

“Advancing The Gospel”

Philippians 1:12-26

October 11, 2020

Read Philippians 1:12-26

This is the Word of the LORD

Prayer of Invocation

“I’m OK.”

That is the gist of what Paul was saying to the Philippians in this passage. “I may be in prison and that never seems like a good thing; but I am OK. In fact, I am more than OK – God is using this as a good thing for the spread of the gospel.”

This letter was written twelve to fifteen years after Paul’s initial contact with Philippi – remember, we read Acts 16:11-40 last week which details that first visit – and they were having some growing pains. They knew Paul was in prison and sent help for him; even so, they had to be wondering both, “How is he doing?” *and* “Is this what we are facing?” Paul’s response was so much more than they could have anticipated, “Yes, I am OK – **and** – look at what God is doing with my hardship. Isn’t it great?!”

For a moment, imagine yourself in a prison cell. This was not like prison cells we have here in the United States. During Paul’s day if you were in prison, you were dependent on people outside the government system to provide you with food, clothing and essentials. There was no “rehabilitation” part of the prison ethos. Imprisonment was purely punitive and it was terrible so as to be a deterrent to bad behavior.

Now, imagine you are in that prison cell because of your faith. Let me stop here for a moment: **can you** imagine yourself in prison for this reason? Can you imagine a situation where you are confronted with the choice of saying, “Yes, I am a Christian” where you know the consequence is that you will go to jail; and, can you imagine in that circumstance choosing to accept the consequence?

In our day and age, there is a temptation to minimize the hardships of faith because it might scare off those who are considering Christ. In many instances evangelism has become a sales pitch for fire insurance – how can I make God give me a good life and how can I avoid hell? The answer pitched is, “If you believe in Jesus, you are guaranteed a life filled with blessing and will go to heaven when you die.” This is seed deliberately sown on rocky soil, because when hardships come – and they do come – those who have been sold on this cheap grace theology find their faith withers because it has no root. I do not wish hardship on anyone, but I think it is important to be up front and clear because Jesus was up front and clear about this. Jesus said this in John 15 and 16:

“If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you.

²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you, 'Servants are not greater than their master.' ***If they persecuted me, they will persecute you***; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. ²¹ ***But they will do all these things to you on account of my name***, because they do not know him who sent me.

"I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. ² They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. ³ And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me. ⁴ But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them."

Paul says the same thing in 2 Timothy:

"Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, ¹¹ my persecutions and suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹² Indeed, ***all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.***

"...proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. ³ ***For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires,*** ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. ⁵ As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully."

The notion of being persecuted or suffering for our faith seems foreign to us in the United States. We are proud of our religious freedom and the First Amendment. We have to work to not take for granted the freedom to worship as we choose. In other countries the possibility of jail or death is very real. Try being a part of a Christian church in China. Try being part of a Christian Church in North Korea. Try being a part of a Christian church in the Middle East. In any of these areas, just identifying yourself as a Christian may subject you to oppression, incarceration, if not death. It was not long ago that we were aghast at the videos of ISIS terrorists beheading or executing groups of men because the men had been identified as Christians. We have heard news of buses in Egypt attacked and the passengers killed because they are Christian.

Can you imagine?

Paul wrote to the Philippians, "I'm O.K."

The gospel is progressing (it does not matter how it is with me)

Now, let us be clear about what Paul was saying. Paul was letting the Philippians know he was OK because he could see how God was using his circumstances to spread the gospel. Paul was not saying his situation was comfortable *nor* was he saying he would have chosen incarceration for

himself. He was interpreting what he saw from his imprisonment – how his circumstances were advancing the gospel.

Compare Paul’s perspective with what we observe all around us. When we lived in Chula Vista, there was a season where I saw several cars with the bumper sticker “He who dies with the most toys wins.” It made me sad for the person who thought it was funny; sadder still for the person who believes it is true. The person who has died is dead; and how valuable in eternity are the things to which they devoted their time, energy and resources?

