

Above It All

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Bible Verse: Philippians 1:15-18
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Well, we come to that portion of our service where we open God's word once again and have the privilege of looking into the mind of God through the word that he has given to us, and we come back to the book of Philippians this morning which we are teaching through verse by verse on Sunday mornings, and I invite you to turn to the book of Philippians 1.

Last time we looked at verses 12 through 14, I'm going to read them again along with our text for this morning, verses 15 through 18, because it does such a fine job of helping us understand the context of what's going on. Philippians 1, beginning in verse 12 as we refresh our minds to things that we saw last week. The Apostle Paul writes,

12 Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, 13 so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, 14 and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear. 15 Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; 16 the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; 17 the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. 18 What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice.

Now this passage here is one of the more personal texts that we have from the Apostle Paul written under a strain of adversity. He is in prison. He is chained to a Roman guard as he dictates this letter most likely to a scribe to record for him. He is in prison, his movement is restricted, outside the walls of his imprisonment there are people that are trying to bring him distress in the way that they conduct their ministry and we'll talk about that as we go through the text but I want to introduce it with a little bit of thought here that makes this personal to us. How is it that a man could write with such serenity in his heart under the weight of adversity like that? He closes that passage in verse 18 saying, "in this I rejoice." Here is a man who is rejoicing in his heart under circumstances that would prompt many of us to resort to complaint against our circumstances. How is it

that a Christian can be content in this fallen world, in other words, is the question because, you see, what makes Paul content in the midst of this adversity is simply an illustration, it gives us an example that we ourselves are to look at and to examine our hearts in light of, in the light of our own adversity and difficulties that we face. How is it that a Christian can be content in this fallen world? How is it that we can live above it all, you might say? And the answer, I daresay, is surprising, really, at least it may be surprising to you. The answer is the exact opposite of what we are conditioned to believe by the culture in which we live and by what the marketing gurus tell us and even what so many religious leaders tell us as well. Beloved, this is really fundamental and essential for us to grasp and to understand. Where does that contentment come from? It is not in getting what you want. It is not in having the things that you desire or the things that you want, even if those are not necessarily bad things. There is something different that is the key to the nature of the Christian life and to point you in that direction, I want to encourage you to look at the Gospel of Matthew 16 by way of introduction still to our text in Philippians. Matthew 16, beginning in verse 24 and, you know, we're just so accustomed in our day and age at the self-assertion of people and to the point where to a biblically informed Christian it just becomes nauseating. Victorious athletes hold up their trophies and say, "I deserve this," and they boast over their conquered foes. Politicians come and tell us that they are the way and they have the answers to deliver us from our problems and, "Vote for me because I'm the answer to what you need," and all of this self-assertion, self-assertion, "Look at me. Look at me, I have the answers. I'm great. I'm strong." And beloved, what we need to do especially when we have the blessed privilege of gathering together in a setting like this, is to step outside of that and see what Scripture says and realize that the reality for the Christian is entirely different and that we have to separate and consciously divorce ourselves from that mindset if we are going to know Christ at all or if we are going to follow Christ at all.

Look at what Jesus says in Matthew 16:24 with me.

24 Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. 25 For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Do you see what Christ says right at the very start of that great passage? "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself." Christ says that the principle by which men know him and the principle by which men come to him, is one of self-denial, not self-promotion, not through self-fulfillment but rather through a following after Christ in a manner that resembles the death on the cross that he himself suffered. You see, beloved, there is a theme of self-denial that runs through the entire nature of God and the entire nature of Christianity. Look at what Christ himself did. Christ himself denied himself, left his throne in heaven and became a man to walk on this earth for 33 years or so in order to sacrifice his life for the sins of his people. It was not in his self-interest, it was not in his self-comfort to do that, but he laid aside the prerogatives of deity that were rightly his in

heaven, laid those aside for a time in order to come and to be a servant for the needs of his people to offer what no one else could do, a perfect sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins at the cross of Christ. Christ himself denied himself to do that.

