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CHAPTER 1:

The Power of Focus

Bobby was a friend and a neighbor. He was gregarious, a successful businessman, a mover and shaker who was always active, either working or headed off on a ski trip to Vail or spending time on his boat. At first, we talked casually whenever we saw each other out in the yard, but over time, the conversations went deeper and covered a lot of topics. We got to know each other well.

Eventually, I learned a little about Bobby's faith. He had known God, gone to church regularly, and knew all the Christian lingo. He said he loved Jesus and would have even described himself as being born again. However, he had backed away from it all. He just wasn't into it anymore. He was what we might call a cultural Christian—a nominal believer who knew the truth, but was no longer fully engaged with living it out.

Bobby was a cabinet maker. His warehouse was full of top-quality cabinets ready to be installed in luxury homes for contracts worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. One Sunday morning as I was pulling out of my driveway to go to church, Bobby's wife came out and waved me down.

“Please pray for us,” she said. “Bobby’s warehouse burned down. We think it was arson. We’ve lost everything and don’t have insurance to cover it.”

Later when I saw Bobby out in the yard, he looked like someone had died. Over the next few months, I could look across the street and see Bobby sitting in a chair, staring out his bay window, almost as if he were in some kind of catatonic state. Sometimes he took long walks around the block. He was depressed for a long time. He lived like someone who thought his life was over.

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We had a lot of conversations during that time, and somewhere along the way, he decided to get closer to God through this experience.

Some entrepreneurs just know how to make money. I’ve heard of multi-millionaires who have gone bankrupt and then made all their money back like nothing had happened. Bobby had that ability. He was resilient. About four years after his loss, he had built his business up again. He had another warehouse, filled it with materials and finished cabinets, and was once again making a lot of money. This time he had a little insurance too—not to cover everything, but at least enough to provide some protection against another loss.

Bobby was easy to get along with and had several master craftsmen who loved working for him. One of them went into the warehouse to help clean up one day, and as he was working on a blowtorch, it sparked some sawdust that quickly went up in flames. Within minutes, the whole warehouse was on fire, and once again, Bobby lost everything in it. Having a little insurance helped avoid a total loss, but the fire essentially ruined his business a second time.

I found out the way I did the first time—when his wife came out as I was pulling out of the driveway. I told her I would pray for them and braced myself to see Bobby go through another very difficult season.

But the next time I saw Bobby, I could tell he wasn't taking it as hard as the last time. I asked him how he was doing.

“When I heard the news,” he told me, “everything in me just wanted to break down. But I told my wife, ‘Stay right here. I’m going to walk around the block.’ As I started to walk, I started praying: ‘Naked I came into the world, and naked I will return. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.’”²

Then he started thanking God, “‘Lord, thank You that I have a wife who is loyal and cares for me. Thank You for my son and my grandson. Thank You for all the loving people You’ve put in my life.’ I choose to give thanks and focus on what I do have, not what I lost.”

Within forty-eight hours, Bobby had called around to his business competitors and found work for all of his craftsmen. It was a total contrast to his experience after the first fire. He didn't get depressed. His workers didn't have long to be discouraged or jobless. I asked him why it was different this time.

“When this happened, I knew I had been through it before and come out of it okay,” he said. “Before, my whole life was about things. Nothing that can be lost so easily can satisfy. I know what matters now.”

That doesn't mean it was easy. Bobby had lost a lot of money and didn't have any cabinets to fulfill his contracts. He knew he was going to go through another difficult season. It would take time to rebuild again. “But I've got a lot,” he told me as we stood in his yard watching his grandson play. “I've got a great family, and I've reconnected with God. Yes, I've got a lot.”

IS THE GLASS HALF FULL OR HALF EMPTY?

It's easy to choose joy when things are going well. But what about when they aren't?

We all go through trials and difficult seasons. Sometimes circumstances are very painful and challenging. Yet Scripture tells us even in those difficult circumstances to choose joy. And Jesus promised we could have it—not only when it's easy but even in the most challenging times of our lives.

**The difference is
not the glass or
the water in it.
It's how we see it**

How is that possible? Choosing joy in the midst of difficulties goes against all our instincts. When things go wrong, it's easy to look inward and fall into self-pity. Before long, our life is spiraling downward.

