



Philippians 1.12-18: Advancing the Gospel

Paul's Letter to the Philippians

Jason Procopio

We're currently making our way through Paul's letter to the Philippians. Last week we saw Paul thanking God for the work that he has done in the people of the church in Philippi, for their participation in his work for the gospel. We see him praying that God might help their love to abound more and more along with their knowledge of him, that they might be like him.

I don't know if you've noticed yet, but the tone of this letter is one of intense joy, and that tone is surprising, given that Paul is in prison. He's suffering for the gospel; he can't participate in the work anymore...and yet he is just brimming with joy over what God's doing. But he goes even further than merely talking *about* his imprisonment or sharing the news of his joy. In this letter Paul is explaining *why* he is acting the way he is; he's getting at the heart of his own motivation, clearly with the hopes that the Philippians to whom he is writing will not only emulate his bravery, but that they might also share his gospel motivations.

Essentially the message of today's text is that the gospel is far more important and joy-producing than personal comfort or security, and that this fact should push us to speak the Word of God without fear, like Paul, and rejoice in Christ's being proclaimed, like Paul.

1) Speak the Word Without Fear (v. 12-14).

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

So there are several questions that immediately arrive when you're reading this text for the first time. It's clear to see that he's in prison, and that he's in prison for preaching the gospel. Which on the surface looks like bad news. Paul was not the first apostle to start preaching about Jesus, but he was definitely the most efficient missionary to the Gentile believers of the Roman world. At the end of his ministry Jesus told his apostles to *go and make disciples of all nations*—Paul was *doing that*. He was leading the charge into places where Christ wasn't yet known.

And now he was in prison, locked up for preaching this gospel. What happens when a movement's leader is removed? All too often, the movement comes to a halt, or at least it is profoundly hindered in its work. So on the surface, it could be feared that this is what will happen: the Romans are hoping that by putting Paul in prison, and once they deal with the other pesky apostles, Christianity will die out.

But Paul says that's not what's happening. What does he say? V. 12: *I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to ADVANCE the gospel.* How is that possible? He explains how in v. 13: *...so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my*

imprisonment is for Christ. In other words, everyone who knows about Paul knows he's in prison, but they also know *why* he's in prison: he's there *for Christ*. Even the imperial guard—more than likely the special guard of the emperor in Rome—knows why he's been put there. And Paul sees that as cause for celebration.

Why? Because when people are used to hearing one thing, a standard of truth or a worldview, and then someone comes on the scene with a radically different standard, what inevitably happens? *People talk about what that guy is saying*. Inevitably, if someone shows up with a new worldview, people will talk about it. Now this could sound like bad news for Christianity: someone shows up saying everything we knew was wrong, and people talk about that guy because he sounds crazy. But remember what we know: remember what we saw with Lydia in Acts 16. What is the means by which the Holy Spirit transforms our hearts to believe the truth? *The gospel!* And so now that Paul is in prison, everyone is talking amongst themselves about *the gospel!* “This guy is saying there's a new emperor, a new king—who is in fact very old, who in fact created the world. And he's saying this new king is a Jewish carpenter from Nazareth named Jesus; he's saying that this Jesus is actually *the Son of God*, that he ministered for three years, then was crucified as a common criminal, and then *was raised from the dead*. He's saying that for anyone who turns to this Jesus in faith and repents of their sins, his death will be attributed to them, so they will no longer be under condemnation from God.”

Essentially, Paul's imprisonment is making people talk about the gospel, and Paul sees that as good news: ¹² *I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel*. And that's not the only way it has done so. Look at v. 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*. Now it took a while for this verse to make sense to me when I first read it, because we initially think, If I saw someone being put in jail for talking about something, I'd probably want to keep quiet about it. Seeing someone persecuted for doing something makes us *afraid* of doing that thing, not *more bold* to do it. Right?

If we think about it for a minute, it makes perfect sense. Look at *The Lord of the Rings*. (I realize I'm taking a calculated risk by referencing *The Lord of the Rings*; I'm hoping that even those of you who aren't fans of the books or films—of which there are more than a few here, to my dismay—will still be able to understand what I'm trying to illustrate.) There is a reason why these books written by J. R. R. Tolkien, and Peter Jackson's films, are so popular. It's not just a matter of the fantastic worlds and Tolkien's (and Jackson's) painstaking attention to detail. They resonate with us because, essentially, they are the story of little people who take on much more than they can handle for a greater good. Other stories do this to a certain extent, but most of them don't resonate as deeply as *The Lord of the Rings*, because here the main characters are hobbits, actual little people (about three feet tall) whose only real talents are being able to walk really quietly and keep beautiful gardens. And yet these little people take on the greatest evil in their fictional world.