Now how is it that a person becomes a Christian at all? Well, you become a Christian in a fundamental sense when you deny your own righteousness, you deny your own intrinsic goodness, you deny any sense of merit before God and you come before him as a humble beggar asking for mercy that you don't deserve and asking for a gift of righteousness that is not your own. You deny yourself. You deny that there is anything worthy or good about you in order to commend yourself to God, and you ask for a gift that you do not deserve in order to be saved. You deny yourself in the most fundamental sense. Well, beloved, as you deny that, you trust in Christ alone and the Christian life starts in that position of self-denial, "God, I have nothing good, nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling," as the hymn writer said, and you've denied yourself and you're trusting entirely in a mercy that you don't deserve from the hands of Christ, well, beloved, what I want you to see is this, is that the self-denial that starts the Christian life which is rooted in a greater act of self-denial that Christ himself made, that theme of self-denial marks the continuance of the Christian life as well and we'll see how this all plays into Philippians 1, I trust, as we go along but the theme of self-denial was taught to us by the Lord in the very way that he taught us to pray in Matthew 6. Essential, fundamental to the nature of Christian prayer, of the disciples' prayer, at the core of that what are we to pray? "Father, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Not my will, O God, but Thine be done. I deny my will. I sacrifice my will. I ask for Your will to be accomplished in the world and in my life. I ask for Your will to be done. I don't assert my will against Yours, rather I subordinate, I submit my will to You and I ask for Your grace to carry out Your will in my life." There is this element of self-denial that is to be the mark of the fundamental way that we interact with God, "Not my will but Thine be done," doing nothing more than following in the very prayer pattern that the Lord himself established in Gethsemane when facing the cross he again denied himself and said, "Father, if it's possible for this cup to pass Me by, let it be but nevertheless not My will but Thine be done." He submitted himself to the Father. He denied himself once again in his hour of extremity knowing that the submission to the Father's will would bring the suffering of the weight of the sins of his people upon him and the sense of separation from God as he bore God's judgment and God's wrath against us at the cross. Self-denial. Self-denial. Self-denial. "Thy will be done," is the theme of the true Christian life.

Now, you know, that's kind of hard to market and so it's easy to cover that up when you're trying to draw an audience to yourself and to attract a crowd. Who wants to hear a message like that? Well, I'll tell you who wants to hear a message like that is a person that the Spirit of God has laid upon and said, "You will belong to Christ. You will belong to Me now." And the person responds to Christ with that humble submissive faith that says, "Lord, I submit to You." The whole concept of who Christ is and the title by which we call him reinforces this for us. What do we call Christ? We call him Lord. We call him Master. We call him King, as we've seen repeatedly on Tuesdays in the Psalms, and the idea that we are under his authority, that we submit to his majesty, that we welcome his Lordship over us and put our lives in his hands, we're denying ourselves as we do that

and saying, "I do not have an independent will that I assert against You. My will is to submit to You and to have You do Your will in my life," and then you deny yourself in that manner.

So there is this principle of self-denial that is running in the background as Paul writes these things in Philippians 1 but let me ask you a question that's going to be really really painful to answer: how can you know when you are living in the spirit of this kind of self-denial? How can you know when you are living that way as a believer in Christ? Well, in large part, I tell you this answer is gonna sting and that's okay, we need to let the word do its work in us, how can you know when you have truly denied yourself in this way, when you're walking in that spirit of self-denial? Beloved, this hurts me as much as it hurts you to say it, it is when you have stopped complaining about your circumstances. It is when you have stopped complaining about the nature of the life that God has given to you. You see, the character of true Christians as we grow in our sanctification as the Spirit of God conforms us to the image of Christ, the character of true Christians is increasingly marked by a spirit like this, it is increasingly marked by a spirit of peaceful acceptance of the way that God has ordered your life. You peacefully accept the fact, you resign in the sense of you peacefully defer to the wisdom of God, "This is the life that You have given me, You are providentially in control of all of my circumstances, and this is the life that You have given me. Father, I accept that. I defer to Your wisdom." That's how Paul could write from prison with serenity, accepting the fact that his freedom was greatly restricted and there were people outside the walls of where he was being kept that were trying to undermine him and to take away the respect that was rightfully his as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