It doesn't have to be that way. As we look at Paul's words in the first chapter of his letter to the Philippians, we will see that joy really is a choice and that God will give us everything we need, no matter how difficult and devastating our circumstances might be. In Paul's teaching and his example, we will learn the power of focus.

We already know the power of focus—in principle. It shapes our perspective. We even use a very common idiomatic expression for it: "Is the glass half full or half empty?" Depending on your perspective, you'd either notice that there's water in the glass or that the water doesn't fill the glass. One focuses on the positive—what's there. The other focuses on the negative—what isn't there. And even if one person sees it one way and another sees it the other way, they are both right, aren't they? The difference is not the glass or the water in it. It's how we see it. We evaluate it according to the perspective we bring to it. Before I started teaching this series, I put the pitcher of water center stage to make this very point.

Some people spend their entire lives focused on what they don't have, what's wrong, what they wish was better, what God hasn't provided, and what they think they need for the joy and happiness they don't already have. And you'd be surprised—some people do that even when other people would envy them for all the wonderful gifts and blessings they have. Even when our lives are filled with good things, many of us have a tendency to focus on whatever is still lacking or needs to be fixed.

Other people have learned to focus on what they do have. They realize that everyone's life has some degree of emptiness. Everyone struggles at work and home. Everyone has problematic relationships and, sooner or later, health issues. We all suffer sometimes. But instead of letting those challenges define them, they see the blessings they've already been given. And because that's their focus, they are empowered to remember God's goodness and sovereignty even in life's most challenging situations.

**Perspective, or
focus, is one of the
keys to joy.**

Perspective, or focus, is one of the keys to joy. And as we'll see, it's something we choose.

Bobby experienced both of these perspectives. After his first fire, his focus was inward. He was acutely aware of everything he'd lost and could hardly focus on what he still had—and what was much more valuable than what he had lost.

After the second fire, his focus was upward and then outward. The situation hadn't changed; both times, his business was devastated by fire, and he lost almost everything. But his perspective had changed dramatically. He learned how to choose his focus.

How can we develop the kind of perspective that transcends our circumstances? That's the key question everyone has to answer—

not just once but daily, even moment to moment. We don't have to wonder if we'll experience tough circumstances. We will. Everyone does. The issue is how we deal with them.

THE DIVINE EQUATION

If you've ever thought your experience of joy is random or that it depends on the circumstances you go through, I've got news for you: There's nothing random about it. We may not be able to choose all our circumstances, but we can choose how we see them. And that choice determines whether or not we live in joy.

If we were to put that principle in the form of an equation, it would look something like this:

THE DIVINE EQUATION: C + P = E

Circumstance + Perspective = Experience

Living above my circumstances occurs when my **perspective** interprets my circumstances rather than my **circumstances** determining my perspective.

You might want to write this formula on an index card and put it where you will see it often. Reminding yourself that there's a different way to see things is one way to shift your perspective.

Maybe you're wondering why an equation like this—something that looks very mathematical and formulaic—is so important. The Christian life is not a formula, of course, but God gives us some guiding principles that have a profound influence on the trajectory of our lives. This is one of them. It's rock-solid truth, and it's demonstrated for us clearly in Scripture as a model for training our minds and hearts to see the truth and live it out.

This is critical to a life of joy. Joy comes from learning to live above your circumstances. You will either let your circumstances determine your perspective or let your perspective determine your circumstances. Those are your only two options. You can probably guess which one leads to greater joy.

Crises, tragedies, and even normal hardships are a part of life in this fallen world. For many people, they represent major turning points. Some people are broken by them and grow bitter, sink into their regrets, and blame God and others for what they have been through. Others are drawn closer to God through them and come out with greater faith and a clear perspective on what's important and what isn't.

What's the difference? Why are some people filled with despair and bitterness while others are filled with joy—even when they've gone through similar situations? The answer is in that equation. Your circumstances don't determine your experience. Your circumstances *plus your perspective* determines your experience. The fundamental issue is how we can develop the kind of perspective that transcends our circumstances.

