

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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The Freedom of the Gospel

Philippians 1:12-26

Last Sunday I began a series of sermons on Paul's letter to the Philippians. As we journey through the next several weeks toward the end of August and the conclusion of my ministry as your pastor, we'll explore the relationship between Paul and the community of Christians in Philippi, listening especially for how God is speaking to us, individually and together, during the beginning of this season of transition in our congregation's life.

We began with 1:1-11, where Paul greets the believers in Philippi and gives thanks for them, especially for what he calls their "partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (v. 5). Paul looks back across his relationship with this congregation, with confidence that God, whose grace began to work among them, will complete his saving work at the day of Christ's coming. What God started, God will finish. His faithfulness is the foundation of their life together in Christ.

Paul not only looks back, but also gives attention to the present, where he continues to experience a great affection for and devotion to this community of believers. His relationship with them is characterized by joy, a mood and theme that we hear at numerous points in this letter. Then, as Paul contemplates the future, he reminds the Philippians that he's praying for them, that they'll grow in love and be able to discern what's good and what's most important, such that right living multiplies among them. So in the opening section of Paul's letter, we hear a word reassuring us of God's faithfulness at all times, including the upcoming season of change here in our church. Because of God's grace at work in us, through the gospel, we have a past, a present, and a future grounded in God's presence and promises.

Let's pick up from there with today's text, 1:12-26. After greeting the Philippians, giving thanks for them, and promising them his prayers, Paul begins touching on his own circumstances, with the accent on how his situation has actually contributed to the advancement of the gospel. Recall that Paul is in prison because of his devotion to Christ and to the propagation of the gospel. He describes himself as being "in chains for Christ" (v. 13). We don't know exactly where he was incarcerated. Some say Rome, others say Ephesus. What matters most is that Paul has been detained because he proclaims a message that undermines loyalty to the emperor.

People of that day and time were accustomed to the "gospel" of Caesar—the good news that a new emperor was on the throne, bringing peace and justice to the world. Now, Paul and these other followers of Christ have appeared, announcing that though Caesar may be acclaimed as "lord," to them only Jesus is Lord. And that includes his Lordship over Caesar. What's more, these Christians believe they belong to a different commonwealth. They're citizens of a different dominion where the crucified and risen Jesus reigns. He, and he alone, is due their highest allegiance and deepest loyalty. You can begin to see how a message like this, and a way of life like this, would be perceived as at best strange, and at worst subversive, especially in Roman-dominated Philippi.

In verse 13, Paul speaks of the “palace guard” or “imperial guard.” These were troops who served various roles for the emperor—bodyguards, military intelligence, crowd control. Apparently some of them have been put in charge of guarding Paul, a prisoner who takes advantage of every opportunity he gets to announce that the world’s true ruler has come onto the scene through Jesus. Though charges against him may not have risen to the level of treason, Paul may have at least been charged with diminishing the “majesty” of the emperor and impugning his status.

According to Paul, it’s no secret around the jail that he’s being held because of his allegiance to the only true Messiah. And yet, whatever resistance to this gospel he has encountered has only served to further the message. Rather than hindering the good news, what has happened to him has actually advanced the good news. We don’t know if any of the security police came to believe, but at least they knew why Paul was there, by what he said and how he conducted himself. Plus, other Christians there in the area of his confinement have experienced a new level of courage in speaking the word of God to others. It’s important for the believers in Philippi to hear about what’s happening. They need to know that though Paul is in chains, the gospel is not. Indeed, the gospel has a life of its own that manages to remove or overcome all sorts of obstacles. This is part of what makes the good news good.

Good news for them and good news for us. As we journey further into this season of change in the life of our congregation, we need to lay hold of and reaffirm our commitment to those things that are unchanging, especially the message that we preach and practice. The news that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead and is now the Lord of history will never stop sounding strange and subversive in a world where all kinds of individuals, institutions, governments, projects, and movements claim that they will be able to deliver us and put everything right. The reign of Christ, in hearts, minds, lives, and societies, remains the one sure hope for a lost and broken world.

As I emphasized last Sunday, our ultimate confidence and assurance are rooted in God’s faithfulness to finish his project of redemption begun through Jesus Christ. God’s grace, working through the gospel, has been the lifeblood of our church from its beginning nearly 67 years ago. The same is true now, and will be true going forward into the future of our fellowship.