You see, beloved, what you start to realize is that when you have denied yourself, you are moving out of the realm of what is fair or unfair as you consider it or as you define it, you're no longer concerned so much about how you are treated or how you are perceived or what your reputation is because that is no longer the focus of life for you. Instead of being concerned, "I'm not being treated fairly here. I'm going to get my pound of flesh. I don't like these circumstances and therefore I'm going to stomp my feet and be angry and let the people around me know that I am miserable." Rather than that carnal attitude and approach to life, you find yourself instead trusting God and accepting that what he has given to you is good and it is sufficient and that it is all that you need. That informs the way a lonely person responds to life. It informs the way a person in a difficult marriage responds to their spouse and family situation. It informs the way that a person with meager means responds to life when they see people with perhaps more prosperity around them, and they can accept that without a sense of resentment or jealousy or entitlement or expectation. You see, this principle of self-denial goes everywhere in our attitude. It goes everywhere into our perspective of life and it shapes it all, and once you remember, once it is settled in your mind that what I deserved in life was nothing less than the full judgment of God against my sin and rebellion against him, you realize that that's what you deserved from God's perspective, and then you realize here I am in Christ, in Christ I have all of these things, in Christ I am blessed and I am not under the judgment of God, I'm under the grace of God, I'm so thankful for that; the fact that God

has dealt with me that way means that I just want to please him rather than to ask for things that he in his wisdom has withheld from me, at least for the time.

You see the spirit of that embedded in what Paul says here in our text in verses 15 through 18, and we need, you know, it's so hard to find a really good reliable example to show us what this looks like and how it plays out in life, well, here we have the Apostle Paul giving us a preeminent example of acceptance of the circumstances that God had given him for the sake of Christ and his Gospel, and we see him responding with magnanimity, with a sense of generosity toward the people who were even opposed to him and working to make him miserable, working to accept Paul, gladly accepting his limitations in his imprisonment. This is a remarkable man that is a reflection of a remarkable Christ that gives us a sense of what our Christian lives are supposed to be like, and for those of you who are not in Christ, what I want you to see is that the selfish way that you view all of life and the self-centered way in which you consider life to be just a matter of entitlement for what you should get, this goes to the very heart of what you need to fundamentally repent of and come to Christ. By what right do you assert entitlement and carry about a sense of expectation and the world owes me, by what sense do you walk about like that when the perfect Christ had nothing to do with that? When Christ who legitimately deserved it all laid it aside to come to earth for sinners like you, beloved, how is it that you could walk in such a selfish spirit of life? And no wonder, then, that the one who denied himself to come for us, the one who would deny himself in Gethsemane and say, "Father, Your will be done," no wonder he calls for those who would be his disciples, he would call them to a like manner of self-denial in their lives.

So that perspective will help us think through what the Apostle Paul is saying here in verses 15 through 18. He's addressing the reality here of factions that were out and about in the Christian ministry as he was languishing in prison, and I just want to remind you that in verses 12 to 14, and really 12 through 18, Paul is writing to the Philippians and he's telling them, "Brothers, I want you to know that the Gospel is moving forward. Even though I am in prison as the apostle of Jesus Christ, even though I am restricted in movement, God is doing a work and God is advancing the Gospel even though I'm not geographically participating in that." And what he says is, "Do you know what God has done? He's brought the Roman Imperial guard to me and in my imprisonment I speak to them about Christ. They go back, they carry it out so that all of Caesar's household knows about the Gospel of Christ and that I am in prison for the cause of Christ. This is a brilliant aspect of the providence of God that I couldn't have planned." The imprisonment actually became a means by which the Gospel was taken to Caesar's inner circle. That wouldn't have happened otherwise.

