

Chapter 2: Joy

Philippians 1:12–18

It is entirely appropriate to lament our circumstances when we are in the midst of suffering of various kinds. This world is broken because of the curse of sin, and even creation itself groans as it longs for the day when Jesus will return to set things right (Rom. 8:20–23). Suffering becomes even more anguishing when we feel that specific challenges we must endure—illness, injuries, or perhaps imprisonments—might be also keeping us from the work that God has commissioned us to do. But while lament may be appropriate, lament by itself is incomplete. Paul’s reaction to his own circumstances of suffering in Philippians 1:12–18 teaches us that we should not only lament, but also *rejoice* as we face any kind of trial (cf. Jas. 1:2). By his example, Paul broadens our understanding of what God is doing in and through our afflictions, modeling how we might rejoice in God’s work through our suffering.

Certainly, Paul could have easily made the case that his greatest effectiveness for ministry could only come by getting out of prison and back on the road to plant churches in unreached areas. Nevertheless, in Philippians 1:12–18, Paul rejoices from his prison cell, surrounded by opposition on every side. Neither his personal circumstances nor his external enemies are capable of *thwarting* the progress of the gospel; even more so, Paul rejoices to see that God has in fact used *both* kinds of setbacks even to *advance* the progress of the gospel. Regardless of his miserable conditions, Paul insists that he will rejoice in the new ways. His only requirement for joy is to hear that Christ is proclaimed.

How could Paul possibly see his own suffering in this light? What kind of faith has the ability to look beyond the circumstances of suffering to broader context of the progress of the gospel? Paul will not answer this question fully in this passage, and we will need to keep reading the rest of his letter to the Philippians to understand his secret. Nevertheless, Paul here lays out the first glimpse of the nature of the cruciform life. What Paul models in his prison ministry reflects a cross-centered perspective that he will fully unpack through the rest of this letter.

God Advances the Gospel through our Circumstances (Phil. 1:12–14)

Given Paul’s remarkable influence, fruitful evangelism, and aggressive church planting, we might imagine that being confined to a prison would be unbearable. Every day he remain in prison is one more day that his opportunities in the wider world slip away from him. Why not seek to be set free so that he can get back to his ministry? Aren’t there people to reach, churches to plant, and books to write? It is difficult to imagine ourselves in Paul’s situation feeling anything other than frustration at the powerlessness of being locked up in prison.

Singular Focus

And yet, as Paul reflects on his personal circumstances, he has an entirely different perspective. Paul could have given his attention in this letter to lamenting his situation and seeking out whatever help he might gain toward getting out of prison. Instead, Paul focuses his attention, energy, and joy on the advancement of the gospel. Part of the reason that Paul doesn't give us more information about his situation likely arises from the fact that "the Philippians already know about his imprisonment, evidenced by their recent gift;" however, the more important reason that Paul does not speak much about his imprisonment lies in his desire to shift the focus away from himself and onto the progress of the gospel. So, Paul opens this section with the line, "I want you to know, brothers..." (Phil. 1:12), directing the Philippian believers to focus on "the *effects* of his imprisonment" rather than the *conditions* of his imprisonment.²

Unexpected Fruit

If Paul judged his circumstances according to the flesh, then he would rule out the possibility for fruitfulness from the start. What could possibly be done from a prison cell? How much could the seeds of the gospel he has planted grow if they are being stamped out by his enemies? Nevertheless, Paul tells us intriguingly that the gospel has borne unexpected fruit—not that the gospel has merely made "progress in spite of adversity; rather, the adversity itself had turned out for the advancement of the gospel."³ Far from being limited *by* Paul's chains, the gospel has advanced in two surprising ways *because* of Paul's chains.

First, Paul writes that the whole praetorium (ESV: "imperial guard") and "all the rest" know that Paul's imprisonment is "for Christ" (Phil. 1:13). The praetorium refers to a specific group of soldiers: "either the emperor's bodyguard or praetorian cohorts stationed in the metropolis."⁴ Paul was chained to members of the praetorium for four-hour shifts, so that the apostle was chained to six different people every day.⁵ Remarkably, Paul did not find his chains inconvenient, but he instead focused on the opportunities of his situation. To Paul, it wasn't that *he* was chained to these guards, but that *they* were chained as a captive audience to *him!*⁶ He had an opportunity to preach the gospel to six new people every day, and he rejoiced at this opening to proclaim Christ to people whom he would have no other means to reach than through this imprisonment.

