

The Book-ends of Life
Acts 16:6-40, Phil 1:6, 4:13

Brothers and sisters, I'd like to share a story about overcoming struggle and adversity with you this morning, about a young girl who grew up in the UK whose mother was ill with multiple sclerosis. After university she struggled to find a fulfilling job. When her mother died she was devastated, so she left the UK to teaching ESL in Portugal.

There she fell in love with a journalist, moving in with him when she got pregnant, but it ended in miscarriage. Even so, she decided to marry him and they had a little girl. But when he became abusive she had to leave and move back to the UK.

Now she was a poor single mom who had to survive on gov't welfare and help from friends, working as a waitress in a café. She was growing despondent, angry over her failures and feeling guilty about an inability to provide for her daughter.

When thoughts of suicide began to run through her mind, she realized she needed to seek help and make some plans for

finding a career. She went to counselling and enrolled in a year-long teacher training course. She also began to shop around for a publisher, to see if there was any interest in a book she had been writing... but no one seemed interested.

Until Bloomsbury Publishing offered 1500 pounds for her story about a boy who goes to boarding school to discover he is a wizard. So at age 32, in 1997, JK Rowling published her first Harry Potter book and the rest, as they say, is history.

But for all her success... you can see that she still carries around the scars of her struggles and hardship in her tough-as-nails reputation for dealing with any current adversity. Maybe you know someone a bit like that - but closer to home?

Someone who has struggled and endured and overcome significant challenges in their life to achieve some success – but they still carry the scars of those struggles and it has changed them. They are hardened, they have an edge, they're weary, a bit cynical, withdrawn, they are not the same person they were before. And perhaps person like this is you...

Now let me tell you another story about an author. He was a strict orthodox Jew but converted to Christianity and traveled the world to share the gospel of Jesus Christ to anyone who would listen. He was often without food, shelter or clothing, he faced danger wild animals, bandits and from travelling through difficult territory.

He often got into trouble with the local officials and had been beaten, whipped, and put in jail. He had been in many situations where he thought he was going to die. Three times he had been shipwrecked – spending an entire day and night out on the open sea and four of his famed works had been written while he was spending time in prison.

Yet, for all of this adversity and hardship that he had suffered, the Apostle Paul writes with all sincerity to the church he started in Philippi that he prays for them with joy, that he can rejoice – and He will continue to rejoice! (Phil 1:4,18)

Paul certainly carried around the physical scars of the hardship and adversity that he faced but it had not caused him to

become bitter, or cynical, or angry, withdrawn or hardened. Instead, as he writes to the Corinthian church “*we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.*” (2 Cor 4:16)

Brothers and sisters, it is our Lord’s desire for each of us – for all of us at Valleyview – to be able to experience that inward renewal, that joy - in spite of, or even because of, the hardship and adversity that we may face in our lives.

And because as Hebrews 12:2 states, Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith – which is to say He is writing each of our stories... this morning the Lord is giving us some encouraging words for the beginnings and the endings of our stories, some book-ends for our lives.

Book-ends which will help facilitate the work of the Holy Spirit to get us off on the right foot and finish on the right note. Book-ends that will frame our life experiences so that we are able to see and understand what God is doing. Book-ends

that give us confidence to carry on and endure whatever we might be going through.

So Jesus says to us *“be confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”* and *“You can do all these things through Christ who gives you strength!”*

Now these two verses are also the book-ends for Paul’s letter to the Philippians, from 1:6 and from the last chapter 4:13.

In the opening verse Paul is expressing his confidence that the Philippian believers were indeed his partners in the gospel – fellow Christians - and would remain so, because their faith and their actions were good works that God had started, and thus God would complete.

And this was important to Paul because he knew they would face persecution from their fellow Roman citizens for calling Jesus Lord instead of Ceasar. They would need to discern which teachings and teachers were false to avoid being led

astray. They would have to resist the discouragement and disillusion with God that would come from finding out he had ended up in prison in spite of how they may have been praying for his protection and release.