Paul went on to say in verse 14, look at it with me again because it helps set the context here, he says, "most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear." So what's happened is that Paul is isolated under his house arrest but the people outside who are not under arrest see his situation and they go out and they proclaim Christ more boldly, more broadly than they otherwise would have. Paul's imprisonment became the means by which the Gospel was advancing, a brilliant plan in the mind of God that human mind would never have

conceived of, and so there is this multiplication effect as the guards come and go out, as the Christians go out and preach, there is a multiplying effect that is taking place because Paul has been isolated and put on the shelf from a human perspective.

Now Paul, what happens now in verses 15 through 18 is that Paul talks a little bit more about the nature of the Christian preaching that was going on that he alluded to in verse 14, and it turns out that it wasn't perfect in terms of what was happening. There were aspects of it that were rather ugly, frankly, and we're going to break these four verses down into two parts, we're going to see, first of all, the factions recognized and then the factions transcended. The factions recognized and then the factions transcended. And what Paul does in verse 15 is this, he describes two groups who are preaching Christ while he is in prison.

Notice in verse 14 he gives this general overview statement, "most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear." Now what he does then is he takes that broad group and he breaks them into two subsets to describe what's going on and what we see is that there are some bad motives that are at work in this proclamation of Christ that is taking place. Look now at verse 15 with me. He says, "Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will." He says, "These people that are going out and preaching Christ, some of them are doing it with good motives, some of them have sin in their hearts, they are full of envy and strife, there is a spirit of jealousy and even contention in ministry as they are doing their preaching." That sounds surprising to us, doesn't it? And to hear Paul describe it that way and where he goes from there is even more remarkable. There are those preaching from envy and strife, but look at verse 15 at the end of it with me, he says, "but some also from good will." He says, "There are these men that are preaching with love and with honorable motives even though there are others who are preaching with jealousy and the wrong motives in ministry."

Now who are these groups? Well, for now at this point in time, we're really not able to identify them with any specificity. Paul knew who they were as he wrote from prison and he assesses their ministry with this perspective in mind. Look at verse 16 and 17 as he describes them in greater detail. In verse 16 he says, "the latter do it out of love," the latter being those who are preaching from good will. Look at the text with me, and he says, "These men know that I am appointed for the defense of the Gospel." In verse 17, he goes back to the other group, those preaching from envy and strife and he says this about them in verse 17, "the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment," and we'll look at that in just a moment.

Let me just say as a preliminary matter, if you have a King James Bible or a New King James Bible, the order of verses 16 and 17 is reversed compared to the text that we're using or the English Standard Version. That's simply because the King James is following a different group of manuscripts compared to the texts that we are using. The difference really doesn't amount to much because the language is the same and it just

comes from the question of the manuscripts that a particular translation is following and sometimes people ask about that, that's the explanation for that.

But here's what we want to come and see in light of what Paul is saying, is that in verse 16 you see this and he describes a group of people that are like so many of you, those of you who love the Gospel of Christ and simply from pure motives seek to advance the work of Christ in their lives, and in verse 16 Paul says, "these latter men, they do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel." These men were concerned that the Gospel actually go forward. These men, these people who were preaching were concerned that the name of Christ would be advanced, that sinners would be converted in a way that would bring even greater glory to God, and they loved Paul, they were personally attached to him, they were concerned for the well-being of the Gospel and the name of Christ, and so here's what they did: their love for Christ and their love for Paul caused them and motivated them to step up and to step out into ministry when Paul was not able to do it. They said, "Paul is silenced, Paul is restricted, Paul is in difficulty, let me pick up the ball where Paul had to lay it down. I'll pick up the ball, I'll carry it forward because I love Paul and I love Christ and I love the Gospel and I'm glad to do that. This is my opportunity to step up," they saw. They knew that Paul was appointed for the defense of the Gospel, they knew that he was a genuine apostle of Christ, and so in deference to the appointment that Christ had given to Paul, they picked up ministry where Paul had left it off due to his imprisonment and they said, "We'll go forward and we'll defend the Gospel in Rome." Nobility rising out of the ashes of Paul's imprisonment. Nobility and pure motives causing people to grow and advance in the cause for Christ as a result of Paul's imprisonment.