Why do these stories and these characters resonate so deeply with us? These little people resonate with us because *we* feel little, and when we see little people displaying extraordinary bravery, that makes us feel

brave. These characters who behave in admirable and counterintuitive ways resonate with us because we want to be like them, and they make us feel like we *could*.

Essentially, that's what's happening here. People have been saved by the gospel of Jesus Christ, they are rejoicing in their salvation, and they are sharing it with others: the church is growing. Then the poster boy for Christianity gets thrown in prison for preaching the gospel, and you can imagine there being a pause—*So...do we keep going, or...?* But then they hear rumors, people talking about how Paul is in prison for Christ, and they can see that God is in fact at work *in* Paul's imprisonment, not just in spite of it... They see Paul's joyful willingness to suffer for the gospel, and God uses his joy in suffering to spur them on—"You see? Jesus is better than comfort. Jesus is better than security. Everything I'm going through is *worth it!*" So they go out, and they are even more bold in the Lord to preach the gospel without fear.

Paul is in prison for speaking the Word without fear. And his joy and boldness is the means God uses to inspire joy and boldness in others. His imprisonment is actually serving the gospel.

2) Rejoice in the gospel proclaimed (v. 15-18)

¹⁵ *Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will.* ¹⁶ *The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.* ¹⁷ *The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.* ¹⁸ *What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.*

Now Paul lifts the veil on something interesting that's going on. His imprisonment is causing the gospel to move forward and advance—and some of the people he just mentioned are doing it because they love the gospel and they love Paul: their support is a kind of cry of solidarity to their brother in prison, an encouragement that his work has not been in vain, and will continue. ¹⁵ *Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will.* ¹⁶ *The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.*

But there are others who are preaching, yes, but not for the same reasons. V. 17: ¹⁷ *The former* [those who preach Christ from envy and rivalry, v. 15] *proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.* So some people are preaching to hurt him. This seems counterintuitive, so let's look at what's going on here. Who are these people who are preaching, and why would that be a problem for Paul?

It's hard to say: commentators are divided. Paul could be talking about what I mentioned earlier: ordinary Roman pagans who have heard why he's in prison and who are talking trash about the gospel. Some people have also said that they're the "Judaizers" he mentions in chapter 3—people teaching a kind of hybrid of Judaism and Christianity. But in both cases, it's hard to see how Paul would rejoice in an unclear proclamation of the gospel he held so dear (he says in v. 18 that they are indeed *proclaiming Christ*, something he'd never say if the gospel being preached wasn't the true gospel). More than likely then, he's probably talking about other Christians who are preaching the gospel faithfully (i.e. they're

getting the message right), but who are personally at odds with Paul. As we know (unfortunately), it is possible for someone to know the gospel well and preach it faithfully, but still live in sin.

Whatever the case may be, their motivation was not love, but a desire to harm Paul. They're out preaching the gospel, and people are coming to Christ through their preaching, and all the while, Paul himself is in chains, having to watch his opponents get credit for the work. But here's the thing that's so wonderful about the apostle Paul (and what must have been so frustrating for his opponents): *he doesn't care about getting any credit*. He's not in this for himself! He's in it for *Jesus*, and if God chooses to use these other morons to spread the gospel and leave him in prison...well, as long as the gospel's being spread, Paul's happy! Look at v. 18: ¹⁸ *What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.*

This is *so unlike* how most of us would react! If this happened to us, most of us would be *furiously*! Think about it: this is something he has suffered for, something he has firmly invested himself in...and he gets locked away while other people are out doing the work that he lives for? "Well...is Christ being proclaimed? Yes? Fantastic! That's such wonderful news!" What an example for us!

Think about what that means: this is what the Christian life should look like. Paul is so entranced by the gospel, so in love with the message of Christ and who he is and what he has done for him, that *everything*—suffering, pain, success, comfort, isolation, failure—ALL of it is eclipsed by the gospel. He so loves Jesus that he is willing to lose everything—*happily* willing to lose everything!—as long as the gospel keeps moving forward.

3) What Is It About the Gospel?

Now at this point we have to ask ourselves a question. What about the gospel is so wonderful that it could produce such a reaction? What makes those who have received the gospel so desperately want to share it and see it spread? You can see that Paul's motivation is not one of fear of judgment or reprisal, but of *joy*—he *rejoices* in the gospel proclaimed. So what is it about the gospel that makes this happen?

