

Sermon Series: Philippians -- Good News

March 9, 2014

## **Title: Against the Flow**

Text: Philippians 1:3-26

Summary: Paul calls us to dare to take a journey that goes against the flow. To make it happen, we share the journey with others and learn to depend on God's love.

## **Against the Flow**

### **Moving Sidewalk anyone?**

You're sitting in the very back of an airplane, headed for Chicago's O'Hare Airport. Your carry-on is in a bin 4 rows in front of you. And your travel documents tell you that you're going to need something just short of a miracle if you are going to connect with your next flight. Been there?

So your seatbelt is off before the plane stops taxiing (don't tell the flight attendant!). You spring from your seat and retrieve your carry-on. Then you stand in a sprinter's crouch while the rest of the plane empties out. Finally, you're running down the jetway and into the terminal. Now, if you can just get to that gate!

You run to the end of the terminal, go down an escalator to a long tunnel. As you step off the escalator you see it: a long moving conveyor belt with side rails. It's the moving sidewalk -- all 860 feet of it. It's your only chance!

Now you're moving several miles per hour without doing anything. By maintaining a brisk walk on the moving sidewalk you feel like you're flying through the tunnel, passing all those folks who decided to take their time by walking on their own. Minutes later and you'll be out of the tunnel and slipping into line to board the plane. Whew!

### **Against the flow:**

But what would you do if you got on the moving sidewalk, then took another look at your boarding pass and realized that you were headed to the wrong terminal? Instead of whisking you toward your destination, the moving sidewalk was carrying you further and further away from it! You look at your watch and realize that you don't have time to ride the sidewalk all the way to the end of the tunnel. There's only one thing to do: turn around and go back.

That would be an entirely different kind of experience. Instead of being carried effortlessly to the other end of the tunnel, the conveyor belt would relentlessly carry you backward to where you started. Every person on the walkway would be in your way, many of them walking at you, wondering why on earth you were trying to go in the other direction. If you wanted to actually make any progress, you would have to walk, and

walk fast. In fact, to make any progress at all you have to walk faster than the moving sidewalk is moving. Stopping to rest is virtually out of the question! You would be like a fish swimming upstream, refusing to let the current determine its destination.

### **Our journey:**

Against the flow. This is the kind of journey that Paul introduced to people as an ambassador of King Jesus. He called them to turn around and walk against the flow of culture and empire. He challenged them to walk against the flow of their own human nature. He called them to put their trust in a crucified Jewish rabbi whom God had raised from the dead. He dared them to believe that God was remaking His creation through Jesus, and that they were the vanguard of that New Creation. He challenged them to focus on the Day when the King returned to make all things new.

Our world is like that moving sidewalk in the airport. It carries us along whether we realize it or not. Things that were unthinkable gradually become the "new normal." We don't have to so much as lift a finger or take a step, yet the whole world changes, and too often not for the better. Without so much as a thought we move further and further from the goodness and purity that God intended for us.

So what if we look at our "boarding pass" and realize that this whole world system is moving us in the wrong direction? There's only one thing to do: turn around and start walking the right way. Against the flow.

## **A Different Kind of Journey**

### **A defined journey:**

Paul begins his letter to his friends in Philippi with a reminder of the nature and destination of their new journey:

#### **Philippians 1:3-6 NIV**

**I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**

We learn a couple of important things about their, and our, journey from this introduction:

- **First, it's a shared journey:** Paul thanks them for partnering with him in going against the flow of culture and empire, not to mention human nature in its broken condition.
- **Second, it has a starting point:** Paul calls it "the first day" of the journey. Our journey of following Jesus must begin by an act of our will and trust in Him. It doesn't just

"happen" on its own. It's like realizing your going the wrong way on the moving sidewalk: You have to decide to turn around, and then actually do it.

- **Third, it a God-empowered journey:** only He can give us the strength and motivation to go against the flow of the world around us; only He can change us on the inside, so that we become His reflection in this dark world.
- **Finally, it has a defined destination: "the day of Christ Jesus."** Your life story has a purpose that will only be fully realized when Jesus returns to make all things new.

