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SERIES: Choosing Faith Over Fear

Speaker: Nat Crawford (w/Arnie & Cara)

Title: Leveraging Your Trials Pt. 1 (Paul)

For most of my life, I've been interested in growth and learning. Part of that is probably just the environment I was raised in. My grandfather was a successful business owner. My mother was a successful business owner. So growing up I was often encountering the lives of successful people.

Whether it was a seminar I was going to, or an audio tape in the car, or magazines around the house or business, I was exposed to the cost of success. If there's one consistent message I learned from the most successful people, is that success comes at a cost. In other words, often the pathway to victory is riddled with hurdles and immense challenges.

What I've found interesting, is that most of the time when asked the question, "Was it worth it?" Most people said, "No." Success wasn't worth the cost.

I think people respond this way because they've sacrificed some of the most valuable things life can offer: relationships with spouses, children, friends and family. It cost them dearly. But I think the second reason it wasn't worth the cost is because they defined "success" incorrectly. Well, how should we define success? What will it cost us? That's what we're going to talk about.

Here at Back to the Bible, we're in a series of messages called "Choosing Faith Over Fear." We're now going to spend time with the Apostle Paul as he shares a perspective that is very different than the culture today.

DISCUSSION:

N: But before we begin looking at the Apostle Paul's perspective on choosing faith over fear, I'd love to ask my guests, Arnie and Cara, you've both had measures of success, but I'm going to guess Arnie, that most people don't know about your background before coming to Back to the Bible. How did you define success before coming to Christ and was the cost worth it?

A: So before I became a Christ follower, my formula was help people, but make a lot of money while you do it. And I was raised in a good Christian home and my parents were missionaries, so I got the thing about helping other people. And I thought, wow, wouldn't it be great, if you could make a lot of money and help people at the same time? Because at the end of the day, it was all a joke. There was just nothing but money, and living for the day.

N: Which in some regards isn't necessarily all bad, on the part of helping people and getting paid for it. That's kind of the way business works. But the reality is for you, success was really defined in how much money you could accumulate, which is pretty common today. Cara, what about you? How did you define success, prior to coming to faith in Christ, and did you find that the cost was worth it?

C: I actually measured success by security. So I would think, financial security, knowing my

bills were going to get paid if something happened, I would have enough of a backup plan to sustain me. You know, it doesn't really work out, because at the end of the day, you can have all the money in the world, but if your health goes to pot, you know, there's so many things out of our control, that you don't feel secure. The world can't give you the same security. So I would say for a while, I was floating pretty good in my twenties, and then, you know, as you get older, things start going downhill.

A: Well, and Nat, for me, I got the irony of it all. One of my boat's names was Uno Mas, which meant, you know, One More. It's always one more this, one more that. [Yeah, I mean it's.] Pretty empty.

C: Which shows a lack of contentment really, if you think about it.

N: Yeah, and when we define success based on the value system of the world, when we are looking for security in all the wrong places, there is never enough. We will never hit that mark. And the reality is it does come at a price, and often the price is too high. And I think that's something we all struggle with today.

I think the struggle with defining success and its cost is not just a battle for non-believers, or those in celebrity or high-profile careers. It's a battle for all of us. So let's see what Paul has to say in Philippians 1, beginning in verse 12.

¹²I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, ¹³so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. (ESV, Phil. 1:12-13)

Paul begins by saying, "Know that what has happened to me..." Well, you're probably asking, what's he talking about. What's happened to Paul?

Well, the letter to the Philippian church was written in a Roman prison cell. Paul is writing this while in chains. Now, let me just pause there. Prisons today aren't what they were back then. There wasn't a nice bed with a sink and toilet. No electricity. No TV. No recreation. It was a dark, dank prison cell. Paul would have been in chains all day long. He would have been chained to a prison guard 24 hours a day. Each guard would spend 6 hours with Paul and then switch. So Paul was chained to 4 different people each day. Even when he had to use the restroom? Yep! Even when sleeping? Yep.

In a meeting this past month, our CEO Arnie Cole, who is in studio with me right now, he gave us a challenge, when we were going to move to working remote due to COVID-19. He said, you've got a choice to make. You can choose misery or you can choose ministry. Will the chains we have through this trial lead us to misery, or will it lead us to ministry? Well, here's the truth of the matter: the trial isn't the deciding factor for that. It's our choice to choose.

The Apostle Paul had every reason to choose misery over ministry. In 2 Corinthians 11:24-27, Paul gives us his ministry experience. Listen to this:

"Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure."

