

The Unchained Gospel **Philippians 1:12-26**

So the Philippians, these Christians living in Philippi who Paul's is writing to, have heard that Paul's in trouble. They know he's in prison in Rome, they know he's most likely chained up, and despite all the difficulties of life that they face, they're worried about him. And Paul knows that. But he doesn't want them to be worried on his account, instead he wants them, remarkably, to share in his joy.

As one commentator says, it's as if he holds his chains up, and encourages them and us to look through the links, and let them become the lens through which we see life and death and suffering. And he opens this next block of the letter by writing in v12 about the 'advance of the gospel' and he finishes it in v25 by talking about their 'progress [which is exactly the same word as advance] and joy in the faith'. And in between that sandwich, he wants us to understand how God uses both the circumstances and the conflicts of life to see the gospel and our faith advance and and grow.

We're going to look at 4 things: difficult circumstances, difficult people, a certain future and an example to follow.

Difficult Circumstances

Verse 12: 'I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.' Now, what has happened to him? Because the Philippians have clearly seen what's happened to him, and think it's bad, and he wants to show them that isn't the case. So what has happened to him?

Well, it all began when Paul went to Jerusalem, probably taking a financial gift for the struggling church there. He bent over backwards not to cause offence to the Jewish believers, because he knew that he'd become this controversial figure. But people made false accusations against him, he ended up being nearly lynched by a mob, he was held prisoner on trumped up charges; he could have been released if it wasn't for some self-serving officials and some rank political opportunism; and he ended up having to appeal to Caesar, for his case to be transferred to Rome, to get justice, but in transit he nearly lost his life in a shipwreck. And now, here he is in prison in Rome. Chained like a criminal.

So the Philippians have every right to think that's bad, don't they? Because it is bad. If that was you and me: false accusations, physical violence, corrupt officials, in jail, we'd be feeling pretty sore, and understandably so. And yet, Paul doesn't see it that way. There's no hint of bitterness or resentment, whilst he's a captive he's not *being* held captive by his past or his present, there's no self-pity.

In fact he sees his present circumstances as a God-ordained calling: v16: 'I am put here for the defense of the gospel.' 'This prison, these chains, these past and present difficulties that brought me here, this is exactly where God wants me. This is the task, the post he has assigned to me.' So, far from Paul feeling he warranted others' pity, he knows that God has not abandoned him, that he is not at the mercy of events, or of the enemy. In the midst of all these difficulties Paul says, 'I am right in the centre of God's will. This is where he wants me. This is God's doing.'

And yet, it's not just God's doing, it's also His strategy. Because you could think wrongly about suffering and difficult circumstances in two ways. Firstly, you could think that there just isn't any point to it. You could think that God makes you go through hardship and trials, just for the sake of it, with no point, no outcome in sight. Or you could think that this suffering or these difficulties are somehow blocking and hindering God's purposes and blessing and will for your life: that if you can just get rid of these difficulties, everything will come right again. But Paul lets the Philippians know that what on the outside seems bad, and injustice is always bad, God is using to advance his purposes. And Paul might be in chains, but the gospel isn't.

In fact it's advancing, and advancing in two ways.

Firstly, it's advancing throughout the Praetorium, v13: 'It has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.' So, the very men who were supposed to guard Paul, and protect the emperor, were being influenced by the gospel. The attacks back in Jerusalem that had been meant to silence the gospel, and put it in chains, had been turned on their heads and used to see the gospel spread right at the centre of the Empire. And God was doing that through Paul's sufferings. He uses the fact that Paul is chained to these men, under their guard, to set the fire of the good news of Jesus in the guard-house itself.

But that required Paul to talk, didn't it? The guards know that Paul is there for Jesus. He's told them. And yet, there is this temptation that when life is hard, we stop talking, we stop talking to ourselves, and we stop telling others, that we are here for Jesus, that He has a purpose in our trials, and we're trusting Him to work this for good. And with the threat of execution hanging over him, it would have been easy for Paul to think that now would be a very good time to shut-up. But he doesn't. Paul sees his sufferings, this place that God has brought him to, as a God-given opportunity to tell others.

