

Moving Forward in Reverse

Moving Forward, Part 1

Philippians 1:12-14

In our Sunday evening series of messages on battling those besetting sins that never do seem to leave us alone, I have referred to a 17th century pastor by the name of John Bunyan.

John Bunyan was a Baptist pastor – and an independent – which meant he wasn't aligned with the liturgy or theology of the Church of England. His preaching however was so fruitful, that the Church of England didn't quite know how to shut him up.

Eventually, politicians succeeded in royal legislation forbidding any unlicensed man from holding private meetings where more than 5 people were in attendance. The King effectively attempted to stamp out evangelical worship services.

Well, John Bunyan was arrested and, in fact, over the course of much of his adult life, he would spend years in jail. On one occasion a magistrate was sympathetic and wanted to release John to his wife and children and Bunyan's famous statement was delivered in that courtroom, "If you release me today, I will preach tomorrow."

Even in jail, he began preaching in the prison courtyard. He not only attracted a large audience of inmates, but hundreds of people in Bedford, England, and the surrounding area would show up on the Lord's Day and stand outside the prison compound in order to hear him expound the scriptures. Finally, the officials silenced him by placing him deep inside the jail in isolation.ⁱ

Yet there in solitude and silence, John Bunyan would end up speaking louder and further than anyone would ever imagine.

In the inner recesses of that prison, John wrote an allegory about how the gospel of Christ and His

cross-work convicted a young father by the name, Christian. Christian believes the gospel and as a result becomes an outcast in his town. John Bunyan then records the journey of Christian through one spiritual battle and one trial of adversity after another as Christian travels to the Celestial City – or Heaven.

His book would sell like wildfire.

Ask John Bunyan and he'd tell you his plans and his passion were to pastor – and to preach – not write a book . . . from prison. Yet, his writing far exceeded the reach of any of his sermons and that book, entitled, *Pilgrim's Progress*, would go on to reach the hearts of tens of millions of people.

In fact, for centuries, *Pilgrim's Progress* was the most widely read and widely translated book, second only to the Bible.ⁱⁱ

I'm sure if you could have asked John Bunyan at different stages in his own life how things were going, he'd probably tell you things weren't going well at all.

In fact, there wouldn't seem to be much forward progress.

During one of his incarcerations, his first wife died, leaving him with 4 children – one of whom had been born blind.

He would eventually marry again, and his wife would write in a letter to a friend that they had "neither a bowl nor a spoon between them."

Only near the end of his life did John Bunyan realize that his greatest contribution for the gospel came out of isolation and difficulty and reversals of plans and dreams. His book was published in two parts – the second section would be published only 4 years before his death.

The same lesson of the Christian life is still true today. It's going to take a longer perspective to arrive at some positive understanding of God's reversals in our lives – **those times when we seem to be going backward, instead of forward and we can't exactly figure out why.**

To trust our Lord – that even though reversals don't always come with an explanation . . . reversals always have a reason.

Which means Christianity involves one of the greatest challenges for all of us – the renewing of our minds so that we learn to view the changes in our circumstances as part of God's curriculum.

And if you've lived long enough in the faith, you've discovered that God often moves you forward, by going in reverse.

Only later do you realize that what you thought was going backward – away from the goal – was actually moving you forward – toward God's better goal which brought Him greater glory and for you and me deeper maturity and trust.

God often moves us forward, in reverse.

Which means – even though this might sound odd – that we as believers need to learn how to reverse our thinking in order to correctly interpret the forward moving circumstances of life as God's orders them.

God often moves us forward, in reverse.

That's exactly the underlying lesson Paul is communicating to the believers living in Philippi.

And he's going to reverse their way of thinking, so that they actually think correctly about the work of God in their midst.

In Philippians chapter 1, the next paragraph opens with Paul's perspective on life.

As we explore it together I think you'll understand why we're talking about moving forward in what seems to be reverse.

Notice verse 12. *I want you to know brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel 13. so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. 14. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold, to speak the word without fear.*

What a perspective on life . . . Paul turns everything around as he interprets three different issues that would have brought most of us to despair.

