

Making Plans in Pencil

Humility, Part 11

Philippians 2:19, 23-24

In an article entitled, *The Art and Science of Delay*, the author illustrated the value of pausing at certain times at work – and in life.

He writes about a surgeon who created what he called *A Checklist Manifesto* – a checklist that included several “pause points” to keep him on track during the process of performing a surgery.

He had three pause points; the first one was before anesthesia – a pause to check the identity of the patient and make sure they had the right person on the operating table; the second pause point was just before making an incision – to make sure it was the right location – this pause point sort of gave the entire surgical team one last chance to take a deep breath; the third pause point was after the surgery and right before sewing up the patient – pausing to account for all the equipment, sponges and needles.

None of these pause points took more than 1 minute, but the imposed delays made a difference. In the spring of 2008, several hospitals began using this surgeon’s checklist – and together, their rate of major complications for surgical patients was cut by 36 percent.¹

The truth is – while none of us want to be delayed for anything – the elevator; the red light; the interview process; the test results – but all of us want certain occupations to follow a checklist and pause long enough to rehearse it before commencing – like a surgeon before cutting or an attorney before your mortgage closing, or a pilot before taking off.

Intentional delays can save a lot of trouble . . . it can even save lives.

We happen to be studying together a letter during a time when the Apostle Paul is experiencing a divinely structured delay.

He is writing his letter to the Philippians under house arrest – with restricted movement and ministry.

He had intended to arrive in Rome and immediately engage in ministry – to step into a pulpit, so to speak . . . not imprisonment.

But this moment just so happened to be a time when Paul’s plans were put on hold – in fact, this a time in his life when God erases several of Paul’s plans and writes new ones instead.

In our last discussion, I wanted to focus our attention in chapter 2 on Paul’s brief but encouraging biography of Timothy.

In our last study we discovered a model of humility in this faithful ministry associate who traveled and served with the Apostle Paul.

Because I wanted to focus on Timothy, I breezed over a couple of verses – to be specific – **verse 19, verse 23 and verse 24.**

They are too wonderfully instructive to just breeze through and so what I want to do today is take a closer look.

And what we’re going to discover are several reasons why our plans need to be written in pencil . . . we never know when God is going to push the pause button . . . or revise everything . . . or make us wait as He overrules our best of intentions.

These verses are loaded with implications; even the godly, disciplined, passionate, zealous, determined Apostle Paul writes out his plans, so to speak, with a pencil . . . and he clearly submits to God the right to use a divine eraser.

And by the way, the idea of writing plans in pencil has created some misconceptions about following the will of God . . . I believe some of those

can be dealt with as well, by a closer inspection of these verses.

Let me give you five good reasons to use a pencil, when you plan, as we work through this text.

First:

1. Planning in pencil prepares you for open doors

Notice Philippians 2:19. *But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you.*

Look down at *verse 23* – just for a moment as well – ***I hope to send him immediately as soon as I see how things go with me.***

In other words, I'm not exactly sure what's going to happen in my future; I'm not sure what the Roman court will decide; but I'm making plans in the meantime.

This was the Apostle Paul's heart's desire . . . to visit the church in Philippi – and to send Timothy along first; but for the moment, the door was closed.

But instead of effectively sitting on his hands, he was busy strategizing with Timothy – talking with Timothy – no doubt, strategically planning Timothy's trip and ministry goals in Philippi – so that as soon as God opened the door they were ready.

This attitude reminded me of Nehemiah; the Gentile king's most trusted associate – the cup bearer. Nehemiah is burdened for his city and his people in Jerusalem.

I love that scene as the Book of Nehemiah opens where he can't hide his emotions any longer and the king notices Nehemiah's spirit is weighed down by something – and he asks Nehemiah what the problem was and Nehemiah tells him. The king responds by effectively saying, "Listen, I'll let you go to Jerusalem . . . do you have any idea when and what you'll need."

