

A Long Time in the Wrong Place

[Acts 24:24-27](#)

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We can spend a lot of time trying to get to the right place, but God never waits for that. God expects us to be of use along the way. And wherever we are of use to God, that is the right place.

When the Apostle Paul was converted on the road to Damascus, the Lord said that he had chosen Paul as his instrument to bring the name of Jesus to Israel, the Gentiles, and to their kings. So far in Paul's life, he has fulfilled his mission to Israel and the Gentiles, but he hasn't yet spoken to kings.

Recently, as you will recall from our series of sermons on Paul's life, the Lord stood near to Paul and reminded him again that he would soon be going to Rome where he would have the opportunity to speak of the grace of God, even to Caesar, the greatest king in the known world. So, Paul is very clear about his mission. He must get to Rome. He has to do that before he is done, he must speak to Caesar. But where do we find Paul today? He is in prison in Caesarea, where the provincial governor Felix has left him for two years! So for two years, Paul has not been on a missionary journey, not in Rome, not where he wants to be, and not where he thinks he should be. He is stuck in the wrong place.

Have you ever had that feeling? Maybe today you feel stuck in a relationship. There was a time when this relationship was filled with passion. You remember what passion feels like. But now you don't have it. For a while, the two of you argued, but now you don't even argue. You can't figure out how to get back to the place that you want to be. When you are stuck in a marriage, it feels like house arrest.

In contrast, others of you are head over heels in love with someone from whom you are separated. Maybe that person is at work in another part of the country and you can't get to him or her. Or maybe, the person that you love so much is in heaven, separated from you by death. Whenever you are separated from someone that you love, it doesn't matter how good things are going for you where you are, you feel you are in the wrong place.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned by the Nazis in 1943, he began a warm and tender correspondence with his fiancée Maria Von Wedemeyer. These letters were published a few years ago in a touching book entitled, *Love Letters from Cell 92*. To tell you the truth, it is hard to read these letters because these two are clearly passionate about each other, yet you know how the story ends. You know that the story ends with Bonhoeffer's execution and that these lovers are never reunited.

In one of these letters Maria writes, Dearest Dietrich, Sometimes, when I wake up at night and can't help thinking of you so much, I wonder if I've been woken by a thought of yours. And that would be lovely. When I get up at half past five in the morning, I always try to think of you very gently and cautiously, so as to let you sleep on a bit. I wept my way through this book . . . twice. Many of you know exactly what that feels like to be separated from the one you love. When you are separated from love, it doesn't matter how wonderful everything else is, you still feel like you are in the wrong place.

Some of us are stuck in the wrong place in our relationship with a grown child. Something went wrong, somewhere back there. You may not even know what it is. But it's clear that you and your child are not as close as you should be, and it is tearing your heart apart. Some of you feel stuck in a financial crisis. Others of you are stuck in a health crisis. Some are stuck in hurts from their past or in a depression that you cannot outrun.

But if my pastoral counseling load is an indicator, the place where we most often feel stuck is at work. You have invested a lot of time and money getting educated and trained for this job. But now you have discovered that you don't like it. At all. You would love to quit and do something else, but you can't. Because there are too many bills, too many commitments, too many people counting on you. And there are too few years left. So in your bravest moments you wonder, "How did I let this happen? How did I get stuck?" It is one of the most common laments. How did I get stuck?

While the Apostle Paul was in prison, Felix the governor would periodically send for Paul hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe so that Felix could release him. Instead Paul would offer him a little sermon about justice, self control, and the coming judgment of God. Felix would get frightened and send Paul back to prison. A while later they would go through the whole thing again. This was going nowhere. Paul didn't get to first base converting Felix. The fact is Felix was one of the worst provincial governors Rome ever saw. Even Nero thought Felix was over the top, eventually recalling him. This is the kind of character Paul was working with. Nothing happened in all of that time Paul was stuck in prison. For these years his job was fruitless, pointless, and unfulfilling. He was stuck in as lousy a job as you can have. Paul knows what it means to be stuck. But he continued on. How do you do that? That is the question today: how do you survive when you are stuck for a long time in the wrong place?

The first and most important thing that you have to do, especially when you feel stuck, is to choose hope. Hope is always a choice. So is despair. To choose despair is to embrace the pain that is felt and to make it an absolute for eternity to say that it is always going to be like this. But to choose hope is to embrace a future that you have not yet even imagined. You can only choose hope if you live with three tenses at the same time: remembering God's faithfulness in the past, envisioning God's faithfulness for the future, and then placing yourself between past faithfulness and future faithfulness. Only then do you understand the present tense.