Now don't get me wrong. This talking in the midst of suffering is not some kind of breezy optimism, that puts on a plastic smile, and refuses to acknowledge the pain and the trial. Paul feels the chafe of the chains. He feels the trouble others have brought on him, he senses the tension over his sentence. Paul's not on holiday here in Rome. Those are very real for Paul. So this is not some fake 'suffering doesn't touch me.'

And, sometimes, in the face of suffering, frankly silence is the right response, and you weep with those who weep, and mourn with those who mourn. But there's also a time to talk: to yourself and to others. And in the face of all that has and is happening to him, Paul can say, to himself, and to the Philippians, and to his captors. "I'm here for Christ. This is where He wants me."

But the gospel's advancing in another way as well, because Paul's imprisonment, and seeing what God is doing through it, has given courage to others to begin to talk about Jesus, and these are just every day Christians in Rome. V14: 'And most

of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.'

So Paul's circumstances could have intimidated others into silence, but because of the way he responds to his weakness and vulnerability, they also become bold. Paul says they became confident in the Lord. They saw that if God could work through Paul's trials and difficulties, God could work through theirs. That if God could use a chained Paul, he could use a free 'them'. They saw that this advance of the gospel amongst the guard had nothing to do with Paul being some kind of super-apostle, and all to do with God using us where we are, in all our weakness, to glorify Jesus. And that emboldened them.

And it should encourage us as well. Because God has this strange way of working through our weaknesses, doesn't he? God is strangely uninterested in our strength, or influence or flashy gimmicks. Instead it's in our weakness that He is strong. And He lights a fire for the gospel in Rome through a man who's been side-lined and chained to a wall. And He works through things, difficult circumstances, that you and I would be tempted to think: He could never use that; no good can come from this, stuff you and I would reject and turn away from.

And yet, that's the gospel, isn't it? That God uses the injustice of Jesus' trial and crucifixion – the unjust work of wicked men – to bring about redemption and salvation for you and me. And the gospel doesn't just advance *in spite* of difficult circumstances, but because of them: the weakness and suffering of the cross of Jesus is the Gospel, in all its glorious, redeeming power and strength. And the difficulties and trials you go through, the problems of marriages, and families, of workplace and health, these are God given moments, even those that others mean for your harm, where God places us in life, to live out and speak out that Christ is better than freedom, better than health, better than wealth.

But whilst Paul's example has encouraged others, not everyone's talking about Jesus from pure motives!

Difficult People

You see, it's not just Paul's circumstances that present him with difficulties, certain people are proving a pain in the derrière. And don't you know how that feels. Life is hard enough, you're facing this situation, these circumstances, which are weighing on you, and you've got someone, or this group of people, who are just making your life a misery. And Paul describes those he's facing. Verses 15-17: They 'preach Christ from envy and rivalry... [they] proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.'

So whoever these guys were, they were preaching about Jesus in Rome, but doing it in such a way that dissed Paul, that undermined him, that cast him in the worst possible light. And either by turning the authorities further against Paul, or causing local Christians to withdraw support from him, they were trying, and to some degree succeeding, to increase Paul's trouble and affliction in prison. And that's really nice, isn't it!

And you might think, 'yes, but why would someone do that? And how can you preach Christ from envy and rivalry and selfish ambition?' And over the years I've pondered exactly that question. How can you preach about the One who emptied himself and came as a nobody, and made himself of no reputation, and you do that to try and make yourself a somebody and get a reputation? Well, I'm ashamed to say that a couple of years ago I came to the answer to that by looking into my own heart. You see, when you want *your* church to grow, when you want revival to come, provided it's in *your* church and not the guy's down the road, when you want things to look good so you look good, when you want God to get *almost* all the glory, then you're proclaiming Christ out of selfish ambition.