It isn't that hard to see how dramatically our responses to hardships can change the course of our lives. Some people have unconsciously made an assumption about life with God—that if you love God and are a good person trying to serve Him, then bad things won't happen to you and your loved ones. Your family members will be spared from cancer and drunk drivers, your kids will become faithful believers, and life will generally go well because God is taking care of you.

That assumption gets shattered sometimes, and people who aren't grounded in a biblical perspective don't know how to deal with the aftermath. They feel as if God has let them down. As you can imagine, that undermines faith and leaves little room for joy.

This is why perspective is so important.

Think about how this might have played out in your life. When you look at life through the lens of your circumstances, what happens? You're happy when circumstances are good, and sad or angry when they aren't, right? But if you look at your circumstances through the lens of God's goodness—His power and promises—that's a higher perspective. You can experience joy because you know a good God is going to take even the worst and most difficult things in life and use them for your good.

Living above our circumstances occurs when our perspective interprets our circumstances rather than our circumstances determining our perspective.

That's the answer to the question we asked above. How can we transcend our circumstances? The answer is perspective: $C + P = E$.

LESSONS FROM THE LIFE OF PAUL

In Philippians 1, Paul gives us four keys and four questions that will determine whether we live with the joy God has promised to give us. We'll look at the first key and first question in this chapter and the next.

KEY #1: FOCUS

QUESTION #1: WHERE IS MY FOCUS?

What is your most challenging, difficult, painful circumstance or relationship right now? What weighs you down or keeps you up at night? If you could pick one thing for God to fix or take away, what would it be?

Now with that in mind, let's look at Philippians 1. This chapter

is especially powerful when we know the context. Paul is likely writing to the Philippian believers from captivity in Rome. He has already been beaten on numerous occasions, spent a night floating at sea, been stoned and left for dead once, and has been opposed in many ways and on many fronts throughout his ministry. God had called him to take the message of the gospel to the gentile world, and he has been single-mindedly focused on it ever since he received that calling. But it hasn't been easy, and his opponents in Jerusalem stirred up a crowd and had him arrested. He spent two years in legal limbo in Judea before being shipped to Rome, where he has continued to await his trial. And while he waits, he writes this letter.

**From a
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discouraged.**

Paul didn't know how influential this letter and the others he wrote while in Rome would be. All he knew was that God had sent him on this mission to reach people with the gospel, and he had eagerly followed his calling. Yet he had been opposed every step of the way, sometimes violently. He was under house arrest (Acts 28:16, 30), which meant he could receive visitors and have some limited privileges in a rented home or apartment (at his expense). But he was still watched by a Roman guard constantly, probably chained at night, and unable to establish new churches or build up the ones he had already started—at least in person.

From a purely human perspective, Paul had a right to be discouraged. And if he looked at his life through the lens of his circumstances, he would have been. It seemed as if his entire ministry was compromised and at a standstill. This could have been a glass-half-empty moment for him.

But that's not the perspective he presented to the Philippian

believers. His letter to them is full of joy. In fact, probably very surprisingly to his readers, it's *overflowing* with joy.

Paul had a strong heart connection with this church. He and they had a lot of affection for each other, as the church was blessed and grew through some significant challenges. The believers in Philippi had heard that Paul was confined in Rome and, since prisoners under house arrest were responsible for paying their own lodging and other living expenses, they knew he needed support. So, they sent him a financial gift through one of their members, Epaphroditus, and this letter is Paul's response to them.

In this letter, Paul took advantage of the opportunity not only to thank them but also to address some of the issues they were facing, which Epaphroditus would have talked about with him in some detail. And one of those issues was their concern for Paul and all he was going through.

Even from the start, this letter is full of affection. After a greeting from himself and Timothy, who was apparently with Paul at this time, he tells them how he feels about them:

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. (Phil. 1:3–6)

Notice the key words in this passage that tell us something about Paul's perspective, particularly "thank," "remembrance," "prayer with joy," and "confident." Does he seem worried about his situation and how it might turn out? Not at all. As he has prayed for all the believers in this church, he has maintained a very positive perspective, full of joy and gratitude.

Paul's Upward Focus

Remember where Paul is. He is confined in Rome, under constant guard and at least figuratively if not literally in chains, awaiting a trial that could result either in his freedom or his death. He has spent years going from place to place to preach and teach the message of Jesus to Jews and gentiles alike, establishing many churches and training many disciples. But at this moment, he is unable to do any of that, and as far as he knows, he may never be able to travel and teach again.