What about us? Once we get through the election season, we are coming up on the Christmas shopping season. Does anyone know how many days left until Christmas? 74. I only know because I went to xmasclock.com this morning to check. If your heart rate just went up, if you just thought about all the things you have to do, if you are stressing about what you *can* do in this pandemic year when everything is so much more difficult, you have an understanding of how our circumstances can overwhelm our larger over-riding purpose and call – that is, if we are not paying attention and just go with the flow. We have all seen the videos of store doors opening on Black Friday and people stampeding in to get whatever is the hot buy or deal. People spend so much energy, so much time, so much anxiety, all to make sure they don’t get shut out of the “hot” gifts this year; all to get to the point on Christmas morning where the kids ask, “Is that it?” and then they discover it is more fun to play with the boxes than the toys that came in the boxes. We can be overwhelmed by our circumstances if we are not paying attention or just go with the flow.

Paul measured and evaluated things – including his incarceration – based on how the gospel fared; not on how his immediate circumstances rated. Please do not read Philippians as a three or four-star Yelp review for the Roman jail in which he was housed. Instead, note how the harsh nature of his circumstances did not diminish the joy he had in Christ. He rejoiced his witness was a persuasive testimony to his jailers and was doubly pleased to think it could be an encouragement to others who were experiencing hard times. My point is that Paul’s example is worthy of reviewing; but it is by no means isolated and it is by no means limited to Paul’s experience in Biblical times. Harsh circumstances do not define us; the gospel does. We have seen these phenomena in this congregation alone:

- I think of Dave Brees, who stood here in front of the communion table and sang his Zephyr Point song gleefully even as his body was failing him. His joy in the Lord was evident in his very soul. It radiated from deep within him.
- I think of Hazel Woodgate. I only knew Hazel for about six or seven months after we arrived here. She was struggling with the loss of her eyesight, she was struggling with her back, and she was struggling with her limited abilities to get around. All of that is true; however, I never – not once, not even at the very end – got the impression that her physical troubles had defeated her. Instead my overarching experience was that she was a victorious woman of substance. Hazel knew the staff and the residents of Sierra Place. She knew – and had talked with – those who were ill, those who were lonely, those who were despairing, and those who were just getting by. She encouraged others to take part in the balloon volleyball, to come to meals, and – most important – to let people know about communion on first Sundays of the month.

These are just two of the many who make up the “Great Cloud of Witnesses” in the life of this congregation.

Their examples give us courage. My spirit was lifted just thinking about these two. I get that same lift when I think of some of you whom I still see living courageously and faithfully. I do not want to embarrass anyone, so I am not going to name names. However, if we were to do a poll of those who are here, in the Family Life Center, or watching at home, it would be startling and wonderful to hear the answers to the question: whose life of faith through hard times has encouraged you? Who has inspired your walk with Jesus? Who has been that example you want to follow? We see through the lives of people we know the steps worthy of admiration, worthy of imitation. They did it; so can we.

But know this, too: no one comes to this place at the start. Paul, Dave Brees, and Hazel Woodgate became those powerful witnesses because of – and not, despite – the difficult circumstances through lifetimes of faithful dedication to growing in Christ. Through the grace that comes by faith, they learned to trust in the little things so they could trust in the big things. They were surrounded by people who loved them and cared for them with the love of Christ – as are we. We will all come to times of trials in our lives – health, financial, relationships, and even death – and we are encouraged by the examples we have seen and known: harsh circumstances do not define us; the hope of the Gospel does.

Opponents Proclaiming Christ: Good!

Turning his attention, Paul then took a moment to relieve some anxiety the Philippians were having. Somewhere, somehow, the news got to Paul that there were other folks in Philippi who were talking him down. They were claiming to be better preachers than he was, better Christians than he was, and some were being bold in ministry to spite him – that is, to make Paul jealous because he was in prison. The Philippians seemed to think that the opponents’ actions would make Paul angry or hurt. They were concerned for him.

Paul’s response to the Philippians was to virtually shake his head at his opponents’ futility. He literally could not have cared less. His opponents totally misunderstood what was important to him. His goal was not to gain esteem in the eyes of others for the sake of his own glory. His purpose was to share the gospel at every turn. Although they were preaching to spite him, he rejoiced. He rejoiced because they were preaching where he could not be present. Instead of thwarting him and making him feel bad, he rejoiced that they were fulfilling his mission for him. What they intended for evil, God intended for good.