And beloved, let me just point out something to you. It took a measure of Spirit-given discernment for them to do this. They saw Paul in prison and they saw him isolated and it would be easy for the carnal mind to think that something was wrong with Paul, that Paul was being punished by God for some secret sin that was not open or yet known or that Paul was not all that he seemed to be, but the true Christians, the Christians there that Paul is describing here in verse 16, saw past the external circumstances, remembered the appointment of Christ to Paul, knew Paul was a man of integrity and as a result of that, they did not question his ministry but rather stepped forward to advance it when he was unable to do so, and their love for Christ and their love for Paul was manifested when his adversity became known and when his adversity continued over a course of time. They stepped up in response to the adversity and rather than questioning the apostle, they stepped forward to carry forward his ministry when he was restricted in it. This is noble Christian character by men who are unknown to us now but were known to Paul at the time and certainly are known in the courts of heaven.

So as a result, these Christians were preaching more boldly in response to Paul's circumstances. The other faction, however, was not so noble. Look at verse 17 with me, he says, "the former," that's a reference to the first group that he mentioned in verse 15, look back up at verse 15 with me, "the former are preaching Christ even from envy and strife," that's the group that he's referring to now, "The former group that I mentioned first, I went and I described these noble Christians and I said what they're doing, the latter

group, but now the former group that I'm talking about, those who are preaching from envy and strife, let me talk with you about them for a little bit," he says, and in verse 17 we see it now, "the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment." That English phrase there, "selfish ambition," uses a term in the original language that was used of politicians who used their public office in order to advance their private interests, and so selfish ambition is describing men who were contentious and who were using the Gospel of Christ to elevate their own prominence. That was their motive in doing it, they wanted to develop their own following over Paul while he was in prison. Because Paul couldn't defend himself, Paul wasn't available, and so they stepped into that vacuum and said, "This is my opportunity and so I'll preach Christ and people will follow me and I'll have a position of prominence as a result," taking advantage of Paul's adversity in order to advance their personal interests. And Paul by whatever means, was aware of what they were doing, had insight into their motives and he says, look at it in verse 17, they were proclaiming Christ out of selfish ambition, seeking their own advancement, and even worse than that, rather than preaching from pure motives, they thought, they intended to cause Paul distress in his imprisonment. This is really bad. This is really bad that people who had benefited from Paul's ministry now turned on him in order to inflict distress, or at least to try to inflict distress upon him in his time of isolation as he was under Roman imprisonment; they found delight in trying to annoy him and while Paul was languishing in prison, they could be the one up front.

Now who were these carnal and insincere men? Who would do that? Some suggest that they were Judaizers who were not Christians at all and they were teaching a false Gospel, and that that would explain how they could act with these motivations, but that really doesn't go very far if you think about it. Would the Apostle Paul rejoice over the preaching of a false Gospel that would lead sinners astray and rob Christ of his glory? Later on in Philippians 3, if you'll look at it with me, he actually warns the Philippian church to avoid precisely those kinds of teachers. He says in Philippians 3:2, he says, "Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision." He says, "Be on the lookout against teachers who introduce Jewish elements of external obedience as a condition to receiving the Gospel of Christ." Paul wouldn't rejoice over men who were doing that. That can't be what he was describing in Philippians 1. And if you remember what he said in Galatians 1, you don't need to turn there but just to remind you of that, that Paul was jealously protective of the true Gospel to the point that he said this in Galatians 1:8, he said, "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!" Damnation upon the one who preaches a false Gospel.