The gospel is the good news of God. It is the news of who God is and what God did and what God *continues* to do. It is the story of God's *power*: it tells of the wise creator God who is sovereign over his creation. He knew exactly what would happen before creating the world; he knew man would choose to rebel. So before he created the world he planned to *redeem* man from that fallenness. The gospel is the story of God's *faithfulness*: he made promises to sinful men and women, and he fulfilled all of those Old Testament promises by sending Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, to live a perfect life, and to take our sins on himself, and to be punished in our place for our sins, and to give us his perfect righteousness. It is the story of God's *generosity*: how God works in us to produce faith, and promises to reward us *for the faith he has given us*. And it is the story of God's *reign*: his victorious Son took his place on the throne and has promised that through him he will unite all things to himself and reign forever with us in the new heavens and the new earth.

You see, the good news of the gospel is not primarily, “If you put your faith in Christ, you will go to heaven.” That is a glorious detail, but it is just a detail: it is the icing on the cake. The gospel is first and foremost the good news of *God himself*. Isaiah 52.7 says, *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news [= gospel], who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, “YOUR GOD REIGNS.”*

Remember the question: What makes those who have received the gospel so desperately want to share it and see it spread? Those who have received the gospel love the gospel because it is *by* the gospel that they get to know God *himself*. And they are so enamored with what they see of him there that they want to keep seeing *more* of him.

We have a lot of missionaries or future missionaries in our church—people who are in France to learn French in order to go do gospel ministry in other French-speaking countries. I know there’s been a lot of talk in Christian circles over the years, people saying things like, “We’re all missionaries in our towns.” I get what they’re trying to say—and it’s true in the sense that the mission of all Christians is to make disciples—but it’s a very misleading statement. When we say “missionaries”, we mean people who leave their homes, who go (most often) to foreign countries, and who share the gospel where Christ doesn’t yet have a witness. That’s a very different thing—we can’t say we’re all “missionaries” in the real sense of the word. Chances are slim that we’ll be persecuted or killed for being Christians, whereas for them, depending on where they go, those chances increase considerably.

I don’t want to set our missionaries on too high a pedestal—please don’t idolize them, they’re just people like us—but their presence here should tip us off to something we all need to know in the same way. Spend time with them and ask them what motivates them to leave their homes, leave their families, come to a foreign country and learn a foreign language, and invariably their motivation will be an intense love for Jesus and a burning desire to share the gospel that makes Jesus known. No other motivation makes *sense* to do that kind of work. It’s an *insane thing* to uproot your entire life and risk persecution and death to *proclaim a message*.

Why am I talking about this? Firstly, because this is exactly what we see Paul doing, so we have a modern-day example of what that looks like. But more importantly, we have an important opportunity in Église Connexion. It isn’t in every church that Christians have the opportunity to share community with such a large number of people who are doing this kind of work. I’m speaking to those of us who are planning on living in France for the rest of our lives: we need to spend time with these folks, and to let what they are doing rub off on us. It’s not a bad thing that we’re not all missionaries—we *need* people who stay—but danger for those of us who stay behind is that in our comfort, we remain content with much less. While we may not all do the same work, we should all share the same motivation. And that motivation is knowing that if we are his, we are his. All we are. Every day, every act. Every choice. Every job. Every move. If he calls us to go, we go, and not begrudgingly, but *gladly*, because when we share the gospel, we have the opportunity to enjoy God for the first time as it were, all over again.

Paul loves Jesus so much that he wants to talk about him all the time. And he loves Jesus because knowing him means seeing the ultimate beauty, experiencing the ultimate glory, in the entire universe. It's a no-brainer: when you see something that beautiful, all you want to do is to keep seeing it. Paul is so motivated by the gospel that he gives his life; is ready to be imprisoned; and is even happy when he isn't the one who gets to do the work, as long as it gets done.

4) Conclusion

So brothers and sisters, be bold. Preach the word without fear. Even that which seems like failure, in the hands of God, becomes a staggering success. God's will is that the earth would be filled with the knowledge of his glory as the waters cover the seas (Habakkuk 2.14), and this *will happen*. We have nothing to fear.

Brothers and sisters, rejoice to see the gospel proclaimed. Talk about Jesus with others. Rejoice when you hear of others sharing the gospel faithfully—no matter where there from, or what denomination. Where the gospel is proclaimed, we get to see God at work. Rejoice that you are free to *do* it, and should you be one day hindered from doing it, rejoice in the knowledge that God cannot be hindered, and the gospel will go forward.

And if you don't know Christ today, I pray that the testimony of the apostle Paul rocks you to your core. I pray that his story stirs up in you a desire to love something so much that you'd be willing to give up everything for it, and be glad to do it. I pray that the Holy Spirit allows you to see that the *only thing* worth that kind of devotion is Jesus Christ himself. I pray that you might come to him, and see his glory in the message of the gospel, and rejoice in that glory forever.