

**The Letter of Paul to the Philippians Part 3
Realizing the Grace We Have been Given
Gives Us an Outward Focus – Philippians 1:3-8**

This morning we want to continue our look at the letter Paul wrote to the church in Philippi.

Let's begin by reading part of the opening of this letter.

Philippians 1:3-7, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me.”

Here, in the last part of this passage we see where Paul mentioned his imprisonment. If you were here last week or if you're familiar with Paul you know he was in and out of prison a couple of different times. But because he trusted His God, because he had received those waves upon waves of God's grace in his life and he saw that and praised God for it, he was able to not only endure his times in prison but he was able to thrive during them.

I believe the same is true of us as well. **When we recognize the grace upon grace we have received and are receiving from our loving Lord, then we can begin to look out from beyond our own prison cell and look to being a consoler more than being consoled.**

I have no doubt that some of you find yourself in a prison of sorts. You might be experiencing an emotional prison of despair, a physical prison of endless bills, sickness or just plain fatigue in life. Prison comes in many forms but know this. God never promises that He will deliver out of your prison but He does promise that He will deliver your heart and give you peace in the midst of it.

Some of the earliest historians say that Paul got out of jail for a few years but then was arrested again, never got out of jail and eventually was beheaded for the cause of Christ. But again, in the midst of what seemed like suffering, and certainly was suffering, Paul was able to continue giving God glory and encourage and write letters to the Christians around the area.

Our goal is to become like Paul in this way. Even though he was in prison he continued to be outwardly focused up till the end. Tough to do but with Christ's help not impossible as we see in Paul's life.

Our human nature is not really wired to be outwardly focused when we find ourselves being attacked or in a difficult place is it? In fact, our human nature tends to become inwardly focused to the point where we can easily have pity parties for ourselves and even try to pull other people into our party.

I know this happened to me last week. I wasn't attacked by anyone but a few things weren't going the way I thought they should. A few people and a few circumstances came into my life and before long it was like why me? Why do I have to deal with this? Now, I only stayed there for a few hours but it could have easily been extended to several days or more. But I was able to recognize it for what it was and with God's help, pull myself out of it.

Let's look at a biblical examples of someone whole indulged in self-pity.

But before we do let me say this. Grieving and mourning is something different than self-pity. Grieving and mourning for a loss looks different for different people. It takes time and the journey is different is part of the healing process.

Self-pity is more about our attitude when things don't go the way we think they should go or we are slighted and offended.

Let me tell you about Jonah.

I love Jonah not just because of the whole fish episode, but because Jonah is a self-pitying sulker. I'm thankful that in the Bible God shows the warts of his servants. Jonah reminds me of God's mercy toward self-pitying sulkers like me and encourages me to lay aside this sinful weight.

You find his story in the book of Jonah which is only four short chapters squeezed in among the minor prophets in the later part of the Old Testament.

You probably know the story well. God asked Jonah to warn the people of Nineveh that His judgment was about to fall on them because of their wickedness. But Jonah jumped on a ship headed in the opposite direction. So God sent a big fish to intercept him and then spit him back out on the beach. Then a repentant Jonah wisely obeyed God, prophesied to the great city, and repentance broke out.

This result displeased Jonah and he was angry. He knew the people of Nineveh. They were not nice people. They brutal to their enemies, and in the future Jonah suspected they were going to attack Israel. So in Jonah's mind these people deserved God's judgment.

But Jonah also knew God. He knew God was merciful to His enemies, forgiving undeserving repentant sinners, even brutal people like those in Nineveh. And sure enough, just as Jonah feared, they repented and God relented. Jonah got so angry he wanted to die.

Here's where we see the all-too familiar marks of self-pity. Jonah then went outside the city to sulk and watch. Perhaps God would have the good sense to destroy Nineveh after all, but it didn't look good.

I like how God thinks next. God sprouted a plant to grow over the place where Jonah sat to give him shade from the blazing sun. Then God sent a worm to kill the plant and which eliminated the prophet's shade. This made Jonah so angry he wanted to die. He had copped quite an attitude.

God responded:

Jonah 4:10-11, "Then the Lord said, "You feel sorry about the plant, though you did nothing to put it there. It came quickly and died quickly. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?"