Paul had a reason...no strike that...he had every reason to choose misery over ministry. But what did Paul write to this Philippian church a few pages later? He said:

“Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹²I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (Phil. 4:11-13)

DISCUSSION:

N: Arnie, do you remember that challenge you gave us, misery or ministry? You weren't speaking from a lack of misery-giving experience, were you?

A: No, not at all. It's just I've learned over time, that in life, and especially when you're doing ministry, you have a choice: either choose misery or really decide to go with ministry, and there's choices all along. Basically, be self-focused, or focused on ministering to others.

N: Right. And you've been around for a while, so you've experienced a lot of opportunities to choose misery, but instead you keep choosing ministry. How are you able to choose ministry time after time?

A: Well, you know, that's a great question. As a new believer, right out of the gate, maybe I'd been a Christ follower for three years, I'm working for a ministry and I get fired, and it's like, Holy cow, what in the world is going on here? I thought the Lord had called me, and it was very, very hard. And I had a pastor that was mentoring me, and he just came and said, Arnie, get over it. They made a mistake, go on. And you know, from then on, and he made it very clear, you've got a choice. You can be bitter and miserable, or you can go on, and just minister in a different way. That was the best advice I ever had.

N: That is excellent. I think a lot of us do need to simply move on, and quit letting the past decisions of other people, or even our own past decisions, affect us today. We need to move on and keep moving forward. And you saw that in Paul's life. So I'm curious what you guys think. What was Paul? Some sort of superhuman, or maybe a super Christian, because I mean the man could be content in all circumstances, or what was his secret?

C: Well, I'm with Arnie in that he was a sinning man, broken man, just like the rest of us, for me minus the man part. But Arnie, he said, he, Paul, made a choice to be content in the situation he was in. He kept his eye on the ball, so he knew what his mission was, and he just focused on that, instead of what was going on around him. Kept him content.

N: Yeah, he was a man who was content in all circumstances. And I kind of have to chuckle, when I think about the time we live in, and our level of contentment is ever decreasing. I mean, we live in a time, where you can go through a drive through, and if the order is wrong, I mean, people go ballistic. On one hand it's, you kind of watch people's reaction on YouTube, and you're like, that's kind of funny. But then you realize, Whoa, something's seriously wrong, when they're throwing the food, and tearing off down the road, because they got a strawberry milkshake instead of a chocolate. The Apostle Paul, if that was him, he would have said, Hey, I'm content. No worries. So how can you and I today, how can our listeners, learn to be content in all circumstances?

C: Well, the way I look at it, is Satan is always trying to trip me up. And when he does, he starts

shoveling it on my head, and he's not going to stop shoveling, until I make the choice to not let him do that anymore. So, you know, I just expect my order's going to be wrong, and I focus on what I'm going to do to make the situation amazing. So you know, you buy a meal for the person behind you, or you make the choice to let it go. Or you get back in the drive through, and you say, Hey, you missed my fries. I mean, really when you think about it, it's such a small problem. Someone yelling at the person at the window and you witness that, hey, when it's your turn, pull up there and offer the person some kindness. You know, you can't expect unbelievers to act like a believer. I can only control what I do.

N: Yeah. One of the phrases I've learned to use quite a bit is, Hey, these are first world problems. It inevitably gets a chuckle from people when I say that, because people do walk on eggshells nowadays when they forget something, or the order gets wrong, or maybe it takes too long to get a receipt printed out. And they're like, Oh, I'm so sorry. And I'm just, you know, Hey, these are first world problems. If this is as bad as my day gets, I'm doing pretty good. And you can see people's demeanor just change. And so I think what we're all saying is, contentment comes from our relationship with God, and that same mercy and grace he's bestowed upon us, we can bestow to other people.

So Paul is sitting in a prison, ultimately awaiting his death sentence. He'll be sitting in this prison cell for two years. And yet, he's content. Paul says in verse 12, that what has happened to him, it has served to advance the Gospel.

How has Paul's chains benefited the Gospel? Well, two ways. One is in verse 13. The other we'll see in verse 14. But the first way, according to verse 13, is:

so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

Paul had a captive audience for two years. Each day, for six hours a day, these guards were chained to Paul. Paul the guy who was known to pray without ceasing. He was constantly writing letters to Christians and churches throughout the region! Paul no doubt talked their ear off and provided reasons for His faith. I mean, can you imagine, being chained to Paul? Paul was the guy who was a persecutor of the church. I mean, he probably didn't need to start the conversation. The guards probably asked, "Hey, Paul, I have to ask, why on Earth would you give up your prestige and influence to stop persecuting Christians, but become one? And all you got was this lousy prison sentence." Paul never needed an open door like that, but I have no doubt he walked through it when it came. And what was the result of these chains? Many of these prison guards would come to faith in Jesus Christ. Because of these chains, the Praetorian Guard would hear the message of the Gospel.

