, Christ is being proclaimed. And whatever may happen to him in the future; whether he lives or dies, his ultimate hope is that Christ will be exalted.

So , Paul says, *That's what I want you to know about me. Now, here's what I want to know about you.*

I want to know that whether I am able to come and see you again, or whether I am absent and can only hear about you; whether or not you will have to suffer as I have and to whatever extent, I want to know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel. I want you to keep the main thing the main thing. Whatever the circumstances; whatever stuff happens, stay together in Christ.

Finally, whatever things may happen to you; whatever other people may do; whether or out of true or false motive; only live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

“Only” is a powerful word that cuts through all the circumstances you cannot control and all the things you cannot keep from happening

Whatever... only live *your* life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. That, by his grace and to his glory, you *can* do.

Amen.