So it's entirely untenable to think that Paul was describing men in Philippians 1:17 who were preaching a false Gospel, in fact, the inspired text says three times in this section of Scripture that they were proclaiming Christ. Look at verse 15 with me where it says in verse 15, "Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife." Verse 17, "the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition." Verse 18, "Christ is proclaimed." So somehow these men were teaching the true Gospel despite their inner carnality. They

were Christians jealous of Paul's influence using the Gospel to promote themselves but they were teaching the true Gospel even in the midst of their sinful motives.

Now it might seem surprising to us that Christians could act that badly. How could a true Christian do that? How could you be motivated badly like that? But maybe if we're asking the question like that, maybe we're just betraying a little bit of our own lack of self-awareness. How is it that you and I do some of the things that we do? How is it that you and I carry about some of the bad attitudes that you and I carry about? How is it that you and I sometimes come into the gathering of the people of God with bitter ambition and bitter thoughts against others? How do we do that? Somehow we do, don't we? And when we remember a couple of things about the nature of the Bible, you realize, first of all, that all of the New Testament epistles in one way or another are correcting Christians with their practical problems or their doctrinal problems. Look at the church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians where Paul addresses them as saints in God and yet there was all kinds of carnality rife throughout their entire body. And we remember what James 3:2 says, that we all stumble in many ways in our sanctification. So, yes, a carnal man can preach the true Gospel of Christ, his reward will be diminished from his impure motives, but the fact of the matter is that the Gospel comes forth and can go forth in truth and Christ can be proclaimed even though the man is not all that he should be as he proclaims it. This tells us something about the truth and the independent power of the Gospel as it is proclaimed.

For our text for this morning, what we want to realize and look at again here, look at verse 17 with me is this, is to realize and remembering in the context of the self-denial that we talked about earlier, is to realize that Paul himself was personally the target of their selfish ambition. They wanted to cause him distress in his imprisonment. They wanted to make him miserable by what they were doing. Wow. What was Paul's reaction to this provocation? Now before we go into verse 18, let's just think about this for a second and think about it from a human level, think about it from a perspective of a man who had not denied himself yet. It would be easy for a man in Paul's position to resent it, to say, "Don't you know I was personally appointed by Christ to my office? You need to respect me rather than to do what you are doing," Paul could have said. He could have protested about how unfair it was, after all, Paul was the one who had been taken up to the third heaven to see things and to hear things that man is not allowed to express. Paul had personally seen the resurrected Christ and been personally appointed by him to be an apostle, for crying out loud, and it would be quite easy for a man of that genuine stature, of that genuine importance to say, "This ain't right. This ain't fair. This isn't the way that it should be and I'm going to get those guys. They're going to get theirs one day."

And yet what we see is that that is not what Paul thought and the way that he responded at all as we come to our second point here for this morning. As we saw the factions recognized, Paul knew what he was dealing with, but here in the second part we see the factions transcended. The factions transcended, and this is wonderful to see. In verse 18, we see that Paul rose above those petty jealousies and the unworthy motives of lesser men about him and he didn't get swept up in the drama of it all. He was beyond it. He was above it all. In verse 18 he says this, "What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice." This question, "What

