

What's Your Story? (Phil. 1:12-26)

Facts are great. We need those funny little pieces of data to understand the world and make decisions. Unfortunately, facts are only one part of the knowledge equation. We also need a framework to understand how all those facts fit together. For human beings, we need a story to hold things together. We are creatures controlled by narratives. Often enough, the roots of our conflicts are differences in our controlling stories. Take for example the current situation in Israel and Gaza. We often hear sharp disagreements about what is happening there. But the issue is not how many rockets were fired or when a particular act of violence took place. The real question is “What is the story taking place?” Some people see this as a story about a wealthy and powerful nation oppressing a marginalized and disempowered people. Others see this as a story of a deeply embattled people fighting for its right to exist in a world that has often hated and demeaned it. There are other narratives out there as well. The story we assume conditions how we understand the facts of the situation. By the way, I don't think this focus on narratives means that the truth is relative. A narrative can be false just as a fact can be wrong. The surging wave of neo-Marxism found throughout the Western world is precisely a false narrative that is controlling the minds of many and doing massive harm.

But we don't need to stay up in the world of government, war, and economics. We can take this down to the personal level. What story do you think you are living? Sometimes, it takes great effort to bring our controlling narratives into the foreground. But we must if we are to make good decisions and understand all the facts of our lives. Maybe the story that controls you is that you are the only one who is right, the only one who knows the answers and can put the world right. For you, your story is a battle against everyone else's ignorance. Or maybe you have been deeply hurt. Your story is that you have been treated cruelly and you need people to affirm you and support you, no matter what you do. After all, you have been the victim. People are either for you or against you. Neither of these narratives will lead someone to a healthy or happy life.

Paul was sitting in prison as he wrote to the Philippians. His detainment was a fact of his life. But Paul's experience was transformed because he knew what story he was living in. God gives us this section of Philippians so we can challenge and correct our narratives, and come to live in the same story that Paul was living in. This is, in fact, the true story of the world. That story can be stated simply: **all things exist for the glory of Christ**. The meaning of my life and the meaning of your life is found in seeking Christ's glory. In our passage today, Paul's experience in prison is **framed by Christ's glory in three ways**.

He rejoices in the preaching of the gospel. Paul is imprisoned in Rome, but he believes that "what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel (v. 12). The palace guards know that he is imprisoned because of his commitment to Jesus (v. 13). Because Paul is bold in prison, other free brothers and sisters have been encouraged to boldness to "preach the gospel without fear" (v. 14). Paul is not naïve. He knows that some preachers have stepped forward during his time in prison out of bad motives, possibly to try and claim his place of leadership (v. 15). Some preach because of love (v. 16), and some preach because of selfish ambition (v. 17). Yet Paul is pleased either way because Christ is being proclaimed (v. 18).

How could Paul have this perspective? Only because he knew the story that he was living was a story about the glory of Christ. Is he free? Then he can live for Christ's glory. Is he in prison? Then he is imprisoned for Christ's glory. Are others carrying the torch in love? Great! They are preaching Christ. Are some trying to usurp his position in the church? Fine. If Christ is proclaimed, he will rejoice not in their bad behavior but in their sound words. To know Jesus and share Jesus is Paul's driving passion. It must be for us as well. Any situation in our lives can be reframed by Christ's glory.

By the way, notice how Paul speaks of both advancing the gospel (v. 12) and proclaiming Christ (v. 18). He shares about the work of Jesus (the good news about what has happened) and the person of Jesus (he proclaims Christ). The full gospel is always about both the person and work of Jesus. Remembering this saves us from two errors. The first we can call a conservative error. It involves preaching about the death and resurrection of Jesus and not focusing enough on the life and teachings of Jesus. The problem is that this undercuts

discipleship. To forget the person of Jesus, both his divine identity and incarnate ministry, is to hinder our ability to grow in his image. The second we can call a progressive error. It involves talking about the teachings of Jesus without due attention to his death on the cross, with all its meaning and implications. If you downplay the cross, you will certainly misunderstand the words of Jesus. This is the problem with the movement that was once called “red-letter Christianity.” It is impossible to understand something like the Sermon on the Mount if we neglect the suffering, substitutionary atonement that Jesus accomplished at Calvary. We must, like Paul, rejoice in the gospel, the message about who Jesus is and what he has done.

He hopes in eternity with Jesus. Paul filters the outcome of his current imprisonment through the narrative of Christ’s exaltation. He believes that through prayer and the provision of the Spirit, the situation will work out for his deliverance (v. 19). But for Paul, this deliverance isn’t exactly what we think of when we think of deliverance. For him, deliverance means living in such a way that “Christ will be exalted in [his] body, whether by life or by death” (v. 20). This is not just a circumstantial freedom but true inner freedom. He looks at the outcome of his situation and with firm confidence declares that to live is Christ and to die is gain (v. 21). And how is death gain? If he lives through imprisonment, then he gets to enjoy “fruitful labor” to the glory of Christ (v. 22). But if he dies, he gets to depart and be with Christ (v. 23). In another letter he speaks of this as being away from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). Because Paul lives for the glory of Christ, he believes that Christ will be glorified in either his life or his death. Either outcome is deliverance for Paul, because if he dies, he has hope of spending his eternity with Jesus.

Do you have this sense of inner freedom when you contemplate death? In asking that I am not implying that death is not frightening. It is after all referred to explicitly as the “last enemy to be destroyed” in 1 Cor. 15:26. Nonetheless, Christ has so conquered death that for the Christian death is no longer merely a menacing power but now a gateway to eternal joy. To live with this perspective is true freedom and deliverance. This kind of freedom in the face of death is taught throughout the Bible. In Psalm 23, it is expressed as a confidence in God in the valley of the shadow of death and a feast table set up in the presence of enemies. This can happen for each of us as we allow the

story of the glory of Christ to shape our own stories. To live life well, each one of us must be prepared to die.

He lives to do the work of ministry. There is, of course, another Christ-exalting outcome to Paul's imprisonment. This is that he would survive and be released to a new season of ministry. For the sake of the Philippians, it is necessary that he remain in the body (v. 24). He is even convinced that he will remain alive to help with their "progress and joy in the faith" (v. 25). By looking forward to this outcome, Paul is not concerned about his own future reputation and career. He wants to be with the Philippian Christians again so that their "boasting in Christ Jesus will abound" (v. 26). His desire to live is not tied up with his own glory. Paul's story is not one controlled by the idol of fame. Paul's story is that Christ would be exalted.

As a pastor, I often have people wonder with me about what purpose God has for them in a certain phase of life. The question might be expressed as "Why has God kept me around so long? What does he want me to do now?" or as, "My job or family situation is about to change, and I wonder what God's will for my life is." These are valid thoughts. Answering them requires that we get our priorities straight. No matter where you are or what you are doing or your age, you can, like Paul, live for the glory of Christ. This is the purpose of all things. This is the true story of the world. So, you cannot go wrong in your life if you set this as the purpose for your existence as well.

Stories matter. Narratives provide the connective tissue for facts. This is true in the realm of history and economics. This is true in our personal lives. There are many false stories out there. With God's help, we need to unearth our narratives and bring them into the light so that we can better live for God's story in the future. How do we do this? Imagine your life as a quest for some great object, like the Arthurian knights quested for the holy grail. In your honest moments, what are you seeking in this quest? If your story is a story of conflict and resolution, what is the great battle you are fighting? For Paul, the object of his quest was the glory of Christ, and the conflict he was fighting was a battle against the principalities and powers as he sought to bring the gospel to as many people as possible. May each of us follow a little closer in his footsteps as we pursue Jesus.