So Paul encourages them, and himself, by stating his confidence that their faith and Christian ministry will endure and last because God started it and God will finish it.

Then, in the closing verse Paul wants the Philippian believers to understand that his ability to joyfully endure hardship and adversity does not come from himself but from Jesus Christ – he wants to give credit where credit is due.

Because there is a delicate balance in setting such a high example for the Philippians and other churches to follow with his example. One on hand they may start to admire him for his abilities and strive to imitate him out of admiration – that’s not what Paul wants. On the other hand they may be intimidated and discouraged by what they see him go through, and shrink back and fall away. They don’t believe

they could do this, or they don't want to do this – that's not what Paul wants either.

And its not like he can avoid telling them about it – they've heard the news he is in prison and they've sent him supplies to help him out, and there are good faith lessons in his situation which they can benefit from. But he has to be careful how he does this lest they think he is boasting about himself.

So – he humbly acknowledges that his admirable attitudes and his ability to endure hardships are possible because of Jesus strengthens him. Which also implies to the Philippians that if Christ can do this in me, he can do this in you as well.

So, these two verses are connected as the book-end our experiences. They both emphasize God's working in our lives to bring about good things. One looks forward, anticipating being able to endure the hardships that will come, and the other looks backward reflecting on what has been accomplished – but it's all because of God.

“He who began a good work in you will carry it to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” “I can do all these things through Christ who gives me strength!”

So brothers and sisters let us apply these encouraging words to our lives this morning, let us put them at the front and the back of our experiences as book-ends which the Holy Spirit will use to help us get off to a good start, and then ensure that we finish well – with respect to our God given callings in life.

You see these book-ends of life indicate that there is a calling for each of us, this is the *“good work which God started”* and *“all the things”* which we can do in Christ's strength... it is that which God called us to do.

For Paul it was his calling to be the apostle to the Gentiles; and then a very direct calling to go to west to Macedonia – starting in Philippi after the Holy Spirit blocked him from going East. And all this came about from his general calling to submit to and follow the Lord Jesus, who appeared to him on the road to Damascus, and we all have this calling, brothers and sisters.

Jesus reminds us in John 15:16 that we did not choose Him, but that He chose us... so that we will bear fruit that will last.

So, we all have two callings actually. The first are Christ's words that He reminded us of last month – Follow me! The second is what we need Holy Spirit guidance to discern as Paul did from his circumstances, it is our Kingdom calling.

You can see an example of this in the conversion of Lydia, the textile business woman in Philippi. She encounters Christ calling her to follow Him in Paul's preaching and responds in faith. Then, she discerns that she has a calling to use her resources to help establish this new community of believers in Philippi. So, she says to Paul *"If you consider me a believer in the Lord come and stay at my house."*

God started the work of Lydia coming to faith in Jesus Christ and calling Him Lord, and she was able to host the church in Philippi at her house through Christ who gave her strength to do so.

Brothers and sisters, God has started faith in Jesus Christ in your lives, He has enabled you to call Him savior – and more importantly Lord. So, you know your first calling... but what about your second calling? What is your kingdom calling?

Let me suggest that you will discover your kingdom calling by reflecting on specific things you can do to demonstrate that Jesus is Lord over every area of your life. We talked a bit about this last week in how we put God first in our time, treasure and talents – by giving God the first portions of our time and our treasure, and specifically how we use our talents to point people ahead to forget the sinfulness of this world and look ahead to the coming Kingdom of God, so if you are pursuing it from this angle its very much a Kingdom calling.

But you can also discern your Kingdom calling by recognizing the truth, even if it might not seem obvious, that Jesus is Lord over your school, your workplace, your family. He is Lord over your thoughts, your emotions, your feelings, your body, your gender...

So, if this is true, then what goes on at your school or work or home honor Jesus as King? Does your school or work or home help you bring **all** your thoughts, emotions, feelings and actions in line with honoring and obeying Jesus?