But not only did these guards hear and receive Christ, but they did what is supposed to happen. They became disciple-making disciples. They took that same Gospel message and shared it throughout the whole Praetorian Guard, an elite and highly respected group. They spread it through the guard and throughout the city of Rome. All from chains inside a prison cell.

DISCUSSION:

N: Arnie, it kind of makes you wonder, what's our problem? I mean for many, COVID-19 is coming to an end of its massive spread, and the quarantines are decreasing. Of course, we don't know how it's really going to play out, but I wonder, were we like Paul using our chains of quarantine to spread the Gospel?

A: That's a great question. I know a lot of us weren't like Paul, trying to make the best of it. From at least what I see, a lot of us struggled to the point, where it was very hard for us to keep above water.

N: But I would say one thing that we've been very passionate about, is using this experience. Even when we're working remote, we're actually using it to motivate us to spread the Gospel at an unprecedented level. Wouldn't you agree, Arnie?

A: I do agree, that's for sure. It's a tremendous opportunity.

N: Cara, Paul's example is something remarkable and attainable. He approached every opportunity with Gospel intentionality. In other words, he saw each meeting as an opportunity to share the hope of Jesus Christ. Why do we struggle with this philosophy?

C: Well, because, you know, you go back to what you talked about earlier, when you held up a quarter, we see our problems, and we can only, we're very shortsighted. I think Paul saw the long-term up in front of him, or no matter how long that would be, Paul had a game plan. He stuck to the game plan. His eye was on the ball. And I think we're just easily distracted by things.

N: Yeah, I think that's really true. You've got a posture, much like Paul. You look for everyday outreach opportunities. Do you want to share a little bit about that?

C: Well, I just, I go in with a game plan, so going in to get my hair cut or going into a situation, I'm very purposeful about reminding myself what my mission is. If I don't, I'm going to get distracted. I'm going to get into my phone, I'm going to be doing something else. But if I go into a doctor's office, dentist, I'm sitting there, and I have the game plan of evangelizing, then I'm going to look for those opportunities.

N: I spend my time as a teaching pastor at a church here in Lincoln. I also spend time doing local outreach, and one of the things I encouraged the church members was, we need to just look for everyday opportunities, but approach them with Gospel intentionality. In other words, quit trying to think you have to be an evangelist like Peter, very abrasive, and then in your face. You don't have to be like Paul who's very philosophical and used a lot of reasonable arguments to present Christ. Rather, be who you are. Don't look for the way to be like somebody else, or be like a Billy Graham. God has you right where He wants you. So lean into those everyday opportunities, just like you were saying, at the hairstylist, or at the grocery store, or at the coffee shop. Wherever you are in your neighborhood, look for those everyday opportunities that God provides you, and simply walk through those in the way God has wired you, with the experiences you have, using your heart for God and a heart for the lost.

So, Paul has used his chains not as a reason for misery, but ministry and the Lord multiplied the impact. And his chains didn't just impact his own ministry. But it also spread to other believers. Listen to verse 14:

¹⁴ And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. (ESV, Phil. 1:14)

Not only has Paul's chains provided opportunity to share the Gospel with the lost, but it also provided motivation to followers of Christ. That's why Paul says that his imprisonment has increased believers' confidence to share the Gospel without fear.

Here's something that we could easily miss. The word "speak" could easily be taken to mean preach, but that's not what it means. It means everyday conversation. In other words, people were more engaged in everyday outreach because of Paul's chains. But it wasn't just the chains, it was the choice of faith over fear. Paul wasn't afraid of death. He wasn't afraid of the trials he was facing. He wasn't afraid of the unknown. He was choosing ministry over misery. He chose faith in God. He leveraged his chains to advance the gospel. And the result was that people came to know Christ and it rippled out just as missiologist Alan Hirsch said, like a sneeze. It began and spread. This motivated fellow believers to be more bold with the Gospel than before.

I think this is a time to remember the impact the Gospel had on us. The Gospel changes everything. It takes religion and makes it look foolish. It takes our religious efforts and says, stop trying. It won't save you. You can't save yourself. Only God can save you as a gift. And that's what he's done through Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:18 says that, "The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God" (NLT). So will the message of the Gospel be rejected? Of course, but as Paul said, "I will not be ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of salvation to everyone" (Romans 1:16-17).

