

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Philippians 1:2-12 on September 14, 2014 at Victory of the Lamb.

**Series: Stuck?**

**Today's Focus: Focusing**

**"Wear Your Gospel Glasses!"**

How many of you wear contact lenses or glasses? Any of you ever have Lasik done?

I'll never forget the day when I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and I walked outside Shopko optical wearing my first pair of glasses. All of a sudden I could read the signs above the store aisles. Outside I could see store signs across the parking lot. I could actually read, "Pick-N-Save." It was December and I could make out individual Christmas lights on the trees where before I saw only blurry balls of color. It was magical! It turns out I probably should've had glasses much sooner. I just had no idea how out of focus my sight had become.

Well unfortunately what can happen to our physical eyesight like mine can also happen with our spiritual eyesight. Because just like people's eyes tend to get worse and worse slowly over time, the default setting for the soul is a sort of slow drift towards seeing life out of focus. And unless we understand this, we may never understand what we're missing. We'll just assume that this is how it's supposed to be. Like me in 6<sup>th</sup> grade needing to sit in the front row to see the chalkboard, it never occurred to me that I should also be able to read it from the back! So I was missing out on seeing a lot of things and I didn't even know it. That's what can happen to us as we go through life. Little by little our lives drift out of focus. This is one way we can get "stuck" in life.

You ever feel stuck? You ever get in a rut where you're wondering, "Where's the joy? Where's the peace? Where's my experience of the presence of God? And how I am supposed to gain momentum and move forward in my faith? What am I failing to see here?" You ever feel like this?

I have. And I'm guessing that means you probably have too. That's why in this series we're going to hear some inspiring words in a letter that's in the Bible. This letter was written by a man named Paul. He was a pastor, a missionary actually. He didn't start out as a Christian. He actually persecuted Christians until he met Jesus one day and Jesus changed his life from being a persecutor of Christians to a missionary of Christ and a great encourager to his people. And so this is a letter that Paul, the Apostle Paul, as he is known, writes to people in the Roman city of Philippi. So he's writing a letter to his Christian friends in Philippi at a church that he started.

And his letter starts out like this. <sup>2</sup> *Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* Now if you've been in church your whole life, this perhaps sounds like very normal kind of talk to you. Like maybe even in your family you get out of bed and you can't help but greet one another by saying, "Grace and peace to you this morning from God our Father and your Lord Jesus Christ." Beautiful, right? I'm sure that's how it works in your house ;) But if you're new to church you might be thinking, "Well that's kind of a funny way to start a letter. I mean, who talks like this? *Grace and peace to you...* And who actually writes letters anyway?"

But before we go on I just want you to understand what Paul is trying to say. He's saying, "These words that I'm going to be sharing with you can bring you real peace. I'm trying to help you get unstuck. And the first thing I want to help you do is to focus you on what's most important... God's grace. God's amazing grace which alone can give you the peace that God wants you to have. So grace and peace to you from God, friends."

Now before you go, "Well doesn't that sound nice, Paul?" and you think this is just some sort of sentimental talk or a bunch of nonsense, I want you to understand that this is intensely practical. And it is intensely personal too. You see, when Paul is writing these words, he is himself stuck. I mean really stuck. He's stuck in prison in Rome. Literally. Not because he did anything bad but because he had been preaching about Jesus. So on the one hand, look what good it did him to follow Jesus...at least outwardly! He got put in prison. But something else was taking place inwardly, inside Paul's soul.

So this letter to the Philippians is written while he's stuck in a prison far away in Rome. He couldn't have been farther away from the Philippians in terms of location...and yet at the same time he couldn't be closer to the Philippians in heart. Listen to what he says,

*<sup>3</sup> I thank my God every time I remember you. <sup>4</sup> In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy <sup>5</sup> because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, <sup>6</sup> being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

*<sup>7</sup> It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. <sup>8</sup> God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.*

*<sup>9</sup> And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, <sup>10</sup> so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup> filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.*

So here's Paul. He's stuck in prison. But who's he thinking about? He's thinking about his friends in Philippi. Instead of having a pity party for himself, Paul says, "I'm praying for y'all." He's thinking about others over himself. So one thing right off the bat that we can learn about getting unstuck is real simply to stop focusing exclusively on ourselves and start focusing more on others.

When's the last time you prayed intensely for the well-being of other people? You know this is one of the reasons God wants to bring people together in a church family. Our lives get all out of focus when we put ourselves in the center of the picture. But when we put others at the center it's a beautiful thing. To encourage each other. To support each other. To pray for each other. Isn't this great to know that here God has put a family around you that prays for your spiritual focus?

This is part of why it's so great to have a church family that you belong to. To have some friends who will always have your back. To rally around those who are hurting and need help because who of us doesn't need some help once in a while? Last year when Sarah's mom was dying you all came together to support

us. You brought meals. You gave us gift cards. You helped us. Many of you have your own stories of being helped. It's wonderful to be part of a church family. And on top of it all like a little cherry we get to work together to share the message of God's love through Jesus Christ with those people who don't know it yet or who've lost focus on it. There are a lot of people in our community who used to have a relationship with God but don't anymore. But Paul celebrates what he calls our partnership in the Gospel. *I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel.*

What a miracle of God that even after he has saved us, he brings us into a church family that we might each have a meaningful role in helping to share Christ's victory with others. So if you don't have a church family to call your own, I just want to say welcome to you today. We'd love to have become part of ours. We may or may not have a lot in common. You might like a different football team. You might vote for a different candidate. But you know what? That's ok. Really. There may or may not be a lot of people here who are in your position of life here, but that's ok too.