And Nehemiah answers on the spot, ***"If it please the king, let letters be given me for the governors of the provinces beyond the River, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah; and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress."*** (*Nehemiah 1:7-8*)

In other words, Nehemiah has already figured out the route he'll take to Jerusalem and how much timber he's going to need for the gates; he effectively asks the king to not only allow him to head up the building project, but he effectively asks the king to finance the project as well.

That's what you can call strategically dreaming . . . I'm ready Lord . . . if that door opens, here's what I believe will honor Your glory and advance Your cause.

For Paul, as he writes here, the door isn't swinging open . . . but when the door opens, and *if* the door even opens – he's ready to set plans in motion.

Again . . . *if* God opens the door.

Which leads me to a second observation:

2. Planning in pencil forces you to hold your agenda lightly

In other words, when there are no open doors, don't try to force one open; don't try to chisel through the one you want, or try to pick the lock or even try to break the door down.

It's your agenda . . . and as far as you can see the door is clearly labeled, "Opportunity" . . . and it seems right and it makes sense and you've run through the checklist and prayed about it and determined that it doesn't dishonor God or hinder what little you can perceive of His purposes . . . so why won't this door open?!

Notice the guardrail around Paul's plans – ***But I hope*** – notice – ***in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you***

In other words, I'm hoping this and planning this – in fact, the Greek work implies a sense of confidence that it's going to happen; but my plans are "boundaried" by the will and purpose of the ***Lord Jesus***.ⁱⁱ

Paul says, "Jesus is *Lord* to me – which means, I am His servant and my life is not to do my will, but His will.

We today use a phrase to express this same perspective when we say, "The Lord willing." That's a wonderful phrase, by the way. It isn't a cliché – and it isn't a cop-out either . . . it's a pause point . . . and it's a mental and verbal reminder to hold lightly to our agenda.

You really ought to hear yourself saying that phrase often – the Lord willing!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian who would be put into a concentration camp during World War II and then executed by Adolph Hitler's personal orders just three weeks before Hitler committed suicide. Bonhoeffer wrote, "We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God. God will be constantly crossing our path and canceling our plans; Christians [may

not] want their lives crossed or [interrupted]. But it is part of the discipline of humility; we do not assume that our schedule is our own to manage, but allow it to be arranged by God.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Note that . . . making plans in pencil is part of the discipline that develops humility!

So Paul here can be observed acting in humility as he makes his travel plans under the direction of the Lord Jesus; he submits his plans to the Lord for approval.^{iv}

And by the way, don’t miss what this means to Timothy . . . he’s on hold too.

You ever been put on hold? How’s it feel? I called a corporation not too long ago and the answering machine that sounds just like a woman told me that my call was extremely important . . . and a representative would be with me soon. And then the answering system began to tell me all about this wonderful company – how valuable it was – what it could do for me – in fact, this call was going to *change my life* . . . which was another way of saying, only an idiot would ever think of hanging up; and then this music started playing . . . and it looped around over and over until I could sing along. I finally hung up . . . realizing my life wasn’t going to be changed after all.

No one likes to be on hold.

Paul here, is on hold . . . but so is Timothy – and perhaps even more tenuously, since he’s awaiting orders from the Apostle.

Timothy is talented, energetic, gifted, intelligent, and ready to serve!^v

And now, whether he stays in Rome with Paul or heads to Philippi seems to be firmly planted in mid-air.

One author put this struggle into perceptive words as he wrote, God is always faithful in His perfection, but often difficult to follow in His purpose; in fact, He is often unpredictable in His ways. As a believer, you can be assured where you are *with* God, but you seldom know where you are going to be taken *by* God.^{vi}

So plan your actions . . . but hold on to your agenda with a light grip.^{vii}

And learn to not only say often, but truly think often, “If the Lord will . . . the Lord willing!”

