

To Live is Christ

Adversity Means Gospel Opportunities (Philippians 1:12-18a)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on May 29, 2022

Introduction

- ❖ Last week, we began a summer sermon series where we'll be preaching through Paul's letter to the Philippians. We covered the letter's introduction in chapter 1:1-11. Today, we'll cover vv12-18. In our text, Paul gives us a better sense of his background context. What's apparent is that Paul is writing this letter from prison. He was in chains for the cause of Christ – for preaching the gospel. **Now his opponents thought those chains would hinder the gospel's advance. But those chains merely served to unleash the true power of gospel preaching.**
 - Paul's opponents discovered what countless other persecutors of the church would eventually come to learn. **That persecution intended to stamp out Christianity only results in scattering the embers, fanning the church into flame, and sparking gospel revival.** That's a consistent pattern throughout church history.

- ❖ As most of you know, I've been blessed with a sabbatical this summer, and my family and I will be leaving tomorrow for the UK. I'm looking forward to resting and recharging. But I'm also excited about all the church history we get to explore. I can't wait to visit Oxford and stand on the site where **Nicholas Ridley** and **Hugh Latimer** were martyred for their part in the English Reformation. They were victims of the infamous **Bloody Mary**.
 - Mary was the eldest daughter of Henry VIII. It was under his reign when the Church of England broke away from Rome. Mary wasn't a direct heir to the throne because, after his many wives, Henry VIII finally had a son. But Edward VI was only nine when he became king, and he died six years later. And his Protestant counselors were unable to prevent Mary, as the eldest, from securing the throne.

- ❖ Now the reason why so many opposed Mary's reign is because she was raised by her mother to be a devout Catholic. Which is why she immediately set out to undo the Reformation and march England right back to Rome and under its papal authority.
 - She reinstated the Catholic mass. Returned worship services to being conducted in Latin only. She outlawed the English Bible and banned the books of the Reformers. **Worst of all, she persecuted Protestants giving them two options: Renounce your reformation principles or roast at the stake.** In her five-year reign, nearly three hundred Protestants were executed. She truly earned her nickname Bloody Mary.

- ❖ On October 16, 1555 at Oxford, two men were tied back-to-back on one stake. Ridley and Latimer were set to be burnt for their refusal to deny the gospel. Witnesses record Latimer's last words to Ridley as, *"Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day, by God's grace, light such a candle in England as I trust shall never be put out."*
 - Those were prophetic words. After Mary's brief but bloody reign, her sister Elizabeth ascended the throne and unified England under one crown, one church. And a clergyman named John Foxe cemented the legacy of Ridley and Latimer in his famous book, ***Foxe's Book of Martyrs***. So in the end, killing them didn't hinder the advance of the gospel. The opposite occurred. **Their story, passed down in Foxe's book, inspired others to take a stand for the gospel even in the face of death.**

- ❖ That's been the consistent pattern. Persecution only fans the flame of gospel ministry. **This pattern began all the way back since the earliest stages of the church.** Think of Acts 8, after Stephen became the first Christian martyr, and how a young Pharisee named Saul was going around ravaging the church. **Acts 8:1** reads, *“There arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem and they were all scattered.”* You'd think that that would deal a devastating blow to a young church. But we read in v4, *“Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.”* (Acts 8:4) **The very act of scattering the church by persecution led to the spreading of the gospel by preaching.**
- ❖ **Enemies of the gospel have always underestimated its power – thinking that Christianity can be stamped out with enough pressure.** Totalitarian regimes tend to apply direct pressure by persecuting Christians. Liberal democracies normally resort to indirect pressure by marginalizing believers.
 - But even Christians underestimate the power of the gospel, worrying about all the disagreements arising within the church. We see so much division over non-primary issues. And there's a growing sense of competitiveness and tribalism among us.
- ❖ Now I'm not suggesting that these aren't problems for the church to address. Whether it's persecution from without or partisanship from within – these are issues we should not dismiss or minimize. But at the same time, we must not underestimate God and the power of his gospel. **What we'll see in this morning's text is how the opposition intended to hinder the advance of gospel preaching merely serves to unleash its power.** We'll consider three aspects of gospel preaching: (1) the unstoppable advance of gospel preaching, (2) the underlying motives of gospel preaching, and (3) the unifying principle of gospel preaching.