In fact, let me rephrase what Paul has written here with three statements to highlight how Paul reinterpreted the events of his life.

The first statement is this:

1. I have suffered setbacks and the gospel is advancing

Those elements seem contradictory . . . but that's God's forward movement, in reverse of man's logic.

And Paul knows it's going to sound odd too.

He said something similar to the Corinthians when he wrote, ***There is this wide door for effective service open to me and there are many adversaries (1 Corinthians 16:9).***

Wait . . . which one is it.

Is it an open door or we got all kinds of problems! It's usually one or the other.

Paul knows that he is reversing the normal way of interpreting the circumstances of life.

So here, to the Philippians, Paul does the same thing; and he begins at **verse 12** by saying – look again – ***I want you to know, brothers.***

That phrase immediately puts you on notice.

This was a common expression in Paul's day to call people to pay attention to something that might easily be misunderstood or even hard to accept.ⁱⁱⁱ

In our contemporary vocabulary, Paul is saying, "Now I'm about to tell you something you might find really hard to believe . . . you're not going to automatically buy into this – so read carefully."

Notice . . . ***what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.***

I have suffered setbacks, and the gospel is advancing.

Now Paul could have stopped and written a volume of what happened to him.

More than likely he didn't need to because this supporting church was already very aware.

For our sake, let me rehearse what Paul is referring to:

In **Acts 21**, Paul travels to Jerusalem, at great risk to his own life, and sure enough he causes a riot in the temple and he is arrested and placed in prison.

In **Acts 23** Paul is finally granted a trial; we're informed that 40 Jewish men have bound themselves together by an oath that they won't eat or drink again until they've killed Paul.

Later in that same chapter, we're told that one of Paul's nephews finds out about the plot and reveals it to Paul.

That night, 200 soldiers and 70 horsemen and 200 spearman surround Paul and at dark – just after 9:00 pm, they spirit him away to another city.

In **chapter 24**, Paul finally stands before an official who has the power to release him, but instead demands a bribe from Paul to be let loose. Since Paul won't pay a bribe, he will languish in prison for 2 years.

Two years later – we're told that Paul finally stands trial before another official and then a few days after that stands before Agrippa – where Paul makes his appeal to stand before Caesar, the Emperor. The court agrees and their journey to Rome begins.

In **Acts chapter 28**, while at sea, a storm arises which eventually shipwrecks the boat and all the passengers swim for their lives and every one of them makes it alive to the nearby Island of Malta.

As these water soaked passengers huddle around a fire built by the local villagers, Paul himself brings his armload of sticks to put on the fire and as he does a poisonous snake that had been scooped up with the firewood bites him, literally clinging to his hand.

Everyone expects Paul to die, but he doesn't. However, he lives no doubt with the pain and discomfort from that serpent's bite.

In **Acts chapter 28**, Paul finally arrives in Rome and is placed under house arrest.

After all that time and after all those events, you would expect Paul to write something like, "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really worn me down and out . . . it has made me come to conclusion that either God doesn't really look after me or that He really doesn't know how to build His church. We're going in reverse . . . in fact; it's been years of one reversal after another."

Instead Paul says '**this has actually served to advance the gospel.**' The highest officials in our land have heard the plan of salvation; government leaders have been made aware of the gospel.

I have suffered setbacks and the gospel is advancing.

Let me make one more comment here – you need to know that Paul isn't speaking with some sort of false pietism. He isn't saying, isn't the Christian life wonderful – no matter what? That snake bite didn't even make me flinch and I can adapt to prison life anywhere on the planet.

While he only briefly alludes to all that has happened to him, he chooses an interesting word

we've translated – advance – **notice the latter part of verse 12 – this has really served to advance the gospel** – that word, **advance** is from prokope (προκοπη) which means to cut forward.^{iv}

It's a verb that would be used for someone cutting away the trees and the undergrowth so that a path can be made – or for someone removing the barriers that might keep an army from making progress.^v

In other words, this is hard work! When Paul says, '**the gospel is advancing**' he's saying it while he wipes the sweat off his brow.

