



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

Why Are You Here in the Capitol?

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PHILEMON

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“Why are you here in the capitol?”

If we asked that question of the legislators, elected officials, lobbyists, and staff who serve in the statehouse, we would get many different answers. Most would say they desire to serve the people of their district and their state. Many would claim they want to make a difference in people’s lives. Others might express their desire to impact a particular issue or set of issues. Some, if truly honest, might even tell us of their desire to achieve positions of power and influence.

The truth is that God has a purpose and a plan that goes far beyond any of these reasons for every person who is working here in the statehouse. We see this demonstrated in the lives of those in Philemon, and it is another big message we gain from our study of this little letter.

God is working out His purpose and plan in all the circumstances in the lives of Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon. Paul points this out as he describes all that has taken place in verses 15-16:

For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

In the letter of Philemon we read how all three characters are facing difficult and challenging circumstances. The author Paul is in prison in Rome. Onesimus is a slave on the run, estranged from his master. Philemon has been wronged by his slave and has experienced loss both personally and financially. Yet in the midst of all these circumstances we find that God has a plan and a purpose for all three and He uses the situations to bring about their good and His glory. God is ultimately in control of all of His creation. He is involved in all events and directs all things to His purpose and their appointed end. God is completely in charge of His world. This understanding of God’s involvement in His creation and in our lives is called God’s *providence*. For followers of Christ we see this spelled out in Romans 8:28 where Paul shares, “... *We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those*

who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose”.

We have a great Old Testament illustration of how God uses difficult circumstances for the good of His followers and for His own glory in the life of Joseph. He was abused and sold into slavery by his brothers (Gen. 37). He was falsely accused and thrown into prison (Gen. 39). He was forgotten and betrayed by the one he had helped (Gen. 40). God used all these circumstance to bring Joseph to the place of second in command of all of Egypt. In that position he was able save his whole family – even the brothers who had treated him so poorly. In summing up this whole turn of events, Joseph proclaimed this amazing truth: “...**You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive**” (Genesis 50:20). Earlier he had sought to comfort his brothers, telling them, “...**Do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life**” (Genesis 45:5).

Now let us see how God’s providence is clearly demonstrated in the lives of Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon.

GOD’S PROVIDENCE IN THE LIFE OF PAUL

Three times in Philemon Paul writes of his situation as a prisoner (vs. 1,9,23). Paul was certainly facing difficult circumstances as a captive in Rome. While this was something of a “house arrest” and perhaps not the worst of conditions, (see Acts 28:16, 30) he had certainly undergone a dreadful ordeal in coming to this place in his life. (Acts 20-28) He had wanted to travel to Rome in order to have a fruitful ministry among the believers there (Romans 1:9-11; 16:29). His plan was to travel from Rome to Spain and so continue the advance of the gospel across Europe. Indeed he made it to Rome, though certainly not as he had intended. His consuming goal in life was to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and he ends up spending **four years** as a captive of the Roman Empire. Yet Paul saw that this imprisonment resulted in the spread of the Gospel. Paul writes in Philippians 1:12-14 of how his imprisonment advanced the cause of the gospel:

BIBLE STUDIES

LOBBYIST / STAFF STUDY: **TUESDAYS, 12:00 NOON**, TREASURER’S CONFERENCE ROOM (EB 54)

LEGISLATOR / ELECTED OFFICIAL STUDIES: **THURSDAYS 8:00 A.M. & NOON** TREASURER’S CONFERENCE ROOM (EB 54)

West Virginia

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¹²Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, ¹³so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, ¹⁴and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.

Paul's imprisonment led to the salvation of Onesimus. It also led to the spread of the gospel throughout the group of elite Roman soldiers whose task was to guard Paul. This may have led to some of them repenting and trusting Christ, since we read of the greetings Paul passed along to the Philippian church from the saints in Caesar's household (Philippians 4:22).

GOD'S PROVIDENCE IN THE LIFE OF ONESIMUS

Onesimus faced difficult circumstances as well, though they were apparently of his own making. He sinned and wronged his master, then fled and made the arduous journey to Rome (a trip of over 1000 miles). We do not know the details, but we know that these events brought him into contact with Paul. Paul had the awesome privilege of sharing with Onesimus the good news that Christ took those very sins upon Himself and died and rose again so that those offences against Philemon and against God could be forgiven. He could have the very holiness of Christ given to him so that he could become a child of God. Though his actions were sinful and wrong, Onesimus' sin brought him to Rome, to the place where he could hear Paul preach the gospel. God used his sinful actions and circumstances that followed to bring about the miracle of salvation in his life.

GOD'S PROVIDENCE IN THE LIFE OF PHILEMON

Philemon also endured difficult events. We do not know the severity of Onesimus' actions, but we can be sure that Philemon suffered harm due to the actions of his runaway slave. Yet God used these events to help Philemon change and grow as a believer as he was challenged to demonstrate the reality of the gospel in his own life by forgiving Onesimus and accepting him as a brother. Doubtless his following through

on Paul's request had a great impact on all who witnessed his actions. The events that took place in Colossae over 2,000 years ago continue to have impact even as we find ourselves studying this powerful little letter today!

GOD'S PROVIDENCE IN YOUR LIFE

This brings us back to our original question, "Why are you here in the capitol?" Certainly you are here to serve the people of West Virginia and to make a difference in their lives. You are here to stand and fight for the issues. You may even be here to achieve positions of power and influence so you can effectively do the above. But God has an even greater purpose and plan for your presence here in capitol.

If you are a believer, a follower of Christ, God will use all the challenges, circumstances, and situations you face to make you more like Christ.¹ Secondly, God has brought you here so that you might be a witness and testimony to those who do not know Christ. This is important to remember as you go about the duties of your office or the responsibilities of your job. Even as you represent your constituents, fight for issues, or strive for higher positions, you should remember that God has a purpose for you to be a witness and testimony of the gospel to those who do not know Him.

If you are not a follower of Christ, it may well be that God has brought you here to the capitol in order to hear and respond to the message of gospel.² It could be through exposure to these Bible studies or a relationship with another believer. God might be using the circumstances of politics and life in the capitol to open your eyes to your need for a Savior.

➤ **EACH OF US SHOULD CONSIDER GOD'S GREATER PURPOSE AND PLAN FOR OUR LIVES HERE IN THE CAPITOL.**

¹ Note last week's study on Sanctification. <http://capitolcom.org/west-virginia/studies>

² Former Delegate Jonathan Miller shared his testimony of how God used his time in the West Virginia capitol to turn his heart toward Christ. You can find his testimony, "No More Politics for Me", at <http://capitolcom.org/west-virginia/studies/2012>.