And just maybe there are some guys there in Rome who fancy themselves just a bit, and their noses have been put out of joint by this apostle pitching up and getting some local attention, and they begin to make the odd remark, and in their preaching they start putting him down. And tragically, we've all seen it happen: this church or this theological stream scores cheap points off that one, or this factions or that group within a church advances their agenda against that one.

But you know what's interesting about these folks making life difficult for Paul? We really haven't got a clue who they were. And the reason we haven't got a clue is that Paul doesn't tell us. He's not dissing them in return. Because all that matters to him is that Jesus is being preached. V18: 'What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.' It doesn't matter to Paul if Paul's name is being trashed, provided Jesus' name is being exalted. And he can see that even through their dodgy motives, God is pushing the gospel forward, so all the time Jesus is getting more airtime, Paul's rejoicing.

Now, that is very different from when Paul sees the gospel being compromised, like in Galatians, because there Paul says he wishes the false teachers would go the whole way and emasculate themselves, and if you don't know what that means you can look it up in a dictionary, but its painful!

But here, the gospel isn't being compromised. In fact, Christ is being proclaimed, and so Paul rejoices, even in the face of people trying to make life difficult for him, because he knows that God's agenda is pushing forward, and He's using even their dodgy motives and glory hunting to do it.

Now the question is, how can Paul live like this? How can he face what he faces: difficult circumstances, difficult people and see what God is really doing through it all, in a way that causes him to rejoice and respond graciously to opposition?

A Certain Future

And the answer is that Paul sees all of life through this gospel lens, and that means that while some things that lie ahead are uncertain, he knows other things about the future with absolute certainty.

Firstly, he knows that **help is coming**. V18-19: 'Yes and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.'

'This'. This present suffering. This imprisonment. This personal attack by others. God is going to turn all 'this' for my good. Great. But how? 'Through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.'

Now I don't want to bore you with Greek grammar, but those two things: 'your prayers' and 'the help of the Holy Spirit' share one definite article, they're like a truck and trailer: the help of the Spirit comes to Paul as a result of these Philippians praying for him. The way God supplies all that Paul needs to face what he faces, and turn it for good, is through the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit comes in greater measure in response to their prayers: Paul knows that. He's certain of that. And so he knows that God will continue to work all this for good, because help is coming through their prayers.

So church, if you didn't know it already, we need one another. God hasn't arranged it so that a man like Paul can just live in glorious isolation, dependent on nothing and no-one. He's arranged it so an apostle needs the prayers of a people, normal, every day, struggling, poverty-stricken people in Philippi. None of us, not Paul, not me, not you, are sufficient in our own strength. We need the help of the Holy Spirit, and He comes as we pray for one another. So – don't just attend on a Sunday. Share life together. Pray for one another. And the best way to do that is by getting into a home group.

But the second thing Paul knows, and affects how he sees life now, is that whatever happens, whether he lives or dies, **Christ will be magnified**.

Listen again to what he says in v19-20: 'this *will* turn out for my deliverance... Christ *will* be honoured [magnified] in my body, whether by life or by death.' Now hang on a minute. How can this turn out for Paul's deliverance if the sentence goes against him, and he gets the chop. And if he does get executed, how does Jesus get honoured and magnified through that? Well, Paul's been really clever and he's used a word for deliverance that also means salvation. So when he says, this will turn out for my deliverance, he could mean 'my release from prison... but that might happen by me being carried out in a coffin, and if it does, it has turned out for my eternal salvation.' So, however things work out Paul knows he gets delivered.

You see, Paul faces two judgment courts, this one in Rome and the Judgement seat of God. And Paul knows that of those two, there's only one whose opinion really matters. And for Paul, victory was not dependent on his circumstances improving or on him being acquitted, or on him escaping with his life. Victory was knowing that even if this earthly court finds him guilty and condemns him, before God he will be declared not guilty.