Brothers and sisters, the Holy Spirit can help you discern your kingdom calling through recognizing a situation in your school, a project in your workplace, a dynamic in your family where something needs changing, reforming, transformation – so that it starts to obey God and honor Jesus as Lord, as the King of the Kingdom. That's a Kingdom calling...

And whatever changing that situation requires of you – you can do those things through Christ who gives you strength. It's true... if the Lord can strength the Apostle Paul for his calling, He can certainly strengthen you for yours.

So as we put these book-ends of life in place, as beginning and ending points – not just for our whole lives but reference points on either side of our perspective we also begin to see things differently. These book-ends give us context to better

understand what is happening in our lives, and how to respond to hardship and adversity.

Take Paul and Silas for example. Because they knew what God had started in them... and had called them to advance His Kingdom in Philippi, and they trusted God was going to complete it – when they ended up being whipped and beaten and chained in jail... they were praying and singing hymns to God. They were not angry or anxious – nor were they worried that their purpose was in danger, or doubting that they had got the calling wrong because here they were in jail.

They knew these truths that Paul ends up writing in his letter to the Philippians and thus they were able to understand what was going on, and how they should respond to this adversity.

You can do the same brothers and sisters. What are you going through right now? Is it smooth sailing for you? You've got your kingdom calling figured out and your working away at it and you're seeing some fruit from it? Well – Amen and praise the Lord! You are doing all these things... because of Christ

who gives you strength. But – don't be surprised when the hardship comes, God is going to use it as part of that good work He has started in you. Trust that and remember that.

Or maybe you're being bothered, pestered, harassed – like Paul and Silas by the slave girl following them around. It's not full on persecution, but you are beset by all the little irritations that waste time, resources, distract you from your purpose.

If you know your kingdom calling is, or you've just figured it out – or you are close to figuring it out. Then what's going on is probably the devil at work, trying to knock you off balance and keep you from getting into the game. He's like *"oh-oh, don't let that one figure it out, keep them distracted, get them discouraged, get them overwhelmed, get them to give up ok!"*

Or perhaps what's going on in your life feels like you're being whipped, beaten, and locked up in a prison and you're about ready to give up and call it quits.

But now this morning – Jesus is giving you these encouraging words, these book-ends to your life and now you're realizing that this adversity and hardship you are facing is because you've taken something away from the enemy through living out your kingdom calling, and he's retaliating...

Or perhaps the hardship and adversity you're experiencing is all internal and personal – emotional and mental and struggling with desires, in your calling as a Christian.

Be encouraged brothers and sisters – God is drawing close to you, to continue the work He started in you and the truth is that when God comes close to us – all the areas in our hearts, mind and soul that are affected by sin – our sinful nature which does not want to submit to God starts to act up and rebel and leaves us wondering what the heck is going on with us. But – rest assured, He who began a good work in you will see it through to completion.

So – as we receive these two verses as book-ends to our lives, and we believe and trust in their truths, they give us a

framework and perspective to understand hardship, and how to respond to adversity in our lives.

Which brings us to the third encouraging aspect of these book-ends. They will help you to endure and persevere.

Brothers and sisters, the truth is that with God working in you, and Christ strengthening you – you are far stronger than what you realize. Let me remind you that 2 Timothy 1:7 says *“For God did not give us a spirit of fear, but one of power, love and of a sound mind”*

Brothers and sisters, when you're full of the Holy Spirit and there's no fear, but you're full of power, self-sacrificing love, and your thinking is clear and straight and disciplined... you are fully equipped for what God has called you to do, and you'll fully cooperate with what He is doing in you.

Now – before I tell you how to be strengthened in Christ this way, let me give you one caveat about how to respond to

adversity and hardship that I think is necessary, because I think someone needs to hear this today.

I believe someone here today is going through some hardship and adversity in their life – and it's because God is blocking your way, just like He stopped Paul from going east, and He's doing this so that that you will start to begin consulting Him about what your purpose and calling and path in life is supposed to be. If that's you – come and talk with me about it and we'll pray about it and discern what God would have you be doing for your Kingdom calling instead.