In our own lives, we often find ourselves in situations we wouldn't choose, sometimes "chained" to people we wouldn't choose. Perhaps we sit next to co-workers we would not have chosen for ourselves, or we live next door to difficult neighbors, or we find ourselves caring for small children who have unrelenting needs and demands.⁷ Do we see these circumstances as a drain on our time, energy, and resources, or do we stop to ponder whether God might be giving us opportunities to proclaim the gospel to people we would not have sought out on our own? May God grant that we would see the people around us as divinely appointed contacts, and not as inconveniences.

It is not only the praetorian guard, but also "all the rest," who have come to understand the reason that Paul is in prison: he is there for Christ. While we are not given enough information to figure out exactly the scope of "all the rest," the general meaning is clear: the message of Christ had spread far and fast through Paul's imprisonment *for* Christ. Probably, this is a reference to the members of "Caesar's household" (Phil. 4:22) who have become believers ("saints"), as Paul mentions at the end of his letter. This group of people in Caesar's household would have likely included "slaves

and freemen who served in the emperor’s palace in Rome. They were household servants, cooks, gardeners, porters, doorkeepers, etc.”⁸ Through Paul’s chains, the gospel is advancing even beyond those guards to whom Paul has direct contact, and on to the rest of the household of the emperor.

Second, Paul notes the way in which “most of the brothers” have become emboldened by Paul’s chains to “speak the word without fear” (Phil. 1:14). Seeing the great Apostle Paul carrying himself with joy in spite of his chains, their fears begin to melt away, giving way to boldness and confidence in their evangelism. The word Paul uses to describe the activity of these brothers here is “speak” (*lalein*). While this word often describes formal preaching (e.g., Acts 5:20, 13:42), we should note that this is a very general word for speech—certainly, a much more generic word than the specialized words to describe specific kinds of speech that Paul later uses in Philippians 1:15 (“preach”) and Philippians 1:17 (“proclaim”).⁹ William Hendriksen describes the situation by arguing that the message of the gospel “had become the theme for discussion without restraint, the topic for ordinary conversation or *talk*, and this *far more* than ever before.”¹⁰ By using the word “speak” (or “talk”) in Philippians 1:14, Paul seems to be describing the kind of informal speech in the early church that historian Michael Green calls “gossiping the gospel” in his wonderful book, *Evangelism in the Early Church*.¹¹

Whether through formal preaching or informal gossiping, Christians were speaking the word without fear! Although the mighty Apostle Paul was chained, the mightier gospel to which Paul had dedicated his life was not. And indeed, with the multiplication of evangelistic voices, all speaking the word boldly, the gospel was spreading farther and faster than even Paul would have been able to proclaim it, had he been freed. As Warren Wiersbe writes, “The same God who used Moses’ rod, Gideon’s pitchers, and David’s sling, used Paul’s chains.”¹² And, we might add, that same God will use your home, your neighborhood, your school, your office, your family reunions, your hospital stays, and your incarcerations.

The Gospel Transcends Circumstances

This passage reminds us that “human circumstances lie in God’s hands and that God uses them to advance the gospel.”¹³ We need to hear this message, especially in the modern world where we spend so much of our time, energy, and money on finding ways to *avoid* suffering. Make no mistake, suffering is a product of the Fall, and we look forward to the day when Jesus will return to renew his creation, putting away suffering, death, and tears forever (Rev. 21:4). But, even though suffering is evil in itself and worthy of our grief-filled lamentations, we should never lose sight of the fact that God leverages suffering in our lives as an important tool in the hands of a skilled craftsman. It is not only that God cannot be *hindered* by suffering, but that he actually transcends the evil of suffering to *advance* his own glory.