Background Context

- ❖ But let start by offering some background info. As we mentioned, Paul is writing this letter while in prison. There are a few theories as to where he's imprisoned, but the traditional view is that he's in Rome. In the imprisonment recorded for us at the end of Acts 28.
 - **We know, from Acts, that his imprisonment was the result of the machinations of those who deeply opposed his ministry to the Gentiles.** They made false allegations that he was stirring up riots among the Jews throughout the Roman Empire and desecrating the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 24:5-6). For two years he remained in custody and faced trials in Jerusalem and Caesarea. He eventually appealed to Caesar, which was Paul's right as a Roman citizen.
 - So Acts concludes with Paul in Rome under imperial (praetorian) guard. Which makes sense if he was viewed as this dangerous insurrectionist, preaching about another king whose authority supersedes Caesar's.
- ❖ Now, at the same time, we also know that the Philippian church had a strong track record of supporting Paul in his missionary activity, especially to help him endure persecution. We read later, in chapter 4:15-16, that after Paul moved on from their city to Thessalonica and Berea and faced fierce opposition, the Philippians were the only church to support him.

- ❖ And in chapter 4:10, we learn that they looked for a chance to support him earlier during his arrest and trials in Jerusalem and Caesarea, but had no opportunity. But now that he's been transferred to Rome, the Philippians finally had an opportunity to send a gift to Paul via a church member named Epaphroditus.
 - **Paul is writing to thank them for the gift but, more importantly, to thank them for standing with him in defense of the gospel and to reassure them that what man meant for evil God meant for good (Gen 50:20).**

The Unstoppable Advance of Gospel Preaching

- ❖ Now Paul does that by first reminding the Philippians of the unstoppable advance of gospel preaching. Try as you may to bind the gospel with chains, that merely serves to unleash its power to save. Try to stamp it out, and you just spread the fire even farther and further. That's what Paul is saying in v12. Let me read it again, *"I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel."*
 - **The Greek work for "advance" (*prokopē*) sounds like the word for "obstacle" (*proskopē*).** So the readers of his letter probably would've expected Paul to say that his imprisonment was a *proskopē* – an obstacle to the gospel. But Paul surprisingly says that his imprisonment was a *prokopē* – an advance of the gospel.

- ❖ **Notice how he doesn't say the gospel continued to advance *in spite of* adversity. But rather that the adversity itself resulted in the advancement of the gospel.** In other words, it's not just that God is strong enough to frustrate the evil plans of bad actors and turn a bad situation into something good. That would be praiseworthy in itself.
 - **But Paul goes further and says that God is so powerful that even the evil plans of bad actors can flow seamlessly into the sovereign stream of his eternal purposes.** How much more assuring is it to know that God doesn't just work good out of a bad situation? **But rather that that bad situation is somehow a part of God's overall good plans, and that what bad people meant for evil, he meant for good.** It's deeply reassuring to know that God is in control of the chaos in my life, and that evil never surprises God nor frustrates his plans.

- ❖ Now it begs the question – what good came out of Paul's imprisonment? How did it serve to advance the gospel? Paul mentions two things: the evangelization of pagans and the edification of believers.
 - Let's consider the evangelization of pagans. Listen to v13, *"so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ."* **The "imperial guard" is referring to Caesar's personal bodyguards.** Think of the red stormtroopers in Star Wars. These are elite soldiers. Historians tell us that the whole guard could've been as large as 9,000 men.
 - And they were very influential in Roman history. They had a hand in deposing and promoting Caesars. The imperial guard were the ones who assassinated Caligula and put Claudius on the throne. Claudius was succeeded by Nero, who was Caesar at the time of Paul's imprisonment.