But actually, brothers and sisters – that's a good example of one of the three ways that you can tap into that strength of Christ, through His body – the Church.

So – you can learn to rely on Christ's strength and not your own strength, you can become strong in Christ brothers and sisters by getting into the Body, getting into the Word, and getting into the Holy Spirit.

So, getting into the Body means participation in the Church – becoming a partner in the gospel as Paul describes it in Phil 1:5. I think you kind of know what this means already don't you... being at worship on a weekly basis, and being active in serving in the church with your grace gifts.

But it's also making sure that build relationships with other believers – especially spiritual relationships that form by being part of bible studies, prayer groups, men's group, women's group... where you can open up and share about adversity and hardship so that there can be encouragement, prayer and ministry and accountability. And don't forget, the Church strengthen you by administering the sign of Baptism and serving the Lord's Supper.

So, brothers and sisters, strengthen yourselves – get into the body, increase your participation in the Church. Co-operate with that good work God has started in you, you can do it!

And get into the Word. Listen to God speak to you and speak to God. Read the bible and pray – every day. The words of

scripture are empowered by the Holy Spirit – they will strengthen you.

Are you discouraged? Read the Psalms. Do you need wisdom? Read Proverbs. Need assurance you are forgiven? Read the gospels and New Testament letters... Want some reassurance that this crazy world is still making its way towards the New Creation? Read Revelation.

And if you don't understand what you are reading – well that's getting into the Body isn't it, because you can always ask another believer who understands a bit more than you about it, or you can ask your pastor – we live for moments like that.

Let God speak to you through His word and then respond back in prayer – and tell Him all about what you are needing strength for, what you might be doubting, you can even “delegate” things to God and ask Him to take care of those things for you. Remember Jesus told us *“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”* (John 15:7)

Brothers and sisters – get into the Word, read and pray... each and every day! Strengthen yourselves. Co-operate with that good work that God has started in you, you can do it!

And last, but not least... in fact its probably the most important because without it you'll not have much of a desire to get into the Church or the Word, brother and sisters get into the Holy Spirit... and get the Holy Spirit into you!

We already heard from 2 Tim 1:7 that the Holy Spirit is a spirit of power, so this is probably a bit obvious – but what may not be as obvious to us is that we need to ask the Lord to fill us with His Holy Spirit. Maybe that's because we don't know a lot about the Holy Spirit, maybe that's because such spiritual things confuse us – we're more physically, touch it – see it – taste it, kind of people... maybe its because we don't know we need more of the Holy Spirit... or perhaps it's because we're resisting the Holy Spirit by living in a sinful situation, or remaining disobedient on a particular issue, or holding a grudge, harboring unforgiveness and so on...

Whatever the reason brothers and sisters, its an easy solution – you simply pray and ask for the Holy Spirit to fill you anew – with His power, with His strength, with His fruit, with His gifts, ask Him to equip you for whatever you are facing.

And I don't want to imply that Jesus listens better when other members of His body pray for you... But there is something more fitting about being prayed for by those whom the Holy Spirit connects you to as the Body, about receiving from those whom the Holy Spirit has empowered with grace gifts, when you are vulnerable and showing your need for the Spirit's power by asking someone else to pray for you.

Sure, you can pray for infilling yourself – but if you understand what you are praying for – and you can have members of the Body do this for you – it seems to be more fitting I think...

So brothers and sisters, get into the Holy Spirit and have prayer to have the Holy Spirit get into you! Co-operate with that good work that God has started in you, you can do it!

Do you need strength to endure and persevere and overcome... then get into the Body, get into the Word, get into the Holy Spirit – and you will discover that you are far far stronger than what you realize, and truly – you will look back at what you have come through and you will say, I am able to have done all these things, through Him who gives me strength.

So, receive what our Lord wishes to encourage you with this morning.

Trust and believe as the starting book-end to your life that *“being confident of this, He who began a good work in you **will carry it on to completion** until the day of Christ Jesus.”* And step out in faith, act on the promise that you *“**can** do all this through him who gives you strength.”*

All for the glory of God. Amen.