then?" is introducing what Paul's conclusion about the matter is. He says, "I'm in prison, the Gospel is going forward, there are men preaching Christ but some are doing it out of impure motives and trying to make life difficult for me and miserable for me in my imprisonment," and he says, "What then?" It's his way of saying, "What do I have to say about it? What's my conclusion about this?" In the midst of all of that, he sees through it. He sees through their selfishness to see the one thing, the preeminent passing thing that ultimately matters in it all and it's this, what matters is that, look at verse 18 with me, Christ is proclaimed. "Whether men are doing it sincerely or they're doing it as hypocrites, the fact of the matter is that Christ is being proclaimed and that's all that I care about," he says, "That's what matters to me is that Christ is being proclaimed among men and that is what gives me grounds to rejoice." They were proclaiming the good news of salvation by grace through the atoning work of Christ on the cross even though some of them were doing it in a way that was intentionally aimed to cause harm to Paul, and what's Paul's perspective on it? What's our perspective in the midst of adversity in life? Beloved, here's what you need to see, here's what you need to grasp, here's what you need to embrace, here's what you need to live by: Christ is what mattered to Paul, not Paul. Christ is what mattered to Paul, not his personal circumstances. His personal circumstances and his personal reputation and the evil intent of men against him was all subordinate, all secondary to the surpassing glory of Christ, the surpassing purpose of Christ, and that is what mattered and that had an implication for his inner man. That meant there was no reason for him to be upset or displaced from his satisfaction in Christ.

So even in prison, even when he was under attack, Paul was joyful and Paul was at peace. Look at it there with me again in verse 18 and we'll save the closing phrase of verse 18 for next time. Verse 18, "What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice." Beloved, do you see that what Paul is expressing there is the reality of the fact that he has denied himself? He says, "My reputation, my circumstances are secondary. They are of no importance compared to the preeminence of Christ in my life and the objective preeminence of Christ and the proclamation of the Gospel to all who would hear. If that is happening, I'll take the perspective that I rejoice in that and I'll overlook and I'll bypass what lesser men are trying to accomplish to cause me pain and distress here in my imprisonment." So even in prison, even under attack, Paul was joyful and at peace and that was possible because he was living in a state of self-denial, not asserting himself, not asserting his reputation, not wrapped up in the realm of his perception and reputation among men. He had set all of that aside for the preeminent glory of Christ and that's what Christians do, beloved, that's how Christians live, that's how ministry goes forward.

And what does that mean and what are the practical out workings of that? Well, beloved, those people in your life that are ill-motivated against you, even lying and slandering you, step back, extract yourself from the situation and remember that that does not need to disturb you. If you have denied yourself, if the Gospel is going forward, if biblical truth is advancing, if Christ is being proclaimed, you can rejoice in that even in the midst of the slander that sometimes comes our way. That's easier to do, that's possible to do, that's a natural outworking when you've denied yourself in the presence of God, you've denied your own righteousness before him and your life prayer is, "Lord, Thy will be done." So

we don't have to get swept up in all of the family drama that sometimes encompasses us or the drama that takes place in other realms of our lives, we just need to keep our focus on Christ and remember that this is not about me at all, this is about Christ and my living in submission to him as Lord, Master and King, and I'm going to trust him for that.

So I ask the question: are we, you, I, are we agitated today, unhappy over our circumstances? Maybe, beloved, just maybe, maybe you and I as Christians even have forgotten some really basic fundamental things as we've gotten sucked into the vortex of the inevitable nature of this fallen world and the fact that sinful people move about us and sometimes set their sights on us to cause us harm just like these preachers of the Gospel were doing with the Apostle Paul. Are we agitated? Are we unhappy? Are we weighed down over such things? Maybe we have forgotten some of the basics that we once rejoiced in as new Christians. My Christian brother, my Christian sister, are we not in Christ? Then surely if we are in Christ, we have all in him. If we have the full complete forgiveness of our sins and we have the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit with us as a down payment of God's final blessing on our lives at the end, then surely we have everything even if there are distractions about us.

