

Living Fearlessly

Message #8 in the series "Finding Victory in a No-Win World"

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown February 28, 2022

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¹⁹ Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

(Ephesians 6:19-20, NRSV)

A recent poll asked people what they feared most. A majority of the respondents selected one fear above all others. Above the fear of snakes or spiders, above sickness, above accidents or crime, above war and above even death – it was the fear of speaking before a group that was chosen above all. Stage fright. Speaking before an audience was the #1 fear listed most above all other possibilities!

Why? What is so frightening about speaking before others? Is it because of the chance of making a fool of oneself is multiplied by the number of listeners, so that, for instance, speaking before 50 people is 50 times more terrifying than one? And, is the terror somehow pro-rated before an innumerable online audience? Maybe I shouldn't be scaring myself by even **considering** that!



Hold that thought. Paul's prayer request will tie that fact to his situation. Consider this; Paul is detained in a prison cell. His freedom has been taken away...he can't travel, he can't preach he can't teach in the market-squares...as he was accustomed to doing.

Look at this Greek cavern-like prison. Could you begin to imagine what it must have been like to be confined to such a small room, when once you had roamed free – previously there was nothing that kept you stuck

in one place. Can you even imagine not being able to move around freely? Where once you could go wherever you wanted to go, see whomever you wanted to see? Wouldn't that be frustrating? Wouldn't that make you question God? Well, the pandemic has enabled us all to easily imagine what Paul must have felt. Frustrated. Confused. Constrained. Stymied. Did I mention frustrated?

But, Paul makes the most of what little he has to work with. Winston Churchill once said, **“Never let a good crisis go to waste.”**

Let me ask you, how did you handle your limitations during COVID? Did you maximize your situation? Or did you stew in your frustration? Probably, if we're totally honest, we'd all admit that we did a bit of both.

The apostle Paul's words give us guidance in making the best of a bad situation. He models for us three simple steps that exhibit faith amidst what could become a 'good crisis.'



He Requests Prayer He Recasts Obstacles as Opportunities He Renders to God what is God's

First, Paul requests prayer. Does this surprise you a bit? The great Apostle Paul, who had stood before powerful political figures, unruly belligerent mobs and sophisticated philosophers championing the faith; who had planted innumerable churches across three continents; who withstood fierce opposition everywhere he went; who wrote 25% of the New Testament (13 of the 27 letters), who was chosen and sent by Jesus who appeared to him, he's asking for prayer? Yes he is.

You see, here's a surprising truth.

Those who sense greatest need for God are strongest in God.

Prayer is EVERY CHRISTIAN'S NEED. And, even the MOST DEDICATED SAINT wisely ASKS FOR OTHERS TO PRAY FOR HIM. I'll say it again, "Those who sense greatest need for God are strongest in God".

If you have ever admitted or realized this about yourself: "I am prone to be a chameleon among others. I tend to blend into my surroundings as much as possible. I'm a coward when I need to be a champion for the cause of Christ." Well, you're not alone. And that admission is healthy. It's humble boldness. AND, it's why we all need one another's prayers. Even the great saint. So, you're in good company.

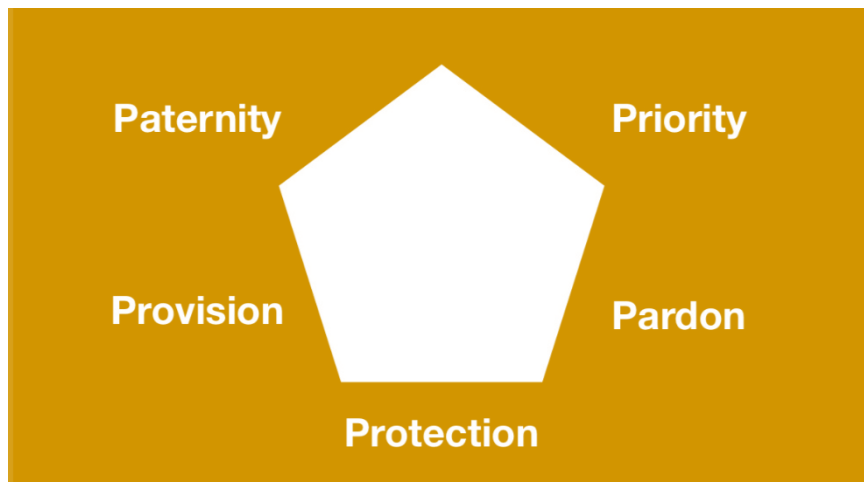
To tell you the truth – the most dangerous place to be (heart-wise) when it comes to life or ministry (those words are synonymous) is to feel, "I got this – I'm good to go....I can handle this on my own - God, I don't need your help". Although it sounds like competent confidence, it