When God ordains suffering to enter our lives, it is not as though his grip has slipped, or that he came across an unexpected complication. Rather, God has a purpose for suffering beyond what any of us could think or imagine that will work not only for his glory, but also for our ultimate good. He is not the author of evil, but evil cannot extend beyond the limitations that he establishes for it by his power. One day, the day will come when we will behold all that God has accomplished through our suffering, and, rather than accusing him or wrongdoing, we will praise and thank him for involving us in his glorious plan.

God Advances the Gospel through our Enemies (Phil. 1:15–17)

Paul's own, personal circumstances were not the only potential barriers to the spread of the gospel. In addition to his imprisonment, Paul also notes that some of these brothers (Phil. 1:14) who have begun speaking the word with boldness are doing so with impure motives. Paul writes, "Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will....The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment" (Phil. 1:15, 17). Who, then, are these brothers who preach Christ from envy and rivalry? What are they after? What should we learn from their presence in Paul's life?

Bad Motives

In fact, Paul has many enemies. Later on, Paul will write about other enemies, men whom he calls "dogs" and "evildoers" (Phil. 3:2). Therefore, we should begin by distinguishing between *those* enemies from the third chapter and the rivals whom Paul describes in Philippians 1:15, 17. To begin, Gerald Hawthorne observes that the enemies Paul speaks about here in Philippians 1 preach Christ:

[Paul] affirms first and foremost that all of them preach Christ. To emphasize this fact he uses three different verbs successively and synonymously—*lalein* (v 14, "speak"), *kērussein* (v 15, "preach") and *kataggellein* (vv 17, 18, "proclaim").¹⁴

While Paul does classify these preachers as rivals, he nevertheless insists that they preach Christ, in sharp distinction from Paul's enemies who pervert the gospel of grace described in Philippians 3. Because these enemies from Philippians 1 preach Christ, Paul is able to rejoice over their preaching (Phil. 1:18). From Paul's rejoicing, we may draw the conclusion that Paul believes that these preachers are theologically orthodox. If so, then Paul's enemies from Philippians 1 are really more like *rivals*, and nothing like the "enemies of the cross of Christ" Paul writes about in Philippians 3:18.

And yet, these rivals are preaching the right things from the wrong motives. Rather than from "good will" (Phil. 1:15) or "love" (Phil. 1:16), these brothers preach from "envy," "rivalry" (Phil. 1:15), and "selfish ambition" (Phil. 1:17).¹⁵ By *envy*, Paul is describing a concern motivated more by a desire "to deprive the other person of the desired thing than to gain it."¹⁶ In other words, they were not only seeking to elevate themselves, but they were also operating from a personal antagonism toward Paul, bent on afflicting him further during his imprisonment (Phil. 1:17). In their preaching, they wanted to put Paul down as well as giving themselves a leg up.

Because Paul describes their opposition to him in terms of "rivalry," he may have in mind some kind of disagreement with reference "to positions taken in a matter"—that is, they may disagree with Paul on some debatable point of doctrine or practice.¹⁷ So, while Paul does not consider his rivals to be "enemies of the cross of Christ" (Phil. 3:18), it is possible that their antagonism toward Paul stems from a substantive disagreement. This would mean that the division is not merely personal, but that these rival preachers represent a faction who are elevating their hobby-horse issue to an (inappropriately) high level of importance in an attempt to pester and oppose Paul. At the end of the day, however, Paul is willing to overlook the exaggerated importance of that doctrinal position in order to acknowledge that they still are preaching Christ. In a modern day context, this might look like elevating a particular stance on baptism or end-times theology or a negotiable political position

as a belief of the highest importance, all the while continuing to preach Jesus Christ and him crucified as the only way to salvation.

