

Gospel Antigravity

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Paul E. Miller's excellent book, which draws much from Philippians, is called *J-Curve: Dying and Rising With Jesus in Everyday Life*. Using a helpful image, Miller reminds us that the letter J, which is of course the first letter of Jesus' name, has the shape of a curve going down, but after it reaches its lowest point, it curves up. The highest point on the letter J is much higher than where the letter began. This illustrates the deep principle of death and resurrection. For the Christian, death and resurrection is like the molecular shape of the gospel and of the Christian life that results from the gospel.

Paul says in Colossians 2:6 that "as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him" - live the Christian life with the same principles you received it. You received it by dying in repentance, and rising in faith.

So in your Christian life. Some kind of dying takes place. That's the curve down. Sometimes the death is to a sin: saying no to a temptation, denying yourself, fleeing from something, abstaining, starving, making no provision for the sin, refusing. That moment of saying no to sin is a barren, cold place of refusal without consolation. But having done that, there is a resurrection. Not always immediately, but in time: the resurrection of that sin weakened, of a clean conscience, of more maturity, of a more entrenched habit. And the resurrection, the gain, is always greater than the loss.

Sometimes the death is not to a sin, but comes in the form of suffering: something God chooses for you. It could be physical sickness, or financial loss or strain, the tarnishing or undermining of your reputation, being blamed unfairly, being bullied or victimised by someone, experiencing extreme pressure or setbacks, relational pain in the family. The death is when we go through these without fighting against them sinfully, but accept that God is crushing something in us. Some kind of evil is usually being weakened or killed. The resurrection that comes is something unexpected and better than what you suffered: greater endurance, increased wisdom, perhaps vindication of your name, a Christlike testimony of forgiveness or patience, a storehouse of experience to counsel others. But the resurrection that comes is being formed into the image of Christ, and therefore more of Christ, more of Him than you would have had without the death.

Very often, the death is needed to love someone. The death is giving up my rights, my demands, my needs, suspending them, relinquishing them altogether, letting them die, so as to serve another, strengthen, encourage grow. And the resurrection of love is always higher than the death suffered in loving.

Like Miller shows in his book, the J-Curve is really calling to us all through life. When we fail to see it, we miss the resurrections that God has for His children. We miss the growth, the Christlikeness, the opportunities for usefulness, because we keep refusing to die: we hang on to our reputations, we fight for recognition, we try to madly escape all suffering, we hang on to our sins and temptations.

Philippians is full of this J-Curve, this cruciform life. The very center of the book is the example of

Jesus doing it: who being in the form of God, did not grasp onto His prerogatives as God, but emptied Himself, became a slave, took on Himself human form, and submitted even to death, and having done that, God has highly exalted Him. Paul shows the Philippians that he could hang on to his status as a Pharisee, as a Benjamite, a keeper of the law. But if he doesn't die to that, He can't know Christ. So he dies to it, counts it as loss, so that He can gain Christ and be found in Him.

It's all over the letter. And it comes up right at the beginning, in that section of the ancient Roman letter which was customarily given to telling your readers what sort of health you were in. Paul tells the Philippians his state, but he quickly introduces this idea of the gospel shape. He is going to show them how multiple deaths in Paul's life are bringing about resurrections.

The gospel is a kind of antigravity. Instead of what goes up must come down, Paul shows that in the life of a believer, what goes down must come up. Now as we study this, we should remember that Paul did not waste ink. He wanted the Philippians, who were obsessed with honour and status and titles to begin to absorb the cruciform life, the J-curved life, by seeing how he interpreted his own circumstances. The very same holds for us. When we see how Paul sees gospel anti-gravity in his own circumstances, we can look for it in our lives.

I. Paul Saw Gospel Resurrection in Supposed Setbacks

¹² But I want you to know, brethren, that the things *which happened* to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; ¹⁴ and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Right after his prayer, Paul launches into an account of how he is doing. After all, this is the Philippian church: unlike many of the other churches Paul wrote to, these people were concerned about him! We might expect him to begin with an account of his imprisonment, what the conditions are like, what his needs are. Instead, Paul uses the opportunity to once again teach the Gospel shape.

Paul says, I want you to know, brethren, that what has happened to me, meaning his imprisonment, has actually resulted in the message of Christianity advancing, progressing. The gospel is doing its upside down work, its anti-gravity again. Paul is by far the most prominent and successful preacher to the Gentiles, so from the world's perspective, when you imprison him, you've definitely cut the wires to the Christian sound system. No more broadcasts at least for a while. No, Paul says, it's actually meant the gospel has gone further. I have endured this death, but God has brought about resurrection. How so?