- ❖ But notice how these powerful kingmakers did not intimidate him. **Instead of the imperial guard influencing Paul, he's the one making a great impression on them.** The whole guard became familiar with this Roman Jew from Palestine who was arrested because of his allegiance to a Jewish rabbi who was known to be a miracle worker. But more so, this rabbi was crucified by fellow Roman soldiers, and yet somehow his followers were claiming that he rose from the dead, and that he's a king who is establishing his own kingdom on earth.
 - And just as Paul took the opportunity to share the gospel with his Philippian jailer (Acts 16:25-34) – he took every opportunity to share with any and every imperial guard assigned to watch him. And by God's grace, he enjoyed the freedom and fruitfulness of gospel preaching even while in chains.

- ❖ When he mentions in v13 how his story was known, "*to all the rest*", he's referring to those who served in Caesar's palace. They got wind of his testimony and heard his gospel preaching. And some of them must have been converted because, at the end of the letter, in chapter 4:22, Paul sends greetings from other believers who are in "*Caesar's household*". **So the gospel had effectively penetrated Caesar's own palace.**
 - That shouldn't surprise us considering how it says at the end of Acts 28, "³⁰[Paul] *lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, ³¹proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.*"

- ❖ So his imprisonment served to evangelize pagans. **It also served to edify believers.** Look at v14. Paul says the believers in the church in Rome were strengthened in their faith and emboldened in their evangelism. "*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 rather than being intimidated by Paul's imprisonment, the believers were actually emboldened to speak up even more.** Paul says they were already bold but now they're "*much more bold to speak the word without fear.*"

- ❖ They were inspired, of course, by Paul and his response to his own suffering. **They were amazed at how Paul looked at his chains with eyes of faith. He didn't see an obstacle – he saw gospel opportunity. He didn't see an imposing soldier – he saw a lost soul.**
 - The believers who witnessed Paul in his suffering were inspired to reinterpret their own suffering through the same eyes of faith. They grew confident in the Lord – trusting that he would empower their gospel witness in the face of their opposition. **They became much more bold and willing to speak out for the gospel without fear of backlash and persecution.** Apparently, gospel courage is contagious.

- ❖ **Friends, the gospel that Paul preached is a radical, risky message.** He tells us in the next chapter that this gospel demands every knee, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, to bow before Jesus and every tongue to confess him as Lord (2:10-11). If you proclaim *that* kind of gospel, you can expect opposition. You can expect adversity.

- ❖ **So how will you interpret that adversity?** How will you respond to that opposition? That's the question. If you look, like Paul, through the eyes of faith, then it's not far fetched to count it all joy when you face trials of many kinds or to rejoice in the midst of adversity (v18). Because you can see the unique gospel opportunities that your circumstances afford. And you can set a courageous example for others, knowing that gospel courage is contagious.

The Underlying Motives of Gospel Preaching

- ❖ That, of course, is the hope – that the adversity we experience for Christ will advance the gospel through more preaching and proclaiming. **But now we need to dig deeper and consider the underlying motives of our gospel preaching.** This leads to our second point. What we'll see is that those believers who were emboldened to continue preaching the gospel in the face of opposition – were driven by two different motives. Listen to v15, "*Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will.*"
 - So some believers responded to Paul's imprisonment with love and went about preaching Christ out of good will. Hoping to continue his ministry to the Gentiles while he was detained.
 - But others responded to his imprisonment with selfish ambition and went about preaching Christ out of envy and rivalry. Hoping to find a way to hurt Paul and gain a greater following and build a bigger ministry. **Those were two diametrically opposite motivations that prompted the exact same action – the preaching of the gospel.**
- ❖ If you look in v16, Paul first addresses those who preach Christ from good will – with good intentions. "*The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.*" These brothers and sisters recognize Paul's divine calling and commission. The word for "*put here*" literally means to lie down or recline. But, figuratively, it can be used in Greek to convey the idea of being appointed or destined by God.
 - So, for example, in **Luke 2:34**, Simeon blesses the baby Jesus and tells his mother, "*Behold, this child is appointed (put here) for the fall and rising of many in Israel.*" Or in **1 Thessalonians 3:3**, Paul exhorts his readers not to be deterred by all the afflictions he's been facing, "*For you yourselves know that we are destined (put here) for this.*" So those who are preaching the gospel with good motives recognize that Paul was divinely appointed and destined to be in prison for the cause of Christ.
 - So they were not surprised or ashamed of his chains. **They understood that suffering accompanies the call of Christ and the mission of gospel preaching.** Even before Paul wrote v29, they already believed that, "*it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.*" (1:29)
- ❖ So those are the ones who preach Christ with good intent. **But who are those who preach the same gospel but out of selfish motives?** Listen to how Paul describes them in v17, "*The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.*"

