

The Gospel: Nothing Can Stop It, Nothing Is Better

Philippians 1:12–18

[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. [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.

Introduction

Point 1 — The Advance of the Gospel (1:12–14)

[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.

- “What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel” (v. 12) — the roadblock became the road. “Advance” (prokopē) is a marching word: pioneers cutting a road ahead of the army.

- Background: after a decade of ministry (three journeys; churches at Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, Ephesus), Paul is arrested (~A.D. 57), held at Caesarea about two years, appeals to Caesar, and writes after roughly four or five years under arrest.

- Paul was warned he would be arrested in Jerusalem — yet he went:

Acts 20:23 — [23] except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

Acts 21:10–12 — [10] While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. [11] And coming to us, he took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, “Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’ ” [12] When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem.

- In Rome he lived under Roman military custody, in his own rented quarters:

Acts 28:16 — [16] And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.

Acts 28:30 — [30] He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him

- v. 13 — the gospel reaches the praetorium: some 9,000 elite imperial guards, rotating shifts, each chained to a man who talks of one thing — Christ. Rome thought it had chained Paul to a soldier; in fact it had chained soldiers to Paul. The prison became a pulpit.

- And by the letter's end, even the palace has believers:
Philippians 4:22 — [22] All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.
- v. 14 — courage is contagious: most of the brothers grow bolder, not quieter. The chains preach in two directions at once — to unbelieving soldiers and to believing Christians.
- The bigger pattern: God keeps placing witnesses to Christ near the seats of Roman power —
 - A Roman centurion's faith amazes Jesus:
Matthew 8:10 — [10] When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith."
 - A centurion at the cross confesses Him:
Matthew 27:54 — [54] When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!"
 - Cornelius, a centurion, is a doorway to the Gentiles:
Acts 10:44–45 — [44] While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. [45] And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles.
 - The proconsul Sergius Paulus believes:
Acts 13:12 — [12] Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.
 - A Philippian jailer believes through an imprisoned Paul:
Acts 16:31 — [31] And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."
 - Felix, Festus, and Agrippa all hear Paul's testimony:
Acts 26:28–29 — [28] And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?" [29] And Paul said, "Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains."
 - Paul had long longed to reach Rome — and God got him there, in chains:
Romans 1:15 — [15] So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.
- This is how Jesus said the kingdom grows — small at first, then vast:
Matthew 13:31–33 — [31] He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. [32] It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." [33] He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."
- Almost three centuries later a Roman emperor, Constantine, would publicly identify with Christ. Never judge what God is doing by how small it looks right now. The kingdom does not initially look like an army storming the palace gates. It looks like leaven hidden in dough.
- So Paul's main point is not simply, "please don't feel sorry for me". His main point is — don't worry, the gospel is still marching on.

Point 2 — The Self-Forgetfulness of Paul (1:15–18)

[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.

- Among the newly bold preachers (v. 14) are two groups: some preach Christ “from envy and rivalry,” even “thinking to afflict me” (vv. 15, 17); others “from good will,” out of love, wanting to labor with Paul (vv. 15–16).
- The envious preachers don’t appear to be preaching a false gospel — the message is not mentioned as problematic, the motives are wrong. Paul reserves his anathema for a false gospel:
Galatians 1:8–9 — [8] But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. [9] As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.
- The honesty of Scripture: envy was among God’s people from the start — Saul, Israel’s first king, was eaten alive by it:
1 Samuel 18:7–9 — [7] And the women sang to one another as they celebrated, “Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands.” [8] And Saul was very angry, and this saying displeased him. He said, “They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands, and what more can he have but the kingdom?” [9] And Saul eyed David from that day on.
- We need not be shocked — God entrusts the gospel to fragile (and fallen) vessels:
2 Corinthians 4:7 — [7] But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.
- But envy is not the point — notice what Paul does NOT say (no self-defense, no lecture on envy). Next to how good the gospel is, it doesn’t matter: “Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice” (v. 18).
- Paul believes the gospel is so good that even when delivered with a bad motive it is still good so long as it gets there.
- Self-forgetfulness: this was never about Paul. As C. S. Lewis pictured true humility — not a man forever running himself down, but one who has stopped thinking of himself at all (*Mere Christianity*, Bk. III, “The Great Sin”) — his eyes were so full of Christ there was no room to nurse a wounded pride. Humility is not so much thinking less of yourself as it is thinking of yourself less.
Isaiah 52:7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”

Point 3 — The Key: “I Am Put Here” (1:16)

[16] The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.

- One Greek verb carries the passage: “put here” (κεῖμαι, v. 16) means appointed, destined, set in place — Paul is acted upon; God placed him here.
 - The same verb is used of Christ, “appointed” for the fall and rising of many:
Luke 2:34 — [34] And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed
 - The same verb is used of believers “destined” for affliction:
1 Thessalonians 3:3 — [3] that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this.
- Four small words carry it — I am put here: not dropped, not stuck, not left by accident. A soldier posted to his watch; an ambassador in chains, where his Commander wants him:
Ephesians 6:20 — [20] for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.
- The reframe: his chains were fastened by God, not the guards; his circumstances were given, not merely suffered. So the first question in hard times is not “Why is this happening to me?” but “I have been put here.”
- Our chains — a desk, a marriage, singleness, a wayward child, a failing body or mind: do we believe we were dropped there, or put there by the God of providence?
- The question that follows: do my chains hear the gospel? Would those chained to me see the fruit of the Spirit?
Galatians 5:22–23 — [22] But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, [23] gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.
- The gospel is better than the chains and can be carried down their length. Paul's chains became the gospel's road — so can yours.

Point 4 — “In That I Rejoice”: The Lens of Joy (1:18)

[18] What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

- How does Paul rejoice — chained, undercut? Not by pretending the pain isn't real. It is the lens he looks through.
- The eye chart: you cannot change the chart (the chains, prison, enemies, suffering are all real) — you change the lens. This is not positive thinking; it is learning to see reality the way God sees it.
- Paul's lens is ground from two truths: (1) he sees himself rightly (not about his comfort or reputation, but Christ proclaimed — the self-forgetfulness of Point 2) and (2) he sees God rightly (sovereign, having put him right here).
- So where the world sees chains / a prisoner / rivals, Paul sees the gospel advancing / a missionary among the guard / Christ proclaimed — and reads J — O — Y (v. 18). The test of our eyes: look at the chart — what do we see? Our circumstances need not change for the joy to come back.