Jonah felt bad about losing the plant because it shaded him. When the plant died the sun made him feel faint. Everything felt so unjust: undeserving Nineveh repenting and the plant perishing. God wasn't giving Jonah his way in anything. Jonah turned bitter and he even lashed out at God.

Certainly self-pity wasn't the only thing Jonah was feeling but you can certainly see it in the way he handled himself.

Self-pity is our sinful, selfish response to something not going the way we think it should. And it's a subtle sin; we often don't recognize it right away because it wears the disguise of righteous indignation. We feel justified to indulge in it after the injustice we suffered, even if all that happened was we didn't get our way.

Self-pity is a dangerous, deceitful, heart-hardening sin. It's a spiritual deadener, choking faith, draining hope, killing joy, smothering love, fueling anger, and robbing any desire to serve others.

Self-pity does us no good whatsoever, even if we've suffered a true injustice or other evil. It is a subtle sin that only weighs us down like an anchor, so we must jettison it as soon as we recognize it.

Signs of self-pity

1. Our focus is always on self

Jonah's expectations were not being met. Things were not going the way he thought they should be going so he began to think more about his little bit of suffering than others. His compassion for others was gone because he was too busy thinking about himself.

2. Our focus is on what we think is going to happen

I have no doubt this is something that we all get into. Like Jonah, when things happen, we begin to speculate how everything is going to turn out and we usually have the worst in mind. If you are like me, things never turn out like I think they will when I am in this state of mind. Thankfully because of God's grace they always turn out better. If I release them that is.

In all reality this last point is true in every case.

3. Our focus is **not** on God

It is easy to see that when Jonah was wallowing in the throes of self-pity, his focus was no longer on God. And because of this the compassion he should have had for the people of Nineveh was non-existent.

The same is true of us. When we fall into the pit of self-pity then our only focus is on ourselves and our comfort. We begin to speculate on what we think might or should happen. And certainly we know at that point our focus is no longer on God or others.

As we remember Paul, even though he was in prison, he was always outwardly focused on others, lifting them up in prayer and encouraging them. I thank God for you he said and I always am offering up prayers for you. He was more outwardly focused than inwardly focused.

PAUSE

There's no magic formula for laying aside the temptation of self-pity. Fighting sin takes practice and determination. Our best defense is always to be saturated with the Bible, and in particular to keep ourselves refreshed in God's promises and the grace He constantly pours out on us.

Here are a few action steps that you can use to help you from going down the road and staying in a pit of self-pity.

- a. **Ask God for help.** Self-pity, like most sins, is an expression of pride. It is typically hard to let go of because we must admit our wrong when we have felt in the right.
- b. **Give yourself some gospel straight-talk.**
When I feel self-pity I need to remind myself what I really deserve and what Christ has done for me to be content with what I have received from the Lord. Essentially, I graciously tell myself to stop being a big, selfish baby.

c. **Repent to God for the sin of self-pity**

It's a sin, not merely a "struggle." It's to be killed, tossed away.

d. **Seek forgiveness from those affected by your sin of self-pity**

Frequently this step of self-humbling is where the hold of self-pity is broken.

e. **In faith take the next step God gives you to face what you don't want to face**

If you feel self-pity over facing a frightening or unpleasant situation and you feel overwhelmed, just be obedient and do the next thing. God will give you grace to see the next step and the strength to take it.

If self-pity has become an ingrained habit over a long time, freedom can be yours in Christ, but only through the constant practice of laying aside this sin. It may take a while, and that's okay. Persevere.

Let's admit it, the lessons of a Christian life can sometimes be hard. We struggle to change but the Christian life is about change isn't it? It is about transformation, becoming more like Jesus. The hard part is, the lessons God usually tries to teach us has to do with how we treat other people so He uses those around us. Our spouses, children, family, friends, co-workers and that makes it hard.

I believe that it is only when we recognize the grace upon grace we have received and are receiving from our loving Lord, then we can begin to look out from beyond our own prison cell and look to being more of a consoler than being the one who always needs to be consoled.

May we all come to know and live in the grace of God each and every day.

Let's pray