actually is foolish arrogance. You see, God works with those who depend on Him; not those who ignore or forget His presence; or worse, those who don't realize they need Him to accomplish anything of lasting value. No, the heart where life and ministry issues from is the heart that is expectant, dependent, leaning on God. Desperate for Him, in fact, to work through and beyond what we have to offer. In a real sense this explains Jesus' words about not doing anything or saying anything unless he sees the Father doing or saying it. Jesus is the most dependent person who ever lived. As the perfect Man, he lived in true harmony upon God (as man was made to live) and was truly dependent, that's why He was so powerfully, vibrantly alive! (but that's a separate sermon series in itself).

Life issues from the heart that not only distrusts its own inabilities, nor limits itself to its own capabilities but looks to God's abilities placed at our disposal through the Holy Spirit. In our passage it's God's armor that we are to wear. God supplies the armor, and Christ has won the right for us to put it on, or to step into it.

I'm overstating this a bit – God **can** work around and in spite of proud, self-reliant people (he does it all the time! I speak from experience! And just think of Jonah. He was a reluctant prophet but was also a highly successful one!). But the heart that works in concert with the will of God through the empowering presence of God is the one who, though aware of their own doubts, fears and faults trusts God to work in and through them because they realize that apart from Him they can do nothing (John 15:4-5).

Let me quickly, by using the Lord's prayer as an example show how prayer serves to re-orient our thinking; rearrange our priorities and remind of us of how dependent we are on God for all the bare necessities of life.



“Our Father who art in heaven” we are secured by our divine parental care (PATERNITY). *“Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”* My identity and the purpose of **MY** life are about **Him**; not building my kingdom, not about asserting my will but **His** fame, **His** kingdom and **His** will, not mine, pursued (PRIORITY). *“Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”* Provide what I need both physically (PROVISION) and spiritually (PARDON). *“Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil* (PROTECTION). PRAYER covers all the bases and re-orientes our thinking; rearranges our priorities and reminds of us of how dependent we are on God for all

the bare necessities of life. This simple prayer that Jesus gave us can revolutionize how we approach our lives, each day, each hour. Prayer is admitting we need God in every area, and it is the first step in NEVER LETTING A GOOD CRISIS GO TO WASTE.

Secondly, Paul recasts what appears to be an obstacle as an opportunity. Whereas we might all too easily have looked at prison restrictions as an end to missionary travels, Paul sees the confinement as an opportunity to preach to a different audience:

¹⁹ Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

(Ephesians 6:19-20, NRSV)

The first time I met Ed Powl, he was already in a wheelchair and Multiple Sclerosis had severely limited his mobility. He freely talked about his ailment and the things he missed doing but also how he managed to get around. At one point in our conversation, he made this offer to me: “John, if you ever come across someone who has just been diagnosed with MS, please don’t hesitate to give him my number. There is so much I’ve been through, figured out, navigated around, that I might be a great resource to someone who is staring this diagnosis not knowing what to expect. NOW, THAT is what I’m talking about seizing an obstacle as an opportunity.

What obstacle, hurdle, disability, disease, hardship, heartache, loss have you experienced that you see as a something you never would have asked for or wished for but for some reason God has brought into your life?

