

A Grace Gathering
15 January 2023

“Things are Not often as they Appear,
the ‘silver lining’ in the Disappointment”
Acts 16:6-10

Introduction:

While life is like a box of mixed chocolates, according to Forrest Gump since you don't know what is there until you bite into them, I would say that life is more than because life is more complex, and truncated than a pound of assorted chocolates (you can master a box of chocolates in this life).

Perhaps a better metaphor of the experience of each of our lives is that of a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle. How do you handle the task of creating a picture of congruity from a massive of differing shapes and colors?

1. You scatter the pieces to find the four corners.
2. Having found the corners, you look for the side pieces and attempt to connect them into the perimeter of the puzzle.
3. Then you isolate colors relative to the picture on the puzzle box.
4. However, as you proceed the thought crosses our mind that pieces are missing, and we are doomed to failure to complete the task.

Life is like that sometimes; it is a jigsaw puzzle. We often think that something is not working out the way it should; unexpected and needless detours deter our progress, what we think is good. There are pieces that are missing. I want to address this phenomenon as we commence 2023 in Grace Gathering. To do so I want to use an example “a missing puzzle” in Paul's understanding of the road ahead and His duties in it.

Context:

The circumstance of Paul's “missing puzzle-piece” happened on the second of the missionary journeys.

1. Paul was anxious to revisit the churches, in part, because of the important decisions of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), the apostolic affirmation of Paul's message to the Gentiles of faith in Jesus (... they were delivering the

decrees what had been decided upon by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem... (16:4).”

2. He was accompanied by Silas (15:40), Timothy joined them in Derbe/Lystra (16:1), and Luke later (we are not sure when he did so, but the pronoun “we” appears beginning in 16:10).
3. Then Paul’s plans unraveled. Passing through Antioch in Pisidia the plan was to go westward and then northward. There was to be no ministry in Asia, “having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak (16:6). They turned to Mysia hoping to enter Bithynia and Pontus, but “... the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them (16:7) so they turn back into Mysia (16:8).
4. They continued westward to the port city of Troas (... having seen the vision immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them [16:10]).”

Lessons:

Since life is often perplexing, sometimes a circuitous turn of events (that fender-bender in a parking lot, the call from children or grandchildren, what you don’t want to hear from your mechanic, a diagnosis following a doctor’s visit, etc.) that leaves us wondering about the ways of God toward His children, I want to take a few moments as we approach the new year to think about the “silver lining” in what we will all experience. The goal of our time together is the assumption that handling tomorrow’s disappointments, even shocks, is a matter of priorities, perspectives, and learning from the past. Let’s begin with the puzzle metaphor and find the four corners.

Corner #1: God works in less than obvious ways at times.

- a) God’s “noes” are perplexing when we hear them. Imagine the consternation and confusion for the missionary team! Was it because their vision was too narrow? Did God want to use them in a different way?
- b) God’s will may not be that obvious to us; clarity is a retrospective insight. In some instances, we may have to wait for heaven. The disjointed pieces of our “puzzle,” the feared “missing pieces,” were not missing and the “puzzle” will emerge with all the beauty and magnificence God meant it to be.

- c) The will of God always is better than our thoughts as history proves. God's intent for them was Greece and Rome, not Asia Minor from this juncture.
- d) You cannot imagine what God is really doing with our lives how He wants to use us, how He is painting in our lives the portray of His son for others to see.
- e) The fact: The opening lines of I Peter 1 tells us that God planned to penetrate Asia and Bithynia some other way, by some others, not Paul in this instance. It was to be the work of Peter: "... to the saints that reside in Pontus... Asia and Bithynia (1:1)," only latter when Paul established a center of his activity in the School of Tyrannus did the Laodiceans hear of Paul.

Corner #2: God is working in a variety of ways in the lives of His people.

- a) He was shaping a team (Paul, Silas, Timothy, Luke).
- b) There would have been no Lydia ("... and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul").
- c) Without imprisonment, precipitated by the torment and deliverance of a demonized girl who claimed that Paul was Zeus (16:16-18), there would have been no Philippian jailor, no church at Thessalonica (17:1-9), no Berean brethren (17:10-11), no Athens ("What you therefore worship in ignorance (an unknown god), this I proclaim to you" [17:23]) , and no Corinth ("... I have many people in this city").

Corner #3: God is never doing one thing at a time.

- a) They must have wondered at God's leading. God's "noes" are perplexing only because we do not know the whole story.
- b) Think of the Naomi story; the tragic experience in her life caused her to change her name to Mara ("bitter"). However, without a returning daughter-in law there would be no Boaz, Obed, Jesse, David, and Jesus.

Corner #4: In everything we do, it must be to glorify God's Son through the gospel we have embraced.

- a) The real point of our endeavors is to use every circumstance in our lives to reflect upon and speak of Jesus, glorify him expressing confidence and faith. Think of what follows in our text. Of Lydia, "The Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul (16:14)." To the Philippian

- jailor, “Believe on the Lord Jesus... (16:31).” To the Athenians, the cultural capital of the world, “This Jesus I am explaining to you is the Christ (17:3).”
- b) It may seem that we stumble, grappling with God’s leading, but you and I know the ultimate reason for all our circumstances.

Conclusion

Life is like a jigsaw puzzle in a box, a lot of pieces and no picture in its fragmented state (a lot of items but no pattern). What you and I must do to find the pattern in the scattered pieces is to locate the corners of it all, then the side pieces, and a picture can gradually emerge. Where are we to begin the endeavor? Where do you begin? Answer: *Focus on the character of God* as He has been revealed to us in Jesus!

- 1) Know that God’s masterplan is greater than our best conceptions of it.
- 2) Know that God is doing the unexpected. Something greater than you can imagine, even when God says “No.” Paul thought in terms of Asia Minor, but the Lord envisioned Rome and the world.
- 3) Know what we have at our disposal ways to discern God’s will: 1) His divine personal leading (negative and positive), yet also 2) a four-fold method ([a] the Holy Scriptures, [b] the prompting of the Spirit, [c] the use of our minds (“And when we had seen the vision,” we sought to go into Macedonia concluding ...[v. 10]), and corporate reflection (“we,” “us” [v. 10])).
- 4) Know that God’s will is perfect only as seen retrospectively.
- 5) It’s about a God-orientation in everything we do!