Now, in case this kind of perspective leads someone to think that the Christian life is fatalistic – sort of a “come-what-may-so-why-care” attitude let me make another observation:

3. Planning in pencil protects you from lethargy

Notice how Paul adds emotionally charged words – *verse 19. But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly* – you could translate that *soon, so that I may be encouraged when I learn of your condition.*

Soon . . . I’m hoping – I have confidence that Timothy will come to you soon . . . *verse 23. Therefore I hope to send him immediately.*

Paul’s feet might be on the brakes, but the race car of his vision and desire is in first gear and the wheels are spinning in place.

- He’s anything but apathetic about the future.
- He’s anything but lethargic about the mission.

Things are going to happen *soon* . . . *immediately.* As soon as God’s red light turns green.

Listen, God may change Paul’s plan, just don’t miss the fact that Paul had a plan that God changed.

John MacArthur wrote in his commentary on Paul’s letter to the Corinthian church, Paul was never content with resting on what he’d already accomplished; Paul never saw a ship at anchor but wished to board it to carry the gospel to people across the water; he never saw a mountain range but he wanted to cross it to build up the saints; he always saw more work waiting to be done; more souls waiting to be saved; more believers waiting to be edified.^{viii}

The truth is, every believer who puts his thinking cap on and sharpens his pencil to map out plans with humility and commitment – will not be tempted toward lethargy or apathy, in fact, just the opposite will occur.

If anything, we need to be wearing out more pencils.

In 1674, the church considered original hymn lyrics to be sinful –if not heretical. Singing outside the Book of Psalms was not allowed. Still, the principal of a boy’s school believed that poetic verse could be instrumental in the spiritual growth of the students. So he wrote several verses to be sung quietly and with the strict instructions that they were only to be used in their rooms, for private devotions.

He collected copies of these hymns for his students and entitled it, “A Manual of Prayers for the Use of the Scholars of Winchester College, 1674.

One of his hymns had 11 stanzas that he designed to encourage the students to not only remain submissive to God's purposes and at the same time active and energetic for the Lord.

Some of them read:

*Awake, my soul, and with the sun
Thy daily stage of duty run;
Shake off dull sloth, and joyful rise,
To pay thy morning sacrifice.*

*Lord, I my vows to Thee renew;
Disperse my sins as morning dew,
Guard my first springs of thought and will,
And with Thyself my spirit fill.
Direct, control, suggest, this day,
All I design, or do, or say,
That all my powers, with all their might,
In Thy sole glory may unite.*

And the 11th stanza:

*Praise God, from whom all blessing flow,
Praise Him, all creatures here below;
Praise Him above he heavenly host,
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.*

We've been singing that stanza ever since.
Making plans in pencil:

- Prepares you for open doors
- Forces you to hold your agenda lightly
- Protects you from becoming lethargic

4. Fourth, planning in pencil reminds you that God's eraser is sovereign

Solomon put it this way in *Proverbs 16:9, The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.*

Notice how Paul carefully phrases this idea, again at verse 23. Therefore I hope to send him immediately, as soon as I see how things go with me.

Can you imagine the implication of this admission? The Great Apostle doesn't have a clue how things are going to turn out of for his own life.^{ix}

If you've ever had the thought that if you were more spiritually minded, you'd be more aware of what was going to happen next, take heart.

Paul has no idea how things are going to pan out in his own life! But there's not a trace here of resentment . . . or self-pity . . . I just wish God would let me know . . .

No, what you get from Paul is the same attitude that we ought to have as well – as soon as I see what God has in mind for me; I'm going to send Timothy to you.

There's only one way you can come up with this attitude and it's when God is sovereign and you are His servant.

Submitted . . . surrendered . . . to your sovereign Lord.