### **A journey with consequences:**

We learn some very interesting things about Paul and the situation he was in when he wrote this letter. Remember how we saw last week that he ended up in a Philippian prison because of the Good News? Well, it would have been no surprise for the Philippians to learn that this letter was penned in prison as well.

### **Philippians 1:7-8 N.T. Wright trans.**

**It's right for me to think this way about all of you. You have me in your hearts, here in prison as I am, working to defend and bolster up the gospel. You are my partners in grace, all of you! God can bear witness how much I'm longing for all of you with the deep love of King Jesus.**

Walking against the flow has consequences. Paul never broke a law or launched a revolution. Nonetheless, he faced intense opposition virtually everywhere he went. Why? Because he was walking in a different direction from the world around him -- both the Jewish world of his upbringing and the pagan world of the Empire.

But Paul refused to let the world around him define him or his new journey. Instead, he reminds the Philippians that even something as unjust and traumatizing as false imprisonment could not stop what God was doing:

### **Philippians 1:12-14 NIV**

**Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.**

### **A shared and joyful journey:**

Paul reminded the Philippians that they shared in his journey -- even the most difficult parts of it. That's what friends are for, after all. They were all partners in the Good News, whether free or in prison. They drew inspiration from each other:

- Paul drew support from the prayers of his fellow Christians in Philippi.

- The believers on the outside gained courage from Paul's fearless example.

Sharing the journey enabled Paul to find joy in the middle of confinement and uncertainty.

### **Philippians 1:18-19 NIV**

**But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.**

**Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.**

What a difference it makes to travel together, especially when the journey gets tough. think about trying to go the "wrong way" on a moving sidewalk. Would you rather go it alone, or would it be a whole lot easier to do so as a group?

Our against the flow journey was never meant to be solo!

### **Journey's End**

#### **Paul's prayer:**

Paul closes his introduction with a prayer:

### **Philippians 1:9-11 NIV**

**And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.**

As he sat in his jail cell Paul found himself face to face with the possibility that his own life journey would all too soon come to and end. His concern was that he would finish strong:

### **Philippians 1:20-21 NIV**

**I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.**

In fact, he goes on to say that he would actually rather be with Christ, but he senses that his life's work isn't finished yet. There was more journey to share with the Philippians and other believers in this earthly life before he reached the finish line.

So what does it take to succeed in the "against the flow" journey? Paul's prayer says it all: it all comes down to growing in God's mighty love. Only God's love can empower us to make the right choices and grow to be pure and blameless for the Day of Christ.

### **Growing in love:**

I wonder how many times we miss out on what's best because we can't see past ourselves?

We have a family story about a move we made in which my father had tied a mattress to the top of the car. We were driving at night, and I was in the back seat with my brother and sister. All of a sudden I saw something white flash by the rear window. No sound; just a whitish shape that was there, then was gone.

I told my dad that the mattress had blown off the car. He asked me if I were sure. From the tone of his voice I could tell that he didn't believe me. He must have thought I saw a reflection and was making a big deal out of nothing. Anyway, what could I say? I certainly wasn't sure enough of what I saw to take on mom and dad!

But when we eventually got out of the car, guess what? No mattress.

Just a little bit of patience, a little less grumpiness, a little less "self," a little more love, and my dad wouldn't have lost the mattress.

### **Journey's End:**

So, you read the boarding pass, realized you were going the wrong way, and made the bold decision to turn around right then and there.

You endured the shocked looks of the others on the moving sidewalk as you strode so purposefully against the flow. Finally you broke free from the wrong-way sidewalk and made your final dash for the gate. The last passenger was just handing her boarding pass to the person at the gate. No matter; you made it!

Paul prays that the Philippians will "make the gate." He prays that they will be "pure and blameless for the day of Christ." He's not saying that they have to be perfect. He is saying that they need to finish the journey. Had they wavered, the moving sidewalk of this world and its ways would have inevitably carried them away from their destination. Had they let the other travelers' opinions decide what was best, they would not be ready for the journey's end.

Your life has an amazing and unique purpose, one that is defined by the God who created you. You were made to reflect Him and Him alone. Nothing that happens in this world can change that reality. Your whole life journey is an unfolding fulfillment of that purpose.

But you can only find your new life if you are willing to go against the flow.