One of our greatest dangers from living in a postmodern society is that we live most of the time cut off from both the past and the

future. That only leaves you with the present day. You cannot understand the present day or enjoy it apart from the past and the future because your life adds up to more than just the present.

The reason Paul kept preaching to Felix about justice and judgment was not because he was concerned about Felix's graft . . . no, Paul was preaching to himself. Hope makes a wonderful judgement on an inadequate present. Hope says don't count on the present. Do not make it an absolute, do not take it too seriously because the present will not last. The future is on the way. We tend to think that the present is the only thing that you can count on and the future is uncertain. The Bible says that this is wrong. Rather, it is the future that we can count on; the future is certain. If you are uncertain about the present, if you are in a dark chapter of the story, sneak a peek at the back of the book. You will see that the mystery works out fine.

When we read the Bible, we discover that the future has already been written. And, I am telling you, it ends great. It ends with justice, it ends with the healing of the nations, it ends with you joining the rest of creation in a wonderful doxological praise because you have been blessed all along. That is how we read the present tense, from the lense of the future. How else can we make it through a newspaper that reminds us about famine in Ethiopia, or child slavery in Sudan, or Christians being executed in Indonesia? Only by reminding ourselves that the story isn't over yet, the future is still on the way. How will you make it through the heartache of your present tense? Only by remembering that God is not done writing the story of your life. But you have to choose to remember that. You have to choose hope.

Jurgan Moltmann, one of our great theologians who wrote a book entitled *Theology of Hope*, has said that everything that he needed to know about hope he discovered in a World War II prison. He learned that the men without hope were the first ones to die. "They collapsed," he later wrote, "from the inside out." It doesn't have to be that way. Hope is available, but you have to choose it. And when you do, when you choose to believe in a future of hope, then you can start to attend to the day that you have.

Every time Felix summoned Paul, Paul returned to Felix and preached the Gospel about the coming judgment of God and the hope of the grace of Jesus Christ. Every time Felix would send Paul away, Paul would remember that his calling was to be an instrument and the instrument simply exists for the master. Frequently, the instrument cannot see what the master is using the instrument for. You are only going to be able to maintain that kind of hope and faithfulness if you are clear that the future is on the way.

Maybe while Paul sat in prison remembering the past, he recalled the story of his Hebrew people. Maybe he remembered the time when they were in exile in Babylon. There they spent a very long time in a very wrong place. It was so hard for the Jews to be in Babylon that for a while, they stopped worshipping. "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" But then the Lord sent his word to the exiles through the prophet Jeremiah saying, "Surely, I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, plans to give you a future filled with hope."

Most of us are familiar with those words. Many of us have them hanging on our walls. But we are less familiar with the rest of Jeremiah's prophecy that claims that since God has this future for us, we must attend to the day we have. "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters . . . seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you in exile and pray on its behalf for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

Are you praying for the wrong place where you are stuck? Are you praying for the supervisor at work that drives you nuts, the relationship that has fallen on hard times? Are you praying for the city where you are, even if it still doesn't feel like your home? Biblical hope does not turn our face away from the present. Rather, biblical hope allows you to return to the present, seeing it pregnant with the possibilities of tomorrow. And so, hopeful people know that their mission in life cannot wait until they get to the right place. Hopeful people turn to their mission today because they are hopeful.

Kelsey Marshall is one of our cherished members of the congregation who has spent a long time in doctors' offices, a place that she would rather not be. She was accepted to go to seminary, but has had to postpone those plans while she attends to one surgery after another. Last week she completed her 12th surgery and is not done yet.

But last Tuesday something wonderful happened in the doctor's waiting room and Kelsey gave me permission to tell you about it. While she sat there for 3 hours, in the wrong place, she decided to note the other patients around her. Soon she was in a conversation with a couple of women who also have serious eye problems. One of them asked her how she was coping, which was all the invitation Kelsey needed to tell her about the inner vision she has discovered from her faith in God and the church where she worships. And then Kelsey began to recite the words from the great hymn, "Be Thou My Vision."

As one of the ladies was leaving the doctor's office, with some more bad news, Kelsey simply said, "Well, Florence, I am going to be praying for you." To which the other lady said, "You know, I didn't realize that Presbyterians were so religious."

Kelsey Marshall, whose needs are so great, who has every reason to despair, has chosen instead to have a vision of hope. And in making that choice, she has already become more of a pastor than a seminary could make of her. Because she chose hope. Learning to choose hope is, I believe, one of the most important insights to life. And you can only learn to choose hope when you are in the wrong place. So, what about you? What choices do you now need to make as you return to the day that you have?

Lord God, give us all the vision to see that you are near, and where you are found is always the right place for us to be today. Speak to us of eternal things, that we may speak of your hope to a world dying from despair. Amen.