I can just see Hudson Taylor in that second floor loft on the Coast of China, sitting at a desk translating scripture with temperatures above 100 degrees . . . sitting there writing with one hand while holding a towel in his other hand to wipe the sweat that continually runs down his cheeks and drips from his chin.

The gospel is advancing.

Notice what Paul writes next – **verse 13, it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.**

Paul effectively writes – the whole imperial guard is effectively hearing from me about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let me paraphrase this second statement to highlight Paul's perspective on the circumstances of life.

He not only says, "**I have suffered setbacks and the gospel is advancing.**

He now says:

2. I am under military guard and they are my captive audience

I love it – I am under house arrest – and these guards are my captive audience.

And Paul isn't exaggerating . . . he writes – the entire imperial guard has gotten the message of Christ.

Let me tell you what that means . . . this is staggering.

Their name from Latin, the official language of the Roman Empire was The Praetorian Guard.

They are stationed throughout the empire to squash any potential rebellion. They are the only military force allowed inside the capital city and those stationed there have one objective – to

personally protect the Emperor and the imperial family.^{vi}

They were the elite troops – highly trained – paid a double salary of nearly \$100,000 dollars a year, in today’s economy.

Caesar Augustus had first installed these troops. He hand-picked each soldier until he had chosen 10,000 men to form this imperial guard.

They served for no more than 16 years and when they retired, they were honored with Roman citizenship and all its privileges as well as a pension totaling in today’s economy, nearly 1 million dollars.

They eventually became known as “king-makers” because only the nominee that had their approval – and their protection – could ever hope to sit on the throne.^{vii}

They had earned the respect of their countrymen; they were loyal, hard-working, well trained, skilled soldiers.

In the strategy of advancing the gospel, God knew that Praetorian soldiers would make outstanding ambassadors.

Acts chapter 28 informs us that when Paul arrived in Rome he was handed over to the commanding officer of the Praetorian Guard.

We know from other passages that Paul was allowed his own private quarters where members of this Guard rotated shifts in guarding him.

But get this – 24 hours a day, seven days a week, Paul was hand cuffed, with a short 18-inch chain to a Praetorian guard. Every six hours the shift changed – giving Paul 4 soldiers every day, 7 days a week.^{viii}

Paul didn’t complain about his chains . . . he consecrated his chains to God.^{ix}

That’s how you move forward in reverse. To any onlooker you’re going in the wrong direction – but because of your trust in the character of God and the curriculum God has designed for your life, you actually make forward progress.

Paul got it . . . he interprets his house arrest as a setting where the soldiers could not escape.

This wasn’t an obstacle, this was an incredible opportunity.

My father, still today a missionary to the military loves this passage – he reminded me recently that this was the first military ministry movement in the history of the church.

This was an incredibly fruitful field where Paul was able to deliver the gospel of Christ to these elite troops who shuttled into his apartment every 6 hours

. . . beloved; this means Paul had the opportunity to deliver the gospel to over 3,000 soldiers.^x

Elite troops who rubbed shoulders with the highest ranking officials in the Empire.

Paul adds this phrase in *verse 13* – not just the Praetorian guards, but notice – *all the rest* . . . all the rest – who are they?

They would have been government officials and attorneys and more than likely some Jewish scholars working on behalf of the Roman government as they all tried to determine whether or not this was some new sect of Judaism or whether Paul and his gospel was a threat to the Roman government.^{xi}

In other words, on the budget of the Roman Empire, all of these officials were basically forced to study the claims of the gospel as Paul revealed them.

- **I am under military guard and they are all my captive audience!**
- **I have suffered adversity and the gospel is advancing!**

One more paraphrase from this text . . . Paul effectively says,

3. I am imprisoned so that other believers can experience freedom.

He writes in *verse 14*. *And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.*

By the way, this word here for *speak* – they are *bold to speak the word* – isn’t a word for some official kind of sermonizing or preaching a sermon.