Friends, we've overcomplicated evangelism and outreach. Paul says, speak the Gospel with boldness. In other words, engage in everyday conversation in everyday moments to share the hope of Christ in you. Don't worry about having a speech memorized. Don't worry about having every answer. Be you. Let the Spirit guide you. Meet people where they're at, where you meet them. Love them. Share truth with them. Share the Good News with them. Do it naturally and let God do the rest.

I think Pastor John MacArthur summarizes this passage when he said, "What to most people, including many Christians, would appear to have been an unmitigated disaster, was an unequalled opportunity for the progress of the gospel."

N: Arnie and Cara, what are your takeaways from this passage today?

A: Well, you know, for me, I had the opportunity, you know, and Back to the Bible is the best job I've ever had, and I had the opportunity to see where Paul was in prison, and it was just a horrid, dark looking, pretty much hole in the ground. And what a tremendous place to let your light shine. And that's always been, if Paul can do it, I certainly can do the little things that I have to put up with, to choose ministry over misery.

N: Cara, what about you?

C: Well, it's exactly what Arnie said. It's a choice. So contentment is a choice and you've just got to be content in your circumstances and use them to better the circumstance, by witnessing through that. I mean, Paul wasn't a superhuman, he wasn't a super Christian. He was a guy who God gave this amazing mission to, but we have the same mission before us. So it's what we do with our mission, you know?

N: Yeah. I think this story is very applicable to all of us today, and we're all facing unique trials. And some of us are kind of in a weird sort of house arrest, like maybe Paul was, in principle, but

he leveraged it. And I think so can we today. Now, one of the things I would love to hear from you, and I know our listeners would be curious is, what are your everyday outreach activities? How are you leveraging the places God has put you in, to share the Gospel with those who are far from God?

C: Well, my daily do-ins are relational. So I usually frequent some of the same restaurants. I mean, once things open back up, we'll go back in there. I like to learn the names of the people who are working there, and I just nonchalantly just start weaseling my way in there, get that good Gospel going. That's it, you know, missionary work isn't always hanging out in the jungle. It's going to the local restaurant, or the barber, or whatever, and you just start creating relationships with people.

N: Well, and I think you nailed it. In fact, it's rarely going into the jungle, right? It's everyday opportunities right in your own backyard, and I think you said something else there that was so important. It takes time. You go to the same restaurant to build relationship with those people, the same store to build the relationship with those people. That way you're kind of preparing the soil for the seed of the Gospel. Is that right?

C: Yeah, that's exactly right. At a grocery store, wherever, I mean, we're people who like routine. Most people are frequenting the same places, and so you just keep building on those relationships.

N: What about you, Arnie?

A: I have to work at it more. I try to have a lifestyle, and I'm not saying lifestyle evangelism, where you just let your light shine and people are supposed to come to you. I'm more of an introvert, but we live on a horse ranch. We have an equestrian academy. It's my wife and daughter's ministry, and probably three fourths of the people are non-believers. It's been an excellent way to minister to people. And then the other thing, if you saw my office, I'm surrounded by 10 different computer screens. All of them tell me how people are doing inside of our discipleship app, goTandem. And I can see all around the world, and I know what needs to be done to help move people closer to Jesus today than they were yesterday. So even though I'm not out there, and kind of in isolation here, we still have people coming to our farm, and then I can see all around the world, where people are, and then doing the best I can to minister to those people that come into my life.

N: Right. And you know, I hate to break this to you. You're going to get a lot of email now from introverts, because you just took away their excuse not to do outreach, Arnie. I hope you know you're going to be inundated with communication, but you nailed it on the head. We are all called to do outreach. You know, your personality is one thing, and you've got to lean into that and that's okay. God made you that way. But there are opportunities around you, whether it's technological, or whether it's through a passion of yours, which is exactly what you've done and what you are doing.

For our family, we've tried to make our home a lighthouse in the community. We're in an established neighborhood where there's a lot of young families, and people know based on the time we spend outside in our front lawn, I mean we put our garden in the front lawn, not in the backyard intentionally. So that way in the summertime, and spring and fall, we would be out there gardening as people walked by. And what do they inevitably say? Hey, tell me about your garden. Or, Hey, it's looking really good, and what do I do? I put down the vegetables, or you

know, if I was actually weeding, I would stop weeding, but I don't weed. But I stop and I talk to them. That was by design. I'm taking a passion, gardening, and leveraging it for the Gospel. So God would simply say to all of us today, wherever you're at, whatever your passions are, don't treat them like they are sacred only for yourself. But use those rather, as God given opportunities to share the Gospel, over time, incrementally, and relationally, with the people God has put in your spheres of influence, right where He has you, in the areas of passion, and let God do the work.