On the other hand, if Paul isn't talking about a particular issue at stake, then the idea of "rivalry" would convey the sense that these rival preachers were trying to gain power for themselves in the church through their preaching. In other words, rather than trying to promote an *issue*, they were trying to promote *themselves*. John Calvin understands the passage this way, arguing that this "term does not apply to doctrine, because it is possible that the man who teaches most purely, may, nevertheless, not be of a sincere mind."¹⁸ William Hendriksen's suggested reconstruction of the situation is worth considering:

It should be borne in mind that there was a church in Rome [where Paul is likely imprisoned] long before Paul arrived there. It can scarcely be doubted, therefore, that certain preachers in Rome had attained a degree of prominence among the brothers. With the arrival of Paul and especially with the spreading of his fame throughout the city (see verses 13 and 14) it is easy to understand that these leaders were beginning to lose some of their former prestige. Their names were no longer mentioned so often. Hence, they became envious of Paul. Their motives in preaching Christ were not pure or unmixed.¹⁹

In either case (riding a theological hobby-horse or jockeying for position), these rival preachers operate not from a love first and foremost for Christ's glory and the good of the church, as Paul does, but from a motive that causes them to oppose Paul. Later on in this letter, Paul will use the same word for "selfish ambition" from Philippians 1:17 to write, "Do nothing from *selfish ambition* or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3).

Good Motives

Still, the fact that these rivals are preaching Christ does not negate the damage that they are inflicting as they promote their partisan agenda. Unquestionably, the church would be better off if these rival preachers would repent and instead follow in the footsteps of the other brothers who are speaking about Christ from good will and love. The difference between the two camps is critical, and the group who proclaims Christ out of good will serves as a source of great encouragement for Paul during his imprisonment.

These preachers of good will and love recognize that Paul's suffering—like the suffering of Jesus—does not arise from God's disapproval of Paul. Rather, as Peter O'Brien writes, they understand that

Paul is under orders, issued by God. There is therefore no sense of divine disfavour in his captivity. Quite the reverse. Because he has been divinely appointed for the defence of the gospel, his captivity is entirely understandable. They are not embarrassed or put off by his bonds. Instead, they identify with him in proclaiming Christ, doing so out of true Christian love.²⁰

Like Paul himself, these Christians see Paul's imprisonment not as a setback, but simply as another kind of manifestation of God's sovereign work to advance his gospel. For this reason, Paul's suffering does not discourage them, but instead it emboldens them to fill the gap for their "wounded comrade in arms."²¹

The Gospel Transcends Motives

Regrettably, some people use the church and mission of spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ from “self-serving and insincere” motives.²² This is a tragedy, but this sin of rivalry does not handcuff God. On the contrary, God uses even false, insincere, and badly motivated preachers to spread the gospel, for the power of God unto salvation lies in the gospel itself—and in the Holy Spirit, who opens the eyes of sinners to recognize the truth of the gospel—rather than in the sincerity of any particular minister.

Even when a pastor falls headlong into disqualifying sin, the people who came to Christ and grew in Christ under that pastor’s ministry are not *themselves* disqualified from the kingdom of Christ. As Gerald Hawthorne writes, “The power of the gospel, therefore, does not depend on the character of the preacher,”²³ because the power of the gospel is ultimately *God’s* work, not ours. Paul judges the effectiveness of these preachers of envy and rivalry in the same way. The gospel that they preach transcends even their worst motivations. This principle is not a justification for sinful shepherds; however, it can be a comfort for scandalized sheep.

In the Advance of the Gospel, Rejoice! (Phil. 1:18)

It almost sounds as though Paul himself recognizes the confusing mix of ministry and motives that he has described, since he regroups in Philippians 1:18 by asking the simple question, “What then?” In other words, what should we make of all this? How should we proceed in light of the progress of the gospel both *in* and *through* imprisonment and envy? Paul’s answer is as clear as his circumstances are painful. In categorical terms, he writes, “What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice” (Phil. 1:18).

Should Paul’s outlook surprise us? Perhaps, if we imagine that Paul’s joy rises and falls with the ever-changing tide of his circumstances. But if we see clearly where Paul’s joy *is* anchored, then Paul’s answer will not surprise at all. *Paul rejoices because he sees the gospel advancing.* In happiness and in pain, in flourishing and suffering, in life and in death, Paul’s joy meter rises because of no other factor than seeing the world filled with the proclamation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Where God continues to work—even where God chooses to continue his work through Paul’s own suffering—Paul can rejoice.