This word is a reference to everyday, normal conversation.^{xii}

The implication here from Paul is that these believers – and understandably so – were fearful or even reluctant to share their faith. There was growing hostility; Jewish leaders were intensifying their opposition and persecution, but unbelievers were also beginning to see Christianity as a threat to their agenda.^{xiii}

So Paul’s willingness to write with joy to his supporters, even though they knew he was under house arrest; his perspective and his spirit and his boldness to share the gospel with the highest officials in the land – Paul writes here to the Philippians and says, even my brothers and sisters

have a new found freedom to speak the truth in liberty – without fear – and boldness.

Fear is contagious . . . but so is courage.

Paul’s willingness to reinterpret the reversals and the adversities of his circumstances with joy and trust in Christ actually ended up infusing other believers to be willing to join him in doing the same.

Let me add this: unfaithful living is contagious . . . but faithful living for Christ is contagious too . . . which one are you going to help spread?

I am imprisoned and my brother and sisters now experience new freedom.

What a way to reinterpret the events of life so that God is trusted and the gospel is communicated and the Lord Jesus is glorified.

As I reviewed the circumstances from Paul’s life in the latter chapters of the Book of Acts that I rehearsed earlier, I reread that verse where Paul set out on that doomed voyage from Fair Havens – the voyage that eventually shipwrecked them all on the island of Malta.

They set out from *Fair Havens (Acts 27 and verse 8)*.

It reminded me of a time 10 years ago where I made some forward motion by going in reverse – and it took place in Fair Field.

The only difference was, I didn’t have a good attitude about it until it was all over.

Perhaps you can identify more with me than with the Apostle Paul. We can learn this together.

My wife and I, and our youngest daughter – at that time around 11 years old were traveling back to Raleigh. It was lightly raining – not much traffic on the interstate – and I went through a puddle of water – just deep enough to pull at the steering wheel. I overcompensated and turn the wheel back – and we began to slowly spin around as if we were on ice.

We went off the interstate backwards, off onto the grassy slope and then we hit the guard rail – scraping along, traveling backwards, knocking one support post down after another, blowing all four tires in the process, until we finally came to a stop.

God planned for us to end up without a scratch, but our van was completely totaled.

I visited a dealer in town to look at conversion minivans like the one we’d just totaled. The sticker shock caused a brief heart attack – more serious than when we hit that guardrail.

So I went on the internet and found a used van exactly like ours – but it was located in Connecticut. I searched the history of that van through the VIN

number – it was clean and with low mileage, it was still under warranty. I negotiated the deal over the phone and agreed to buy the van.

Wayne Witt, one of our elders, was building his air miles as an amateur pilot, and he along with another young man flew me in his little plane to Cheshire, Connecticut. Since its name is the same name of the Cheshire cat, I should’ve known there’d be trouble.

The van salesman met us at the little community airport where we checked out the van and then drove it back to the dealer – my friends flew back to Raleigh.

My plan was to wrap up the deal and get to my parent’s home in Virginia no later than 10:00 that night.

I pulled away from the dealer around 2:00 that afternoon – the plan was working perfectly. I drove the van about 20 minutes or so and then pulled off at a services exit to get some strong coffee and some of those little chocolate covered doughnuts that come in a package – filled with protein and fiber and vitamins. You’ve had them I’m sure.

When I got back into the van and turned the ignition, nothing happened. I mean nothing.

It just made a strange noise. Now I’m not a mechanic, but I’ve heard dead battery sounds – that clicking sound; I’ve heard bad starter sounds . . . this was different.

I found the dealer’s number and called him on the phone and my first question was, “What did you sell me?” Only in a higher pitch?” He said, “That van is in perfect condition. You know from the VIN search, it’s had one owner and all he’s ever had to do is replace a headlamp and a door lock . . . that van has never broken down.

He said, “Remember, since you’re still under warranty you have free roadside assistance.” What a thrill! I always wanted to use that.

After several hours waiting, the wrecker came and he towed the van to the little town nearby of Fairfield, CT. Fairfield. It was not fair and there were no fields anywhere in sight.