Two ways;

First, it has become widely known that Paul's chains are in Christ. The whole palace guard, Paul says, knows that he is a religious prisoner, a prisoner because of his belief that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah. In fact, the words translated *palace guard* are praetorian – the Praetorian Guard. These were an elite group of Roman soldiers, around 9000, stationed just northeast of Rome, who were charged with protecting the emperor. Later on, they became the ones who selected and put the emperor into power.

So these very elite soldiers would have been guarding Paul. But perhaps as they watched him, and listened to him dictate the letters of Ephesians and Colossians and Philemon, perhaps when they saw his visitors, his interactions, they began to realise that they were guarding a fairly remarkable prisoner. And so news spread from guard to guard, to their families, to all the palace staff and the very household of Caesar himself, “all the rest”, in Paul's words, that there was this highly unusual

former Pharisee being held as a prisoner for this fast-spreading religion of Christianity. Paul seemed to have become the talk of the town, as it were.

You can sense Paul's evident delight that his imprisonment had created publicity for the gospel that he could never have gotten apart from this imprisonment. How could Paul have ever gotten to see, let alone meet and have extended conversations with the most elite fighting troops of the Roman empire. Paul loves how the gospel turns things upside down!

The second way is seen in verse 14. Paul says, not only has my imprisonment become publicity, but it has also become powerful confidence for other Christians to preach fearlessly. Christians have been in Rome for some time now, and the official opposition has made many of them secret or silent. But now there is a high-profile Christian under the guard of the Praetorians, and so Christianity is the talk of the town. This man Paul is willing to go to prison or even be executed for his beliefs. That example of suffering, of sacrifice, of courage, pulls many of the Roman Christians out of the shadows. They come out and say, "Yes, I have been and am a Christian! I believe this gospel." Paul's imprisonment has been another unexpected turn. Instead of Christians fearing what may happen to them, Paul's imprisonment has been a confidence boost to them. Now they are daring to speak the Word, where they had not before.

Again, Paul is delighting in this. They muzzle me, but they just put a microphone under thousands of others. I accepted the death of imprisonment, and God has brought the resurrection of gospel advancement.

The Christian believes that he or she serves a completely sovereign God. We believe that nothing happens to us by chance or accident. We recite verses like Romans 8:28 to ourselves And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose. (Rom. 8:28)

But this is where we take Romans 8:28 and apply the shape of dying and rising. The things that work together for our good are often not good things in themselves. They are setbacks. They are delays. They are denials. They are refusals. They are things we wanted that didn't come, and things we didn't want that did come. They are places we didn't expect to be, relationships we didn't expect to have. To get the gospel mindset is to ask yourself, "What might God be killing, removing, weakening in me through this?" It is then looking to God's providence to see how through that death, there was more gospel: more of Christ in you, more of Christ shared with others.

One of the ways we learn to do this is to stop thinking about life as 'my plans' and 'my goals' and 'my advancement', and to start thinking of it as "God's plans through me" or "the advancement of the gospel through my life". That's dying to your own name and life and identity and letting it be Christ's life in you.

But perhaps someone may say to Paul, it's one thing when circumstances don't go your way. You can always look back and see how God used them to further His plan. But it's another thing when people actively oppose you, when they harm you, insult you, ridicule you. But Paul has that in mind too.

II. Paul Saw Gospel Resurrection in Obstructive Opponents

¹⁵ Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from good will: ¹⁶ The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; ¹⁷ but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁸ What then? Only *that* in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.

Among all these people who are emboldened to preach and sharing the gospel, there are two groups. Some preach from good will, according to verse 17, out of love. They know that Paul has been chosen and appointed to defend the gospel, which is why he is in prison. These Christians preach the gospel, defending the same gospel, and thereby vindicating Paul. They do it out of love for God and Paul, and from good will.

But others, amazingly, do it from envy and strife, and according to verse 16, from selfish ambition. This word for *envy* is *phthonos*. “Aristotle distinguishes *φθόρος*, “the base passion of base people,” from *ζήλος*, “the honest passion of honest people” (Aristot. Rhet. 2.11.1,387b– 88b). *Ζήλος* is a desire to have what another person possesses without necessarily bearing a grudge against him because of it. *Φθόρος* is concerned more to deprive another of the desired thing than to gain it. It involves sadness when good things happen to others, joy at the evils they experience— thus the opposite of “rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” Hellerman, Joseph H.. *Philippians* (Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament).

Verse 16 tells us these people preach from selfish ambition, which is the word used for someone who is trying to climb the ladder of political office. They have ambitions to be known, or famous, or wealthy. Paul says, these people are not doing so out of pure, sincere motives. Instead, they want to torment Paul, and they think they will add to his pain by the way they preach.