Jill Briscoe, the wife of Stuart Briscoe – who will be with us this summer for one of our summer series sessions – wrote about an event that floored them. It was humorous, but powerful at the same time. It involved their oldest son David, who years ago as a little boy was told on Friday that he wouldn't be going to school the following Monday because he was going to be taken in for an x-ray. David quietly said, "All right." Monday came and David got in the car; his face was as white as a sheet, his eyes bulging with fear. Stuart said, "David, you're not frightened, are you?" David said, "Off course I'm frightened, Dad." "Why are you afraid?" to which little David said, "C'mon Dad . . . I know what an execution is." He'd been thinking – all the way from Friday to that following Monday that he wasn't going to be x-rayed – he was going to be executed. Jill writes, "Even still, David got into the car, trusting his Father's will."^x

5. Planning in pencil entrusts your future to God's revision

Look at verse 24. And I trust in the Lord that I myself also will be coming

The word here that Paul uses for trust (peitho; πειθω) comes from a verb that can also mean, to be convinced – or to be persuaded.^{xi}

He used the same verb back in *chapter 1 and verse 25* where he wrote, *I am convinced that I will remain and continue with you all . . .*

But again, would you notice Paul's theological guard rail around his enthusiastic perception of future events.

Look again – *And I am convinced* – you could translate it – *in the Lord that I myself also will be coming shortly.*

I am convinced . . . and I really think this is what the Lord is going to do, but the Lord might not want to do this after all . . . and if the Lord doesn't want it to happen, it never will.

Paul writes with both eager anticipation and wise caution that comes from his personal walk with Christ.

He had written to the Roman believers in Romans chapter 1 how he was asking *according to God's will that he might be able to come to them.*

And now, as he writes the Philippians from Rome, he indeed had made it there . . . just not the way he thought he would.

God had entirely revised those plans too.

Acts 21 informs us that Paul visited the temple in Jerusalem and his presence had caused a riot to break out;

- he's taken into protective custody by Roman troops;
- and that morphed into an arrest that morphed into false accusations and assassination plots by Jewish authorities;
- which morphed into an appeal to Caesar by Paul;
- which led to a long voyage by sea, which morphed into a shipwreck;
- which eventually led to Paul's arrival, in chains, to this Capital city of Rome.^{xii}

Paul had prayed that it be God's will for him to come to Rome and God indeed willed it, but entirely revised what Paul had imagined.

And now Paul informs the Philippians that he is trusting in the Lord to bring his own desire to pass so that he can return to Philippi.

Would you notice what Paul does not write here in **verse 24**?

- And I trust in the justice of Roman law that I will be coming to you;
- And I trust in my position as a Roman citizen . . .
- I trust in a fair trial . . .
- I trust in getting the best deal and the right judge because if that happens, then I'll be released and come to Philippi.

No, no – ***I trust in the Lord.***

In other words, I trust in my sovereign Lord who rules all things –

- my freedom or my imprisonment;
- my comfort or my discomfort;
- my health or my sickness;
- my wealth or my poverty.^{xiii}

So how do you approach your planning for the future? Whether it's choosing a college or career path; a husband or wife; a promotion, a move to a

different company, a different house, or an entirely different vocation?^{xiv}

Sharpen your pencil . . . prayerfully think things through . . . count the cost . . . study the scriptures – not for some mystical answer from God but in order to understand the character of God and the promises of God . . .

And then with humility pencil in your plans, aware that your Lord has the ultimate eraser – and the sovereign ability to overrule your choices and redirect your steps and rearrange your schedule and even restrict your desires and refashion your future dreams.

Aware . . . surrendered . . . resting in His sovereign guarantee that He is able to cause all things to work together for your – that is, even things that aren't good are worked together for your good . . . and what is your good? The next verse clarifies – that you might conformed into the image of His Son (***Romans 8:28-29***).