- ❖ It's important to emphasize that these people are *not* the same as the opponents to the gospel that Paul refers to later in chapters 1:28, 3:2, or 3:18. In those verses, he's talking about false teachers who preach a false gospel. But these individuals in v17 are still classified as brothers in Christ (cf. v14). As fellow believers in the church in Rome. They weren't false teachers. Paul considered their message sound. He says they were preaching the actual gospel.
 - And that makes his point. **Yes, their *motives* for preaching contradicted the *content* of their preaching, but that did not hinder the *effect* of their gospel preaching.** By God's grace, people were still coming to faith in the Lord Jesus.

- ❖ But that just raises more questions. If they're on the same team preaching the same gospel, then why would they oppose Paul, and why would they think that their preaching of Christ would afflict him?
 - **It's likely that they saw Paul as a ministry rival.** He said in v15 that they are preaching Christ from envy and rivalry. They probably viewed his imprisonment as a prime opportunity to grow their following and steal sheep from him. That's how they hoped to afflict him.

- ❖ **Or some theorize that the rivalry wasn't about numbers per se but methodology.** These preachers may have disagreed with Paul's methods, deeming them too bold and risky. They considered their method more sensible evidenced by the fact that it's kept them out of prison.
 - **So they would be motivated all the more to preach Christ in order to prove their approach right and Paul's wrong.** His way led to his arrest, which hinders the advancement of the gospel. If that was their thinking, then that explains why Paul is emphatic that the gospel is still advancing even while he's in prison.

- ❖ But in the end, even if we can only speculate on their underlying motivation to preach Christ, we know it was motivated by selfish ambition and done out of ill will – out of envy and rivalry. And when it comes down to it, one day these Christians will have to appear before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10). To give an account for their motives in their selfish rivalry against Paul. **Even if the resultant action is good – like preaching Christ – your motives still matter before an all-knowing God.**
 - Now if these rival preachers are true believers, then the sin of their selfish ambition *has been* atoned for by the blood of Christ. They *are* forgiven. They *are* saved. And they *will be* led to repentance, at some point, by the Holy Spirit who resides in them. But even still, it's important to stress that motives matter when it comes to our personal accountability before God.

- ❖ **But now when it comes to the advancement of the gospel, our text makes clear that God is powerful enough to use our selfish motives to advance his sovereign purposes.** The bad motives behind our good behavior does not limit God and his ability to do good through us.
 - On one hand, that should encourage you. Especially those who feel unworthy to serve God. If you're always questioning your motives – unsure if your heart is pure enough – **be comforted knowing that God can use you even if your motives are mixed.**

- ❖ But at the same time, be warned and be aware that motives matter when you have to give an account before the Lord. **This text should serve as a warning for those who have grown too familiar with serving God.** Who just keep serving in ministry without considering their motives. Without examining whether their motives are pure and coming from good will and done out of love. Some of us probably need to pause and reflect on the underlying motives of our gospel ministry. That's a needed application we mustn't ignore.

