

Philippians 3:8-14 – April 3, 2022

Time travel. It's one of those storylines that virtually every sci-fi show in history has attempted. I know that because I have watched just about every sci-fi show ever made. And it comes up a lot.

It doesn't matter that modern physics says that time travel is impossible. In fact, one of the primary reasons many sci-fi shows delve into the topic of time travel is for exactly that reason. Because in the realm of fictional physics, there are an infinite number of ways to solve a fictional problem, providing endless storylines and subject matter.

I personally enjoy time travel storylines. How does a trip to the past effect the future? How does a trip to the future effect the decisions you make in the present? Can you actually change the past, or is it locked in stone? Does the very act of visiting the future completely alter its outcome? And then there's the angle that all the comic book shows and movies are currently exploring: the multiverse. It's enough to give my wife a headache, but I love this stuff.

Maybe that's why, when I read our Epistle for this week, it struck me that Paul talks like a man who's been to the future. That's his definition of faith, really. Many people think about faith in terms of a hope. A desire. A wish. There isn't any reality to it. You've just conjured this up in your head and now wish it were true.

But Paul is far more certain than that. In fact, Paul's faith is far more certain than even an expectation. This is not a matter of probability to Paul. Not even 100% probability. Read what he says:

*“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”*

Do you hear the language there? It's as if Paul has already seen the resurrection. As if he's in a race and he's already been to the finish line and seen Christ Jesus waiting there, ready to hand him the prize. He's already gone into the future, seen his own death, seen the end of the world, seen the resurrection of his body, and he now knows exactly why he's running, where he's running, and what he's running towards.

And this has an incredible effect on Paul's life. When the letter to the Philippians opens, we find out that Paul is not in a good situation. He is in chains. He has been locked up in the dungeon of a palace. He has an entire contingent of soldiers guarding him day and night. He will very likely be beaten and executed in the most creative way that the Roman Emperor can contrive. He should be absolutely despondent.

And yet, by the end of Philippians, what do we read? *“Rejoice in the Lord always! I will say it again: Rejoice!”* Is this man insane? Has imprisonment simply knocked him senseless? No! He can say all this because he already knows how it's all going to turn out. By faith, Paul has been to the future. And it's a great future! And now everything he experiences, good or bad, pleasing or painful, is simply the race, the journey, to get him to that goal. Paul has become almost a spectator on his own life.

It's an amazing way to live and it took an impressive level of faith to get there. Unfortunately, I don't know that it's terribly practical for us. It's not that Paul is wrong or even unique. He's absolutely right in living his life like this. And anyone can follow in his footsteps and reach the same approach to life.

No, it's not terribly practical because, frankly, we're a long way from that kind of faith. We can follow in his footsteps, but we'll be walking for an awfully long time before we get there. I've known elderly people, in fact, who were at death's door and could simply say, “I'm in God's hands. He'll take care of me. Whatever happens, happens.” But it took years and years, an entire lifetime of faith, to reach that point. There's absolutely no way that I'm going to get us there in one sermon. Don't worry. I won't try.

Nevertheless, we can take a couple steps in the right direction. And Paul lays out those steps in this very same passage. One verse earlier we read:

*“That I may know [Christ] and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”*

Now, in case you were wondering, St Paul did not ever ‘know’ Christ in the physical, mortal sense. They lived at the same time and Paul certainly had heard about Jesus’ ministry. But as far as we know, Paul had no personal encounter with Christ until the road to Damascus.

And yet, Paul still wants to know Christ. In fact, he doesn’t just want to know him in his person or in his ministry. He wants to know him in his death. Paul’s faith may give him the ability to travel into the future. But he attains that faith by traveling into the past.

He gets his faith by traveling to that hilltop called Golgotha. By standing in that scornful crowd and looking up at the agonized body of his Lord hanging from a cross. By watching them take the body down, wrap it in linen, and lay it in a stranger’s tomb. By waiting with the disciples for three long days as they tried to understand the meaning of their teacher’s words. And by running with them to an empty tomb and watching as their Lord walked alive and unharmed amongst them later that day.

Paul gets his faith by seeing Christ suffer a multitude of pains and seeing God raise him from the dead. And if God the Father has done that for his only beloved Son, why wouldn’t he also do that for all those he calls his children? God has called us as his children through the waters of baptism. We have seen the resurrection from the dead that God provides for his children in Jesus Christ. Which means we have seen our own resurrection from the dead.

By traveling into the past we see our future. Or, as Isaiah tells us, by looking at the great works of God in the past. Remembering that this is the God who parted the Red Sea and drowned Pharaoh's army. Look at all that God is capable of doing. And now realize: That was all in preparation for something completely new.

Look to the past and you see the love God has for his people and the power God has to save his people. Well, all that love and all that power showed up in flesh and blood in Jesus Christ. All that love and all that power died on the cross and was resurrected on Easter morning. All that love and all that power is coming again to rescue us.

To make this world something new. The wilderness of sin, death, and the devil that surrounds will be transformed into a paradise. There will be rivers of life in the desert of death. A drink that quenches the thirst of God's chosen people. People formed by God himself, that they might declare his praise.

When Paul looks to the past, he sees the future. When Isaiah looks to the past, he sees the future. And when Jesus looks to the past, he sees his future. For he sees a people who over and over again murdered the very prophets God sent to them. And he knows perfectly well that if they murdered the prophets, they will murder the Son too.

But he doesn't care. His love is so great that he would willingly, knowingly walk into a vineyard full of bloodthirsty tenants. Just so that he would become the cornerstone upon which their salvation is built.

Throughout this Lenten season, those who come on Wednesday nights know that we have been doing some time traveling on those evenings as well. Entering into those last hours of Jesus' life and looking at the people who surrounded him before he died.

Next week, we do so even more fully as we celebrate the triumphal entry of Christ on Palm Sunday. As we sit with him and his disciples around the table of the last supper. As we stand in the crowd and watch our Lord be crucified. And as we join together peering into the empty tomb on Easter morning.

I pray you will join me as we travel back in time and so also look into our future, through these events. They are not simply remembrances or rituals. They are the core of our Christian faith. They are the goal towards which we are straining. Together, let’s press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of us. Amen.