This is the confidence, Alan Redpath the former pastor of Moody church once wrote, that there is nothing; no circumstance, not trouble, no testing that can ever touch me until it has gone past the inspection and approval of God. If it has come that far to get to me, it has come with a great purpose for it has come from the throne of God.^{xv}

Making plans in pencil:

- Prepares you for open doors
- Forces you to hold your agenda lightly
- Protects you from becoming lethargic or apathetic
- Planning in pencil reminds you that God's eraser is sovereign

5. One more – planning in pencil reminds you that God's grace will be sufficient.

I love this phrase – notice the personal touch that brings tears to my eyes as Paul transparently writes – again at **verse 24**. ***And I trust in the Lord that I myself also will be coming to you shortly.***

In other words, I know Timothy will be a blessing to you and I know I need to send Epaphroditus to you as well – but I want to come to you myself.

I want to come too.

I don't just want to read their report or hear about you . . . I want to come and be with you as well. I hope to come soon.

We don't know if he ever made it back. There are good arguments on both opinions.

Paul had already written in chapter 1 that it would be a win-win situation – either be released from prison and reunited with them, or death and release . . . from this life.

But one thing's certain – Paul would find God's grace sufficient either way. Either way.

So here's the checklist to run through . . . at those moments when God places you at a pause point:

- ✓ Am I preparing for open doors?
- ✓ Am I holding my own agenda lightly?
- ✓ Am I lethargic or apathetic?
- ✓ Am I submitting to God's ultimate eraser?
- ✓ Am I surrendered to God's sovereign revision?
- ✓ Am I trusting that God's grace will be sufficient?

Her friends knew her as Lina Sandell. She was born in 1832 in Sweden, into the home and family of a pastor. She loved her father and often traveled with him as he preached in other places.

On one occasion, when she was 26 years of age, they were traveling by ship, heading for another ministry location. One evening they were standing together on deck, reveling in the beauty of creation and the glorious handiwork of God.

For some strange reason, the ship engine lurched unexpectedly and Lina Sandell's father fell overboard. Rescue was impossible –and in a matter of moments, as she watched helplessly, he drowned.

So many of her plans for ministry . . . and even the life she knew and cherished . . . were suddenly erased by God.

But new lines were written and over time, Lina Sandell would write more than 600 Swedish songs of faith and praise and trust.

One of her hymns summarizes so well our discussion today . . . it speaks to the heart of every believer, like Timothy and the Apostle Paul, whose lives are on pause . . . or in the midst of a divine delay . . . or with plans redirected, a dream or two left unfulfilled . . . relationships and life itself entirely redesigned.

One stanza goes like this:

*Day by day and with each passing moment,
Strength I find to meet my trials here;
Trusting in my Father's wise bestowment,
I've no cause for worry or for fear.*

*He whose heart is kind beyond all measure
Gives unto each day what He deems best –
Lovingly, it's part of pain and pleasure,
Mingling toil with peace and rest.*

*Help me then in every tribulation
So to trust Thy promises O Lord;
That I lose not faith's sweet consolation,
Offered me within Thy holy Word;*

*Help me, Lord, when toil and trouble meeting,
To take them as from a father's hand;
One by one, the days, the moments fleeting,
Until I reach the Promised Land.*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 5/10/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Frank Partnoy, *Wait: The Art and Science of Delay* (PublicAffairs, 2012), p. 181

ⁱⁱ G. Walter Hansen, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letter to the Philippians* (Apollos, 2009), op. 193

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians* (Crossway Books, 2007), p. 109

^{iv} Hansen, p. 193

^v John MacArthur, *Philippians* (Moody Publishers, 2001), p. 200

^{vi} Adapted from Graham Cook, *Embracing Change*, (Quiet Compass, April, 2003)

^{vii} Adapted from Dennis E. Johnson, *Philippians* (P & R Publishing, 2013), p. 171

^{viii} John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Moody Press, 1984), p. 461

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- ix Sam Gordon, *Philippians: An Odyssey of Joy* (Ambassador, 2004), p. 100.
- x Citation: <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1998/november/5447.html>
- xi Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Regency, 1976), p. 138
- xii Johnson, p. 171
- xiii Adapted from J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Philippians* (IVP Academic, 1984), p. 138
- xiv Johnson, p. 172
- xv Citation: <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2002/july/13762.html>