The Unifying Principle of Gospel Preaching

- ❖ But the main point that Paul is making in our text is that the true preaching of the gospel is what matters most. If there is rivalry between fellow believers – if we're dealing with interpersonal conflict between Christians – our hope centers on the gospel. **If our shared commitment to the gospel and to faithful gospel preaching remains intact, then that, Lord-willing, is what can reconcile us back together.**
 - This is our third point – the unifying principle of gospel preaching. Paul makes this point in v18a. Listen to it, *“What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.”*
- ❖ **If Paul is not bothered by imprisonment, then he's certainly not bothered by the selfish motives of rival preachers.** Sure, they want to shrink his ministry and grow theirs. But Paul is not bothered by that. Because he's not playing their game.
 - When he writes, *“What then?”* that's like how we would say today, “So what?” I don't care. Paul doesn't care about being a celebrity pastor. He doesn't care about the size of his following or making a name for himself. **All he cares about is the name of Christ and about more people being saved in that name.** So as long as Christ is faithfully proclaimed – whether in pretense or in truth; with bad motives or good ones – that leads Paul to rejoice.
- ❖ Friends, let me take a moment to speak directly into our present moment. Into the present-day fracturing of our Christian communion. **I'm talking about all the polarization and division occurring between Christians – often times within the same church or same family.** There's so much out there with the potential to divide – whether it's how to respond to the pandemic or how to approach social justice issues or how to navigate partisan politics.
 - We can be on different sides of the aisle. Christians can have different convictions and different approaches on how to stop horrific mass shootings like what happened in that supermarket in Buffalo or that Taiwanese church in LA or that elementary school in West Texas. We can have different views on whether it's right, during a pandemic, to require masks or vaccines. Or we could debate the best solution to the problems of racial profiling and police brutality, or of sex abuse scandals in the church, or of illegal immigration at the southern border.
 - And even if we feel like most of us in this church would be on the same page in resolving these issues, you can be sure that you know other Christians in the workplace or on campus or in other churches who see things differently.

- ❖ **It's easy to adopt an “us” versus “them” mentality.** And to question the genuineness of some people's Christianity because they would actually support policy proposals or vote for candidates that we find morally repugnant.
 - But the Apostle Paul would have none of that. He had every reason to adopt an “us” versus “them” mentality towards those who were reveling in his sufferings and trying to take advantage of his imprisonment for selfish gain. But he refused to play that game. **He maintained the centrality of the gospel and gospel preaching.** And he was content to move on – with no desire to tweet back that them, or to rant against in a blog post, or even to speak badly of them in a personal letter written to another church community who wouldn't have known their names. But he didn't go there.

- ❖ **What Paul cared more about is that they were still gospel people conducting gospel preaching among lost people who needed Jesus.** Now, sure, they might be gospel people in need of repentance and further sanctification for their ill motives. But they still were, like him, undeserving sinners saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, and not by our good works or even good motives so that no one may boast.

- ❖ Let me be clear: I am *not* trying to minimize the importance of these subjects over which Christians often disagree. I'm not saying we should ignore these contentious issues and just focus on the work of evangelism, of preaching the gospel.
 - **What I am saying is that we should *not* minimize the fact that we believe the same gospel, seek to preach the same gospel, and share the same hope for the lost to be saved by that gospel.** I'm saying that there is no “us” versus “them” in the Body of Christ. There's only “us” and the Lord Jesus who is our Head (Eph 4:15). And the one Spirit who unifies us in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3). And the one Father, who is over all and through all and in all (Eph 4:6).

- ❖ So think about a church or Christian organization or individual Christian that you know you'd disagree with over one of the significant issues we just mentioned. **Can you say, in all honesty, that, despite your disagreement, you still rejoice over their preaching of the gospel?** That certainly was Paul's attitude towards fellow believers with whom he disagreed.
 - It's hard to speak ill of someone or to think poorly of them when you're rejoicing over what God is doing through their gospel ministry. **When you're thanking God for how he's using someone or some group to save the lost – it's hard to see them or treat them as enemies.** That's the unifying principle of gospel preaching. That's why we need to keep the gospel central.