When we got to the dealership it was after 5:00 and it was closing – but one of the mechanics checked for spark and gas and got both – he said, “Look, I’m heading home, but I’ll look at it first thing in the morning.”

I hadn’t planned to spend the night . . . I hadn’t packed anything. I said, “Is there a hotel in walking distance?” He said, “Yea, there’s a Fairfield Inn

down the street a couple of blocks.” So I walked there to book a room.

Then I remembered my younger brother, a salesman, had so many frequent flier miles that he could get a room in the Marriott Hotel Chain for nothing. I called him said, “Hey Tim, I’m in the Fairfield Inn . . . can you book it on your points for me . . . I’ll save my cash for food since I’m stuck now for at least another day.” He said, “No problem.”

He called me back a few minutes later and said, “Stephen, the Marriott people can’t find a Fairfield Inn at the address you gave me.” I said, “No, I’m standing right here in the lobby of the Fairfield Inn.” He said, “Okay, I’ll call them back.” 10 minutes later he called and said, “There isn’t anything related to Marriott in that area.”

By now I had been looking around – I’d noticed there wasn’t any air conditioning in the lobby and the carpet was an old faded shag carpet of red and tan colors . . . the carpet you grew up with. I said, “Hey Tim, wait a minute” and I walked outside, looked up at the sign and it said, “Fairfield Motor Inn.” Ah, I was in the town of Fairfield, Connecticut.

Let me add this note – this past week as I recalled this incident, I went online and looked up that Motor Inn’s website and it doesn’t even show any pictures – which is a clue.

I read some of the reviews – they weren’t pretty . . . one of them read, “This was a terrible experience for a tired traveler.”

My brother said, “Look, if you can get to New Haven, Connecticut – it’s 10 miles north of where you are – I’ve got a free room for you and a late checkout while they fix your van . . . continental breakfast . . . stuff your pockets with apples and oranges and you’ll be set.”

I still don’t really know why any of this is happening, but at least I’ve got a place to stay – with air conditioning . . . just 10 miles north.”

I asked the hotel clerk if she would call me a cab – 30 minutes later he pulled up, I got in and said, “Fairfield Inn, New Haven.” He said, “Okay, that’s 20 miles north – it’s going to cost you 30 bucks. I said, “No it isn’t – its 10 miles north and it’ll cost me \$15.” He said, “No it isn’t – its 20 miles north and it’ll cost you \$30.” I got out of the car and walked back into the hotel – I mean, the Motor Inn – and asked the lady to call me an honest taxi – that taxi driving away out there said New Haven was 20

miles north and would cost around \$30 bucks.” She said, “He’s right!”

It’s now nearly 7:00 o’clock at night . . . I didn’t know what to do . . . **I called the dealership and got a salesman**; explained my need to get to New Haven and asked if he’d be willing to drop me off.

He said, “Well, that’s going to end up being an hour round trip for me . . . I’ve got to work until around 8:00 o’clock tonight . . . I’m sorry.” I said, “Okay, don’t worry about it.” I knew it was a long shot anyway.

What do I do . . . I don’t have much cash on me, I’m hungry, my phone is almost out of battery . . . my van is a lemon and I’m stuck in a town filled, no doubt, with liberal Democrats . . . not that there’s anything wrong with that – the Apostle Paul would have said, “You’re in the middle of a mission field . . . go for it.”

I was saying, “Lord . . . what’s going on?”

I was about to call another taxi when the lady at the front desk told me I had a phone call. It was that same salesman – he said, “Listen, I’ve been thinking about your predicament . . . I know you’re stranded . . . tell you what, if you can help me with a little gas money, I’ll come after work and take you to New Haven.”

I said, “Thank you so much.”

A little after 8:00 he pulled up and we took off. His name was Michael . . . he was in his early 70’s; retired, but once again working part time to make a little money.

We had a little chit chat back and forth about the van breaking down . . . the mistaken identity of the Fairfield Inn . . . he laughed. He was quiet spoken, but polite.