To remind in a very summary form of things that I want to review in the near future in a series to come, beloved, does not your wise God order all of your circumstances? Is not your life what God has given to you? As you sit here today, don't you have precisely the life that God has given to you? He is in providential control of all things. The Bible says that he works all things after the counsel of his will. Whatever led you to this particular moment in life has come to you by the ordering, directing, silent, sovereign hand of God to put you in precisely this place at this time so that you might become a vessel of his glory where you live right now, and if your circumstances have come to you from the past, the past has been ordered by God to bring you to this point, and if the outworking of it in the future is that God is going to cause it all to work together for good, all to work together for your good in Christ, ultimately one day conforming you to the very image of Christ in his resurrected glory when you are with him in heaven, if the past has been ordained by God to bring you to this point with the goal of bringing you to conformity to the image of Christ, then where is our room for agitation and unhappiness and discontent and grumbling and complaining? Does not your wise God order your circumstances? Does he not have his love upon you even in the midst of the severe challenges that you're facing? Well beloved, it's all a question of perspective at that point and what it is that you will choose to focus on and to let your heart rest in. Yes, you could rest in, you could settle your heart on the injustice of the opponents against you and the things that have been said and done to you, yeah, you could go there. You could go there but understand that to go there and to stay there is to reverse the very principle of self-denial that is at the heart of Christian living. "Father, Thy will be done. Father, I am under Your hand. Father, I trust You even in this. Father, I can be like Joseph and say those men may have meant evil against me and have done really wicked things against me, sure, I get that, but Father, I understand that there is a transcendent overriding providence of Yours in which even when men intend evil against me, You intend it for my good in the end and I'm going to trust You for that and I'm going to let this circumstance purge me of my

discontent and purge me of my self-will and I'm just simply going to trust You for it, and I'll praise You even as the winds are blowing about me."

Look, look, it's a fallen world and fallen men are about us and sometimes they set there designs to hurt us and I know that some of you are in the midst of that, but in your heart you have to say, "But what happens to me is secondary to the greater reality of Christ, and I see in Scripture revealed to me that Christ loved me and gave Himself up for me and I am going to find my life, my motivation, my satisfaction, my identity in what Christ is and who He is and what He has done for me. That is going to be where I place the roots of my life and draw all of my nutrients and all of my moisture to be the man described in Psalm 1 who flourishes because of his meditation on the word of God."

Beloved, if you and I are in Christ, if you and I are under the hand of a wise and loving God who is ordering all of our circumstances, then beloved, let me just make this really brief and concise so that it will stick: if we are in Christ and we are under the providence of God, then surely a lifestyle of a complaining attitude should not be our response to such magnificent grace and the wonder of his glory. You see, as Christians we are in a condition, we are in a state of having denied ourselves and saying, "What happens to me circumstantially is less important to me than the One who saved me." To be a Christian means that you have subordinated your preferences about life, you have subordinated even your reputation to accept with joy what God has given to you in Christ and to live in the overflow and the outflow of that. To be in Christ is everything. To be outside of Christ is to have nothing. And yes, others may exceed us in life and find higher position and higher prominence and everything else and even arrive at it in an unjust way, but that does not diminish Christ. Paul here in prison was above it all. Beloved, you and I can also live in that same way. Indeed, we must as that is the fitting and proper response of gratitude and trust to this great Christ who has loved us and gave himself up for us.

Let's bow together in prayer.

O God, we feel the weight of injustice at times. So many here are suffering at the hands of those who are treating them wrongly. God, I pray for a work, an operation of grace in their hearts that would lift their eyes to the transcendent immutable nature of the love of God found in Christ Jesus our Lord that would serve as their comfort and their strength even in the midst of the adversity that life has brought to them. Father, help us to deny ourselves, help us to live with the spirit, "Not my will, O God, but Thine be done," to resign ourselves in a peaceful acceptance of the way that You order our lives and to move forward with a sense of joy and serenity, O God, even when circumstances argue strongly against it. You are our God. You are our Christ. You are our Master, our King, our Savior, our Lord, and we rest all of our hopes, all of our aspirations, all that we are, all that has discouraged us, all that has caused us to rejoice, we rest it all in the greater identity that is ours of being in Christ, being the object of His love and being on the receiving end of His eternal purposes which can never fail. Help us rise up, Father, in life and in inner attitude to the position that is ours in our loving and gracious Lord. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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