And it's Jesus who has secured that not guilty verdict for Paul. So, if Paul gets acquitted here in Rome, and gets to keep on preaching the good news of Jesus:

Jesus gets honoured, He gets magnified. But if he ends up executed, and then declared righteous and vindicated before God, it will all be because of Jesus, and His death and resurrection. So whether he lives or dies, Paul knows that Jesus is going to get all the glory. And that means that even when the future's uncertain, Paul can face it with joy and certainty.

And the same is true for us. You see, when you know that Christ loves you so much that he gave his life for you, so that one day, when your life is over, you can stand as a free man or woman before the eternal law court, and hear your heavenly Father welcome you home, all because of Jesus, then you'll share Paul's longing that Christ be exalted: in the difficult times as well as the joyful ones, in death as well as in life. And you'll know that in all these circumstances this God who loves you is working them for your good and for Jesus' glory.

But the third reason Paul can face this uncertain future with certainty and poise, is because he knows that **Christ is better than life**. Verse 21: 'For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.'

Now, in our culture we don't think of death as gain do we? Judging by the explosion of anti-wrinkle cream and plastic surgery and hair dyes and fitness programs, far from seeing death as gain, we want to try and hang on to youth for as long as possible. We want to stave off death to the very last minute, we want to resist it until the battle is hopeless. And that's because we think this life is it, and its treasures are it. I read a commentator this week who said he'd seen a bumper sticker on the back of one of these huge camper vans that said, 'He who dies with the most toys wins.' And that's the outlook of our age isn't it? It's this life that matters, there isn't another one, or if there is, it's not going to amount to much, so find your treasure here.

The problem is that the treasures of this world ultimately don't satisfy, do they? They say they will, and they seem to, at least to start with, but then it wanes. We pursue personal comfort, nice house, family, money, academic prestige, promotion because we think these will give us what we want. And they do, to begin with, but then it fades and we feel that need for the next thing. But that longing for satisfaction, and the failure of this stuff to fill it, tells you that somewhere there are real riches that will satisfy, somewhere there is a drink that will quench our thirst, and these aren't it.

And Paul can face what he faces with poise and that inner certainty, and he can say that death would be gain for him, because he's found the treasure that satisfies, and it's Christ. And our attitudes and responses to these difficult circumstances and difficult people we face in life, can be transformed when we know, like Paul knew, that all this other stuff, money, or position, or what others think of us, are not the real treasure, that this isn't life. Christ is life and death is gain.

But I want to close out by getting you to think about something – just briefly. Just ask yourself, why does Paul spend the last few verses of this passage kicking around this conflict he's feeling as to what would be better, him dying or him

staying? Because he clearly feels that conflict, doesn't he? v23, 'I am hard pressed between the two.' And it's clear which one he'd rather go for, v23 again, 'My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.' And yet he ends up convinced it would be best for him to carry on in this life, rather than die, because that would mean more fruitful work for him: v25: 'Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith.'

But why does he bother writing all that out? Why let it all hang out like that: why not just say, 'look guys, as bad as things are, I'm convinced I'm going to get out, which will be good for you'?

An Example to Follow

And the reason is that this desire to depart and inherit the real treasure doesn't lead to a kind of dreamy-headed uselessness, or self-absorbed selfishness. Paul sees the need of these Philippians, and he knows the way of Christ means putting the needs of others before your own, of doing what's of advantage to them, rather than pursuing your own agenda. And he knows that, because that's what Christ did at the cross, and that's what the gospel is all about.

But he wants these Philippians to see it too. You see, as we saw last week, their unity in Philippi is under strain, they've got some personal conflicts, and cracks are beginning to show. And when that starts it can rapidly snowball, as people push their own agenda, and want their own way.

And so Paul wants them to see his own struggle, as he weighs what he wants with what's in their best interests, and how he chooses the path of putting their interests ahead of his interests, their needs ahead of his desires. And he can do that with them; and you and I can do that with each other, with your wife or husband, or Christian brothers and sisters, even the ones you disagree with, when Jesus is your ultimate treasure, and when you know that he so loved you that he put your interest first, and served you, and took the lower place for you, even when you disagreed with him.