Remember that the word of God is living and effective, because that’s what it is—the word *of God*. The good news of Jesus Christ is powerful, because that’s what it is—the good news *of Jesus Christ*. This gospel word doesn’t accomplish its purpose because we always get it completely right, in how we preach it or why we preach it, or in how we live it. In today’s text, especially verses 15-17, Paul acknowledges that many of the others who are now more courageous about preaching Jesus aren’t always doing so with the right motives or intentions. He says, “Some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill” (v.15). “The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing they can stir up trouble for me while I’m in chains” (v. 17). Apparently, some of these “brothers in the Lord” (v. 14) are more concerned with advancing themselves than with advancing the gospel. They’re more interested in partisanship that divides than with proclamation that unites. Some of them may even see a chance to prove themselves superior to Paul while he’s locked up and out of circulation. In short, as one commentator has put it, they “preach the self-giving Christ with self-serving motives.”¹

But Paul displays a magnanimous spirit. He realizes that the way the gospel is being handled is a mixed picture. Some are preaching out of impure intentions, while others are

proclaiming Christ out of love and goodwill. All the while, he tries to keep things in perspective, maintaining a sense of the big picture. He says, "The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice" (v. 18). Paul finds reassurance in knowing that in God's providential purposes, the gospel is progressing, sometimes through Christ's messengers, and sometimes in spite of them.

As for himself, Paul says that he'll continue to rejoice. For one thing, because the good news is advancing. And secondly, because he knows that he and his future are in God's hands. Whatever happens will ultimately work for his deliverance. Keep in mind that Roman prisons weren't aimed at rehabilitating people. They were more like holding tanks where you were kept until the powers that be decided to either execute you or let you go. Paul tells the Philippians that whatever happens to him, it's important for them to know that their prayers for him, and the Spirit's provision, have sustained and strengthened him. At this point, whether he lives or dies, he believes that Christ will be glorified.

"For me," says Paul, "to live is Christ and to die is gain" (v. 21). If, as he expects, he gets acquitted and released, Paul will get to continue his life of knowing Christ and making him known. At the same time, if he gets executed, he will be with the Lord who has been the passion and pursuit of his life. Paul doesn't go into detail about what it means to "be with Christ" (v. 23), and he does believe in the ultimate transformation of the body at the resurrection of the dead, which we'll hear more about when this sermon series reaches chapter 3. But for now, Paul wants the Philippians to know that if word comes that the Roman authorities put him to death, he was ready for it and at peace with it.

Still, Paul knows that there's plenty of gospel work to be done, and he's eager and ready to move forward with it. For him, dying and being with the Lord would be a gain. But he's first and foremost concerned about what would benefit the Philippians. As we'll soon see when we get to chapter 2, a gospel-shaped life is about discerning the needs of others and looking out for their interests. That's what Paul is striving for even now, in the midst of his own deprivation and suffering. He knows that the Philippians still need more teaching and more leading that he can provide them. As one commentator has put it, "For a travelling apostle to be put in prison must have seemed like a concert pianist having his hands tied behind his back."² So Paul knows that when the doors of the jail open and he walks out, he'll be stepping right back into what he calls "fruitful labor for me" (v. 22). He says, "I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me" (v. 26).

Though the last word in today's text is "me," we know from all that Paul has said so far in his letter that it's not primarily about him. Paul is very discerning and skilled at not making himself the subject. Christ is the subject. And when he is back with the Philippians, in person, face to face, there will be plenty of glorying and boasting, not in him or them, but in Christ.

Last Sunday, today, and in the weeks ahead, we'll continue to reflect on the significance of the relationship between a pastor and a congregation. But we need to do so with the awareness, as we see in Philippians, that the relationship is actually a three-way bond—pastor, congregation, and Christ. All that happens in the life of a church happens in Christ. Sometimes the emphasis is on the relationship between the pastor and the congregation. Sometimes the emphasis is on the pastor's relationship with Christ. Sometimes the emphasis is on the congregation's relationship with Christ. But no matter where the accent lies, the primary actor in this three-way bond is Christ.

At almost every turn in today's text, we encounter Paul talking about Christ. About being in chains for Christ, preaching Christ, sustained by Christ, being with Christ, being joyful in Christ, exalting Christ. For Paul, for the Philippians, for me, for you, it's all about Christ. So here in the present, and going forward into a season of transition, our call is to always make Christ the subject. Not myself. Not yourself. Not any other human leader, institution, or movement. Christ.

Why? Because Jesus Christ is Lord, the only one worthy of our ultimate love and loyalty. And the good news of his Lordship is a message that has a life and power of its own, overcoming obstacles and accomplishing more than we know or imagine. We ourselves are mortals, here for only a brief time, yet living that time in the freedom of knowing that Christ is on the throne, and that his grace has gathered our lives into a great gospel purpose, giving us a future that generates joy in the present, no matter what resistance, suffering, or trials we may experience. Through it all and in it all, the gospel advances and Christ is exalted.

¹ Todd D. Still, *Philippians & Philemon*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2011) 37.

² N. T. Wright, *Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon for Everyone: 20th Anniversary Edition with Study Guide* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2023) Kindle edition.