You might recall what happened to Paul on his first visit to Philippi (Acts 16:11–40). After preaching and teaching for many days, Paul and Silas found themselves at the center of a controversy and were thrown in a jail cell after being brutally beaten with thick, bone-breaking rods. As they sat in the dark, chained and shackled in probably painful positions, they prayed and sang hymns. God responded miraculously with an earthquake that broke their chains and opened locked doors, and the Philippian jailer and his family received Jesus as their Savior. Paul knew what it was like to worship in a crisis and see God move powerfully to bring good out of it.

That experience may have happened a decade or more before Paul wrote this letter, but many believers in Philippi would remember it well. They might need to be comforted in his current crisis, but apparently he did not. Even though he was going through alarming circumstances, he became the comforter and encourager, and they would have been heartened by his assurances that he prayed for them “with joy.”

They were also encouraged by the reason Paul remembered them with joy when he prayed. As he tells them, it was “in view of [their] participation in the gospel” from the beginning of his ministry among them. In other words, “we were in this together,

and we still are.” Paul was filled with gratitude because they and he had seen God work in that city. He was thankful for his lasting relationship with these fellow believers.

Paul is not only joyful and grateful in this letter but also optimistic. His focus in this passage is not on himself but on God and the believers in this young church. He is “confident” that God is in control—that He will continue working in them as He has in the past.

Paul could have been full of concerns about himself. No one would blame him. He could have talked about his difficult living conditions, chains that kept him close to his guard, rats in the building, lack of funds to pay for his food, frustrations about being silenced by an ungodly government, or any number of other complaints. He could have focused on his innocence and how unfair his whole situation was. But blaming God or others and complaining about circumstances

Paul’s words focus not on circumstances, but on the heartfelt connection he has with this church.

reflects an inward focus. Paul refused to go there. He knew God was still on His throne no matter how challenging his situation looked.

That’s an upward focus, not an inward one, and it’s powerful. It reflects an attitude of trust in God and gratitude for what He has done, is doing, and will continue to do in the future. Someone who focuses upward has no need to live in regret, cast blame, or feel despair. *When we know God is taking care of us and is sovereign over all our circumstances, we can live with gratitude and joy.*

As you consider the truth in the last paragraph, it is deeply encouraging, but very challenging. I mentioned in the introduction that

I've had lots of struggles putting this into practice. Closing out this section on Paul's upward focus, I want to share one thing that has helped me the most. Singing doesn't come naturally to me, but as I was on my personal *restore my joy* journey, one of the things that has helped me the most is to spend time singing to the Lord. My son is a worship leader, and I often select songs he's written because they're close to my heart. I often sing them in my office as I start my day. I don't know how to explain it, because yes, praying is important, and yes, I'm in God's Word, but there is something powerful about lifting our voices to Jesus and hearing music that floods over our souls, that draws us near in a way that mere intellectual truth or even praying doesn't. Let me encourage you to give it a try to develop your upward focus.

Paul's Outward Focus

Paul reflected very little on his own situation. He was more concerned for these believers and how they were doing in their circumstances in Philippi. Though they were not nearly as challenging to work with as some of the other churches Paul founded, they had their issues, both in the opposition they faced in Philippi and in their relationships within their church. Still, Paul was confident that God was going to keep working in them until Jesus' return.

Then Paul explained why:

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 and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me. For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. (Phil. 1:7–8)

Notice the key words Paul uses to express his perspective, especially those that express his emotions: “feel,” “heart,” “partakers . . .

with me,” “long,” and “affection.” He is not reluctant to tell them how he feels about them or to remind them of the connection they have with him and with each other. This is a very relational letter—that makes sense, because the gospel and God’s kingdom are relational at their core—so Paul’s words focus not on circumstances, but on the heartfelt connection he has with this church. He is genuinely concerned about their welfare.

Imagine hearing about a dear friend who is going through an incredibly difficult time—severe financial hardship and a recent cancer diagnosis—and sending them an email to ask how they are doing and if there is anything you can do help. How would you feel if this was the response that came back: “Every time I think of you,

I pray for you! I remember our times together, and I long for more of them.