Now it's difficult to know who these people were, and what exactly they did and how. They can't be among the false teachers Paul condemns in 3:3 or 3:18-19. Those people deny the gospel, they are doomed for destruction. But these people Paul includes amongst the brethren who have been emboldened to preach. And note – not some other Christ, but Paul's Christ, the true Christ.

These people are treating Christian ministry like a competition, like a race to the top. They envy when Paul has special recognition or is known better than they are. So, even though they profess the same gospel, and maybe are in Christ, they have fallen prey to their own heart's pride.

Probably these people criticised Paul when they preached: criticised something he had done, or the fact that he had gotten arrested, or claimed he had gotten some point of doctrine wrong. And there is a certain boost you get when you have the chutzpah to criticise Paul, and point out his flaws. It shows you must be, well, better than Paul, and really, the teacher you should be following instead of Paul. This is a death for Paul. He is stuck in prison, and cannot defend himself, cannot answer them. They are maligning him and his reputation.

But we don't have to try too hard to understand this phenomenon, because it is still with us. Spiritual pride is the most camouflaged sin of all. It will sit in your heart, looking just like zeal for the truth, looking just like desire for sound doctrine, looking just like discernment, but what it really is, is a desire for distinction. The desire to be distinguished from others: not part of those sheeple, more discerning than that lot, seeing into God's Word with an incisiveness that few others have, an ability to spot errors that others fail to see. All this is pride. Worst of all, it can become barely visible to yourself, while you tell yourself that you are crusading for truth.

I am sure some of these Christians told themselves that they were only setting the record straight, and protecting people from some of Paul's errors, or helping people not to worship Paul. But really, they were in the grip of selfish ambition.

Look around today, and especially on the Internet. People strongly desire the recognition that comes with Youtube subscribers, Facebook friends or followers, many subscriptions or subscribers. For

some people, especially for para-church ministries, it is their bread-and-butter. And you will find that for some ministries, they gain distinction by preaching out of envy and strife. They claim there are errors when there often aren't. They capitalise on hearsay and gossip. They stir up controversy where there was none before. But they profit off it. They gain attention, followers, people who decide to trust them. But it doesn't take much discernment to see that strife and envy and selfish ambition are what drive the ministry: the spirit is contentious, the attitude is belligerent, the view of others is consistently uncharitable, the posture is touchy and defensive.

But how did Paul respond to these opponents of his? Look at one of the most magnanimous statements in Scripture:

¹⁸ What then? Only *that* in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.

Paul says, whether it is being done sincerely or for base motives, if the true Christ is preached, I rejoice and will keep rejoicing! Once again, even when there are people with evil desires, terrible motives, wrong goals, Paul says, as long as they actually preach the gospel, it's more gospel! More advancement of the truth! I am dying to my own name, and Christ's name is being advanced.

Now Paul is not whitewashing these people and their evil motives – they will no doubt get their reward. Elsewhere, he makes it very clear the kind of character and life that those who preach the gospel should have. But as long as the gospel goes out, Paul sees more advancement of the truth.

Outside of Christian ministry, what about when others malign your reputation, speak against you, gossip about you, slander you? What about when others actually try to make themselves look good at your expense? It is a terrifying thing to die to your own reputation. It is very hard to refuse to defend yourself, vindicate your rightness, that you were correct, or you were orthodox, or you were justified. It is a knee-jerk reaction, for most of us. But Paul tells us about the resurrection that came to him when he accepted it from the Lord:

⁷ And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.

⁸ Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.

⁹ And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:7-10)

Yes, there are times to speak up and defend oneself. What is harder for us is to realise is that there are times to not. There are times to die, because of what God will do through it if you do not, if you let Him defend you. Like when Paul was in Philippi, he chose not to defend himself at first, and was illegally beaten as a Roman citizen. But he died to his own defence, because he wanted the gospel powerfully shown in Philippi. Only after an earthquake, and the conversion of many, did Paul insist that the magistrates in Philippi come and say sorry, thereby receiving the resurrection of vindication.

The gospel shape to life is not happy-optimism or cheery-faced slogans. It is rooted in the truths of the gospel and the fact of a sovereign God. The J-Curve only works for believers.

If you want to experience the anti-gravity of the gospel, you must submit to the death God gives you: be it the setback, the suffering, the difficulty, the loss, the withdrawal, or even the active opposition or hostility or unkindness or neglect.

A.W. Tozer: “In every Christian’s heart there is a cross and a throne, and the Christian is on the throne till he puts himself on the cross. If he refuses the cross he remains on the throne. Perhaps this is at the bottom of the backsliding and worldliness among gospel believers today. We want to be saved but we insist that Christ do all the dying. No cross for us, no dethronement, no dying. We remain king within the little kingdom of Mansoul and wear our tinsel crown with all the pride of a Caesar, but we doom ourselves to shadows and weakness and spiritual sterility.