I hope I have the same attitude. I try to have Paul’s attitude.

The truth is I am not aware of anyone who knows enough or worries about me enough to be an opponent. I would like to think that someone would consider me successful enough to want to try to knock me down a few pegs; however, I am not sure I have risen in the public awareness for that to be a concern.

However. However, I wonder sometimes if I am not the guy who is doing the comparing. Preachers are no different than anyone else; we want people to think we are the best preacher. When someone else draws big crowds we are inclined to be dismissive, like, “Well, anyone can get numbers by pandering to what people *want* to hear; but me, well, I am preaching *the Gospel...*”

I notice this most in myself when people come back from visiting relatives or go to a special service at another congregation; they want to tell me how great was the pastor. I find myself working – working! – to be happy that there is someone else doing a good job.

In more recent years I have experienced some growth in this area. I celebrate – honestly, I do – the success and fruitfulness of the ministries of the other congregations in our area. It has taken some time and some painful release of immaturity on my part, but I have come to realize their ministries are different than what we do. They can be every bit as Christian and gospel-based as we are. At the same time, their success does not in any way diminish the fruit of faithfulness and the blessing we have seen from God in the midst of this congregation. Where others are proclaiming Jesus, I rejoice.

My Deliverance Is At Hand

Finally today, Paul transitioned back to his own situation. He knew his current circumstances were not permanent: he anticipated deliverance. “I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this [my imprisonment] will turn out for my deliverance.”

His deliverance could come either by release from prison or by death. Those seem like to very different outcomes; yet Paul addressed them as if they were to be equally prized. He did not view his role or approach differently if he were to be released from prison or to die in prison.

How are you looking forward to the days ahead? How do you approach the prospect of death? Are you like Paul, “If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.”

Friends, this is what Paul was saying: the kingdom of God that Christ proclaimed and initiated is eternal. Eternity includes now. So, he was saying, “...follow my example and live in eternity now. If that means proclaiming Christ in word and deed in the flesh because you are here, rejoice and do that. If that means experiencing death and seeing Christ face-to-face, rejoice and do that.” Live each moment in the big picture. You do not need to be so heavenly-minded that you are no earthly-good; you can be earthly good as you live into the heavenly reality of the coming kingdom.

Conclusion

All of this brings us back to where we started. Paul answered the Philippians’ inquiry, “How are you?” with “I’m ok.” If I were to ask each one of you how things are going (and I pressed you for something more reflective than “fine” or “busy” or “ok”), you would probably get around to talking about the things challenging you. It is inevitable in this pandemic where our routines have been disrupted, we have been prevented from seeing the people we love and cannot do the things we

have enjoyed. Our lives are hard right now. Whether we are struggling with isolation, health, finances, trying to do the best for our families, trying to deal with broken or difficult relationships, we can get lost in the problems and miss the big picture. What is the chief end of humankind? To glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Paul encouraged the Philippians to see the big picture. Let me leave you with this old illustration: in Europe years ago, the bishop went to inspect a construction site. He stopped and asked each tradesman what he was doing. "Framing the windows," said one; "Building the west wall," said another. Finally, he came to a man who was pushing a wheelbarrow of materials to others; "and what are you doing?" The man replied, "I am helping to build a cathedral for the glory of God!"

See the big picture. Harsh or difficult circumstances do not define us. Live to advance the gospel. Take steps today that will bear fruit in the tomorrows ahead. Rejoice, because you know that with the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for your deliverance.

Amen.

Prayer

Questions:

1. How are you using your circumstances to spread the gospel?
2. What did Paul mean by, "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain." Does that resonate with you – if so, how? If not, what is the stumbling block or hesitation?
3. Has the pandemic and the restrictions that have kept us from coming together lent new meaning to Paul's longing, "so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again?" Have you realized or remembered what a blessing it is to gather together to worship and praise? Make a list of all the things and all the people you have missed – then spend some time in prayer giving God thanks for your recognizing those blessings.