How might focusing on what you’ve learned through the difficulty or sharing lessons you’ve learned only through that adversity – how might it help others?

- Ask God how you might parley your pain into gain.
- Ask God to help you use not lose what he taught you to teach/reach others.
- You not only can help another through that same difficulty or you can at least make them feel like they’re not alone, that they’re not crazy to entertain fears. You’ve been there – they’re not alone. Your words can be a lifesaver.

What is Paul asking prayers for? To use imprisonment as a pulpit. To view his obstacle as an opportunity to reach an audience he would not otherwise have access to; an audience he would not have chosen address; to possibly have an impact even upon the emperor’s household (just see Philippians 1:12-13)!

Prayer is faith in action that we’re dependent on God.

**Those who talk to God (in prayer)
talk about God to others (in sharing faith)**

Lastly, Paul shows us how to not let a good crisis go to waste by ‘Rendering to God what is God’s.’ I think you might know where I derived that phrase from. When the religious leaders try to trick Jesus by stumping him about taxes his answer uses the phrasing I’m using for my third point. Jesus’ answer is to render to Caesar the coins that bear his image (in other words, support the government financially for the roads they’ve paved, the police protection they

provide, etc.) however, give God yourself (your love, devotion, worship, faith) *since you bear His image*. In our passage the entire line of reasoning reflects this when he says,

¹⁹ Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

(Ephesians 6:19-20, NRSV)

Paul asks for prayer that

- he might receive guidance as *what to say* when given the chance
- he might say it boldly, that it might penetrate, land, have impact
- he might proclaim the ‘mystery of the gospel.’

Paul renders to God his due by declaring his good news! Jesus is King! Okay, the message itself is clear and simple – but that news has something of a mystery about it! Paul, locked up in chains, rendered powerless proclaims, “I follow the One who reigns over everything!” Do you sense the incongruity? He had written earlier in this letter that

Godraised Jesus Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come **(Ephesians 1:19-20, NRSV)**

Paul, a prisoner, kept under lock and key by guards who have power and weapons to keep him from escaping is an ambassador of an unlikely ruler – he’s the dignified representative of the One who ascended a cross, not a throne, to victory and supremacy over all powers greater than Rome – yet including Rome. Okay, that makes for a logical consistency, but to the eyes of the watching world.....it is something of a ironic mystery. You see, Jesus waged a bigger battle, across a cosmic battlefield and gained ascendancy. He is indeed, Lord of all – including Rome. And yet, before our eyes, across the reality of space and time, evil empires still hold sway...they exercise their rule, power, and enforce their will.

We all find ourselves in this same conundrum. We proclaim a perfect Savior; though we are far from perfect. We speak of a loving God who forgave us, changed us, radically transformed us – yet we are far from carrying through on that love all the time; we are far from changed-enough; we’re being transformed but not yet thoroughly so. Paul was to write elsewhere,

*For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus **Christ as Lord**, with ourselves **as** your servants for Jesus’ sake.* **(2 Corinthians 4:5, NRSV)**

Paul’s prayer is very much our prayer. Give me a message that lands, that impacts that both connects to the hearer and penetrates their hearts with the mystery of the gospel. And, I pray, help me to proclaim it boldly, not sheepishly, not out of a sense of obligation but out of faith. Let this be our daily prayer:

God, give me today

1) an opportunity to speak

- with someone about Jesus;**
- 2) the wisdom to see it, and**
 - 3) the boldness to take it.**

Brothers and sisters, whether you consider yourself a mature or young Christian, a strong or weak Christian, this wisdom is for all who wish to be wise and effectual believers: apply yourself to

- Request prayers for yourself
- Recast obstacles into opportunities
- Render to God what is God's = whereby I mean give Him his due; even though the world appears otherwise, share of his love that conquered all, of his faithfulness that gave his own life to save ours.....and tell this story of the One who loves you and gave himself for you!