We're glad you're here and we want to help you get unstuck. We want to help you learn that God loves you so much no matter who you are or where you're coming from. In truth, even those of us who've been a part of a church family our whole lives, we ourselves need you. We need to keep being focused back on God's love through Jesus too. All of us drift inwardly toward getting stuck on ourselves. All of us individually tend to drift towards thinking that my opinions are the only ones that are valid or that my ideas are the best. But in reality they're not always. We all need each other. Life's better together. That's one of the reasons we have Groups starting this Fall. In your worship folder there are a number of opportunities to get connected to other people in the church in small groups—to find some friends, to have fun, to pray for each other and to help each other grow in your faith.

Paul says, *I always pray with joy*<sup>5</sup> *because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now,*<sup>6</sup> *being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

So I just love this here. Because who's ultimately going to help you get unstuck and move forward in your faith? Who's going to take responsibility to do whatever it takes to bring you home to heaven one day? God is! Isn't this like the best news possible? God who began a good work in you, *he* will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Until the day Jesus comes back or you die to meet him, whichever comes first, God's not going to stop working in you to bring you home to heaven!

So here's ultimately what can help you get unstuck in life...when you focus on what God wants to do in you and what God is going to do in you to keep you moving forward in faith. Sometimes getting unstuck starts when God simply shifts your focus to the fact that it's not all up to you to get unstuck.

So think about this. The good news is that God isn't done with you yet. On the cross Jesus our Savior cried out, "It is finished." So your eternal destiny is secure through Jesus Christ. Jesus has already done everything to make heaven possible and to bring you into God's family. He lived without sin. He died for yours. And he rose as a conquering hero from the dead. Through holy baptism you and I are buried and with Christ and raised to a brand new life of faith. Heaven is promised to us as our inheritance through faith

in Jesus. So there's nothing you need to do to add to that. There's nothing you can do to subtract from that either. It's finished.

But God's not finished with you yet. Just as your forgiveness is all God's work, so your progress in faith, your sanctification, and your eventual glorification one day is all God's work. God will bring it to completion. And so from beginning to end, it all depends on God. God is going to keep working through his word to build your faith. God is going to keep working through the sacrament of holy communion to feed and nourish your soul. God's going to get you across the finish line. Don't give up on God because God hasn't given up on you.

You know what this means, don't you? This is one of God's greatest promises. Like Nathan talked about last week, God promises to work out all the circumstances of your life to move you towards a deeper relationship with him that one day results in you ending up in heaven. I imagine someday in heaven seeing certain people and going, "How'd *you* get here?" And they're gonna say, "Well, clearly it was all God that he could bring someone like me safely home. Turns out he even used that crazy time in my life, that challenging time, that *tentatio* time to refocus me on Him."

Let me ask you, friends...How many of you here have been to a 3D movie? It's a whole different experience. But what happens if you try and watch a 3D movie and you don't have the special glasses? You miss out. In fact a 3D movie is meant to be watched in 3D so if you aren't wearing the glasses it doesn't even look right. And if you don't even know that you need special glasses to watch it you might even get frustrated and complain about the movie theater. "What a terrible screen or projector!" That's crazy though if it's because you weren't wearing your 3D glasses, right!?

So today God wants to give us the spiritual insight to see the big picture of what he's up to in our lives. God giving us our gospel glasses to see what he's doing in us. We have a partnership in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. To focus on these blessings we need to wear our gospel glasses. We need to look at everything and everyone in our lives through the lenses of God's love and his special purpose of moving us forward in our faith and giving us opportunities to care for others and share the gospel message with them. Now in a sense what we're going to be doing throughout the rest of this series is learning how to see everything through these gospel glasses. So be sure and come back the next couple weeks as we continue this journey together. But let me give you one very quick story of what it looks like to wear your gospel glasses.

A friend of mine who's a pastor in Las Vegas shared me a story this week about a man who has started studying the Bible at his church. Previously this guy had lived a promiscuous lifestyle, casually sleeping with lots of different ladies. He used to proudly tell everybody, "How can you live with somebody unless you sleep with them first?" But now he doesn't say this anymore. In fact no longer does he even think this way. You see now he's wearing his gospel glasses. He now sees the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment which says, "You shall not commit adultery" as the blessing of a loving God who wants people to know and experience what unconditional love is within marriage. And in fact this kind of love he now knows is what God has first and foremost shown for him through his Savior Jesus Christ who died for all his sins, giving him a peace he now has only as a result of God's amazing grace. So friends, have fun this week starting to wear your gospel glasses. Imagine how wonderfully different life's gonna look! Amen.

## My Next Steps

**Connect:** How easy it is to lose focus. Share a story of someone who lost focus (or personal example).

**Aha:** Losing focus spiritually (also very easy) will have a negative impact on our lives, perhaps even disastrous. Focusing on God's love for us in Jesus always has the power to get us back on a healthy track!

**Treasure:** *[B]eing confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus* (Philippians 1:6).

**Challenge:** Think about times in your life when it seems easy for you to lose your focus on Christ. What kind of impact does that have on you emotionally? In other words, what are the clues that you should be looking for that you've lost your focus? What plan will you put into place, when you notice that your focus is lost?