At this point, by the way, he didn’t know I was a pastor – or even a Christian, which was a good thing because I didn’t want to act like either one.

But all of a sudden, this guy became talkative. He then began to tell me some of his story. He’d been in the military . . . had even been captured and spent several months as a prisoner of war; after getting out of the military he’d married, but had been divorced now for years; rarely ever saw his two adult children and their families.

He told me he had gotten cancer a year or so ago – nearly died . . . but survived the treatment – then moved to Fairfield to be near his high school sweetheart who was now a widow.

He then said in a rather hushed tone, that he had undergone a number of blood transfusions during his

cancer treatment and as a result, contracted the HIV virus from contaminated blood. By the time the discovered it, it was full blown . . . and only weeks before I'd arrived to pick up the van, he'd been told he had less than 6 months to live. I thought – here I am complaining about a broken down van . . . what a tragic, unexpected, life changing reversal for him.

He looked at me and said, “You know, I have never told anyone that I have AIDS – but you’re not from around here anyway.” Then he said, “You know what I’ve decided to do? I’m going to go to Florida this winter and die in the sun.”

I’m going to die in the sun.

There was no doubt in my mind that every reversal of the last several weeks . . . including that very day . . . had been God’s providence to propel me forward.

I had been brought to a town in Connecticut called Fairfield to deliver the message to a dying man whom God had prepared to listen by means of a terminal diagnosis.

We sat out in the parking lot of the Fairfield Inn – the real one this time – and after a while, Michael bowed his head and put into words his faith in Jesus Christ alone.

We kept in touch periodically until months later when Michael did indeed die. He never made it to Florida. And he didn’t die in the sun . . . he died in the embrace of the Son – his Savior and Lord.

I was late in spotting this truth – modeled by the Apostle Paul . . . a change in circumstances, for the worse, is often God’s way of taking you in the right direction after all.

It took me to Fairfield.

It took Michael to Heaven.

The maturing believer is one who learns to spot and to interpret the reversals in life as part of God’s curriculum to both grow in our trust and influence others to walk with Christ as well.

Discovering that God often moves us forward, in reverse.

I have been introducing our Sunday evening assembly to this wonderful collection of Puritan prayers – written and prayed by men of old like Charles Spurgeon, Richard Baxter, Isaac Watts, John Bunyan – remember him?

It’s a little book called *The Valley of Vision*, and one of my favorite prayers speaks to reinterpreting the circumstances of life.

I close with this prayer:

*Lord, Thou hast brought me to the valley of vision,
where I live in the depths but see Thee in the
heights;
hemmed in by mountains of sin I behold Thy glory.*

Let me learn:

*That the way down, is the way up,
That to be low is to be high,
That the broken heart is the healed heart,
That the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,
That the repenting soul is the victorious soul,
That to have nothing is to possess all,
That to give is to receive,
That to bear the cross is to wear the crown,
That the valley is the place of vision.
Lord, in the daytime stars can be seen from deepest
wells,
And the deeper the well, the brighter Thy stars
shine;
Let me find Thy light in my darkness,
Thy life in my death,
Thy riches in my poverty
Thy joy in my sorrow
Thy grace in my sin
And Thy glory in my valley.
Amen.^{xiv}*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/2/2014 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 2014 Stephen Davey
All rights reserved.

i Adapted from John MacArthur, *Philippians* (Moody Publishing, 2001), p. 59

-
- ii Ibid
- iii MacArthur, p. 58
- iv Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 546
- v William Barclay, The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 20
- vi Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland, general editors, The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 12 (Zondervan, 2006), p. 199
- vii Adapted from Barclay, p. 21
- viii Sam Gordon, An Odyssey of Joy: The Message of Philippians (Ambassador, 2004), p. 45
- ix Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Joyful: Philippians (Victor Books, 1978), p. 32
- x Ibid
- xi Adapted from Wiersbe, p. 33
- xii Wiersbe, p. 34
- xiii MacArthur, p. 62
- xiv Arthur Bennett, ed. The Valley of Vision (The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), p. xxiv