Notice that Paul does not consider his circumstances in themselves as reasons to rejoice. He does not in the least consider his imprisonment or the rival preachers to be *good* circumstances. Indeed, these things are evil, and he recognizes them as such. Rather, he points to the fact that Christ is proclaimed and says “in *that* I rejoice.” Faced with suffering, we certainly do not need to spiritualize our circumstances by calling them “good.” Paul gives us a different option—to acknowledge the *evil* of our sufferings, but then to turn our attention to the profound *goodness* of what God is accomplishing *through* them.

Let us never downplay our suffering, and let us *certainly* never downplay someone *else’s* suffering! Instead, let us fix our gaze on the power of God to transcend our suffering either, reminding ourselves that God’s great power is perfected through weakness and suffering (2 Cor. 12:9). The gospel itself announces that God’s power unto salvation comes through the weakness and suffering of the Son of God who emptied himself to become a servant for our sake, all the way to the point of

death (Phil. 2:5–11). Likewise, God also continues to advance his gospel through the suffering that we experience today.

In the midst of your suffering, meditate on what Roger Ellsworth writes to summarize Paul's attitude: "We cannot always trace the hand of God, but we can always trust the heart of God. His heart is devoted to working all things together for good for his people (Rom. 8:28)."²⁴ Is your heart set on the details of your circumstances, or on your confidence that the heart of God will certainly work through your suffering to bring about Christ's glory and your good?

Discussion Questions

1. How do you react to Paul's joy in the midst of his suffering? Does he strike you as a superhero of spirituality? Wise? Disingenuous? Crazy? Do you long to know his secret? What can we learn from Paul's example under these painful circumstances?
2. What are the situations to which you are "chained"? That is, who has God put in your life that you would not necessarily choose for yourself? How might God work through your chains to advance the gospel? What unexpected opportunities does your present situation give you for "gossiping the gospel"?
3. Do you need to repent of opposing Christian groups who promote a debatable issue (on which you disagree), but who nevertheless preach the gospel? Or, do you need to repent of bitterness toward Christians who offended you in the course of their ministry? How might Paul's perspective in relation to his rivals and to the progress of the gospel of Christ inform your attitude?
4. In what ways does understanding the heart of God and the mission of God help you endure your own suffering? How does Paul example help you remember and recognize the mysterious ways in which God works through our pain? What practical steps might you take to encourage your heart God's grace and mercy toward you, regardless of your circumstances?

Notes

1. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 108.
2. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 89.
3. Silva, *Philippians*, 62.
4. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 93.
5. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 113.
6. Kenneth Stewart, "The Gospel Unhindered," January 9, 2012. <<http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=19121332191>>. Accessed July 16, 2016.
7. Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary / New Testament*, vol. 2 (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2001), 67–68.
8. Hendriksen, *Philippians*, 24.
9. "λαλέω," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (NIDNTTE), 2nd ed., vol. 3, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 78–79. Compare with "preach" (Phil. 1:15):

“κηρύσσω,” NIDNTTE, vol. 2, 674–82. Also, compare with “proclaim” (Phil. 1:17), “καταγγέλλω”: “ἀγγέλλω,” NIDNTTE, vol. 1, 116–20.

10. Hendriksen, *Philippians*, 70.

11. Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 243.

12. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 67.

13. Thielman, *Philippians*, 63.

14. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 36.

15. Earlier editions of the ESV translate the word “selfish ambition” in Philippians 1:17 and 2:3 as “rivalry.” Although “selfish ambition” (*erin*) closely resembles the word “rivalry” (*eritheias*), the newer edition helpfully differentiates the two words.

16. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 99.

17. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, (BDAG), rev. and ed., Frederick William Danker “ἔρις,” 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 392.

18. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians*, trans. John Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 37. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom42.iv.ii.iii.html>>

19. Hendriksen, *Philippians*, 71–72.

20. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 101.

21. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 120.

22. Thielman, *Philippians*, 72–73. In this section, Thielman addresses the same Donatist controversy that I write about here.

23. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 39.

24. Roger Ellsworth, *Opening Up Philippians* (Leominster, UK: Day One Publications, 2004), 27.