I just have so much affection for you!”

It would be a little shocking, wouldn’t it? You would expect your friend to start by talking about his or her struggles, not to focus on you and express gratitude for your relationship.

**Paul was not
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circumstances,
and neither are we.**

Notice that Paul doesn’t just talk about his own affection. He longs for them *with the affection of Christ*. Jesus has put His own affection for these people within Paul’s heart. This is an expression of divine love.

I memorized this passage many years ago and remember praying, “Lord, I don’t know if I could ever say that to anyone, but I would love to be able to do so—to someday, somehow love, long for, and care for someone in the same way Jesus cares for me.” There is nothing self-centered or self-absorbed in that kind of love. It’s a completely outward focus. Paul was so filled up with love for other people that he seemed almost unaware of his circumstances.

That kind of love leads naturally into prayer. Not only does Paul tell them he has been praying for them (vv. 3–4); but he also tells them what he has been praying.

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:9–11)

Paul essentially tells them, “My focus isn’t on myself and my imprisonment. It’s on God first and also on you, and I want you to know what I’m praying for you. I’m asking God that your love and relationships would grow deeper and deeper in the knowledge of God.”

This “knowledge” (*epignosis*) is a very powerful word. It’s not just head knowledge; it’s real and experiential. Paul wants them to have a profound, ongoing experience with God that leads to deep discernment and understanding. In other words, he is asking that they would get so close to God in the midst of this corrupt Roman culture and all the opposition it brings against believers—him in Rome and the members of this church in the Roman colony of Philippi—that they would “approve the things that are excellent.” His prayer is that when the world comes against them, they would know from experiencing and interacting with God Himself what is right, wrong, good, true, false, and every other insight that helps them know how to live their lives.

Why? After praying that the Philippians’ love would keep growing and deepening, Paul uses a very important but easily unnoticed phrase: “so that.” He wants them to abound in knowledge of God “so that” they will be “sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes

through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”

Out of all the things Paul could have focused on, that’s what he chose. And focus really is a choice. We must learn to see it as one. Paul was not a victim of circumstances, and neither are we. We are rooted in God, connected in love, and growing in truth and righteousness for His glory and praise. I confess, this is a constant battle for me. When negative circumstances come my way, I catch my thoughts “going negative,” feeling like a victim, or blaming someone for my misfortune; I say out loud $C + P = E$ (Circumstance + Perspective = Experience) and refocus upward and outward.

A FOCUS THAT LEADS TO JOY

**Maintaining
that upward and
outward focus isn’t
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but it is possible
with practice
over time.**

I don’t know what you’re going through right now. Whatever it is may be extremely difficult. But whether you are enjoying good times or struggling through the greatest challenges of your life, God’s Word always points us to a higher reality than surviving our circumstances and navigating the situations we face. We can choose to lift our eyes, embrace the higher vision, and live in gratitude and joy.

That is not a onetime choice. It’s daily, even minute by minute. You can choose to look at God, other people, and life itself through the lens of your circumstances, but when circumstances are not good, that focus will only lead to frustration, bitterness, and despair.

Or, you can learn from Paul and look up and out. His circum-

stances were as bad as anyone's. He could have faced execution in the very near future. He had no way of knowing for sure. While he waited, he endured the frustration of captivity and a very long break in his traveling, preaching and teaching, and church planting ministry. In the midst of those challenges, he kept his upward and outward focus, trusting God and building up the people around him.

Maintaining that upward and outward focus isn't always easy to do, but it is possible with practice over time. Paul expressed this perspective from the very beginning of this letter to the Philippians, and if we look closely enough, we can see how he has developed it. As the letter continues, Paul by example demonstrated again and again how we can have that focus, too, and live all of life with an attitude of joy even in the midst of our deepest challenge.

DISCUSSION/APPLICATION QUESTIONS

- 1.** What's the most challenging circumstance you're currently facing?
- 2.** Where is your current focus: inward, upward, or outward?
- 3.** What factors and/or people tend to reinforce a negative or inward "victim mentality" in your life?
- 4.** From what you learned in this chapter, what specific steps could you take toward changing your focus and your perspective?

Assignment: Share with one trusted person your specific application to question 4 and ask them to pray for you.