



*A Radio Ministry of Cornerstone Community Church
"Persecution Advances the Gospel"*

Philippians 1:12-18

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Let's turn to Philippians chapter 1 as we think about the advancement of the gospel.

It is very, very easy for us in our affluent society where Christianity in our culture is widely accepted, there's not much that we can truly call persecution, there's a little, we're seeing it more and more, but not even close to what the New Testament church experienced. And so, we tend to get too comfortable, and we tend to become very inward focused as believers, and even as churches. We tend to become inward-focused. And we lose the vision of the world out there that is dying without Christ and going to hell. And we must, with the Lord's help, keep the vision of the nations before our eyes, because that's what you find throughout the Scriptures.

God has left us here to serve him, to proclaim his name, to live for his glory, all so that he continues to do his work of calling out from among the peoples of the world a people for his own pleasure. The people that we heard about from Revelation 5 this morning. From every tongue and tribe and nation. That's what heaven's going to look like. Heaven is going to be multi-ethnic, multiracial. That's what the church should be looking like now as we are reaching the nations with the gospel.

Jesus did not predict that his followers would be mistreated. He *promised* it. He said in John 15:18-20, "*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.*"

Notice the word that is chosen: if they persecuted me, they *will*.

The Apostle Paul later wrote to Timothy, "*All those who live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*" Not "may" be persecuted, not "might" be persecuted, but "*will*" be persecuted. In other words, persecution is a part of real Christianity. And Jesus's promise came true.

According to Thomas Brooks, a British congregationalist pastor who lived from 1608 to 1680, "Church history records the extent to which the early followers of Jesus suffered for their faith." He says, "Peter was crucified with his heels upward. Christ was crucified with his head upwards, but Peter thought this was too great an honor for him to be crucified the same way as his Lord, and therefore he chose to be crucified with his feet upward. And Andrew was crucified by Abgar King of Edessa. And James the son of Zebedee, was slain by Herod with the sword. And Philip was crucified at Hierapolis in Asia. And while Bartholomew was preaching the glad tidings of salvation, multitudes fell upon him and beat him down with staves and then crucified him. And after all this his skin was flayed off and he was beheaded. Thomas was slain with a short lance

at Kalamna in India. And Matthew was slain with a spear, say some. Others say he was run through with a sword. And James, the son of Alphaeus, who was called The Just was thrown down from off of a pinnacle of the temple and yet having some life left in him he was brained to death with a Fuller's Club. Levi was slain by Abgar, king of Edessa, and Paul was beheaded at Rome under Nero. Simon the Canaanite was crucified in Egypt, say some, others say that he and Jude were slain in a tumult of the people. And Matthias was stoned to death. And John was banished on the island of Patmos, and afterwards as some historians tell us, he was, by that cruel tyrant Domitian cast into a large cask of scalding lead, and yet was delivered by a miracle. Thus, all these precious servants of God, except John, died violent deaths. And so, through suffering have entered into glory. They found in their own experience the truth of what Christ had foretold concerning their sufferings and persecutions."

A more recent example of persecution against Christians is what happened in July of 2007. The last day of the month WorldNetDaily ran a story about two young boys in Egypt, ages 11 and 13. They were ordered to take a school test that would result in their conversion to Islam. And they wrote, "I am a Christian" on their exam papers, knowing in advance that could very well spell the end of their education. What brought the case to the public attention is the categorical refusal of the two kids to pass the Islamic exam and convert to Islam, stating they will not deny their Christianity and convert to Islam, no matter what it would cost them. The story went on to say the two boys are facing a future without any educational opportunities, even though they had been classified as brilliant students at the French school in Alexandria.

In April of 2007, three believers were martyred in Turkey. You may remember this. Three men had met at a Christian publishing house for a Bible study. Instead, they faced the ultimate test of faith. A group of five Muslims met them there claiming to be interested in learning more about the Bible. But the real reason they were there was to torture and ultimately slit the throats of the three followers of Jesus.

Days later, Suzanne Goeske, widow of one of the men killed issued the following statement: "Oh God, forgive them, for they know not what they do." A letter distributed by The Voice of the Martyrs said, "In a country where blood-for-blood revenge is as normal as breathing, many reports have come to the attention of the church of how this comment by Suzanne Goeske has changed lives." One columnist wrote of her comment, "She said in one sentence what 1,000 missionaries in 1,000 years could never do."

See, persecution has a way of spreading the gospel. It's paradoxical, but it's what we see throughout the Scriptures and throughout church history, that Satan and his army of evil angels work night and day to put an end to the work of evangelism. But God has a way of always turning it to his advantage! It's that way now, it was that way in the days the Apostle Paul. And he describes this to the Philippian believers.

And so, if you're not in Philippians chapter 1 already, please get there. As the Apostle is confined to prison in Rome, what he's doing now is encouraging the believers in Phillipi by informing them of how the Holy Spirit is using his suffering to advance the cause of the gospel.

I want you to notice, first of all, the consequence of imprisonment.

Beginning in verse 12 of Philippians 1. *“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel,”* or to propagate the gospel, or to lead to gospel progress. I want you to know this, brothers, lest you be overly discouraged, and distraught, and even in despair. That you know that God is using my imprisonment to actually accomplish the work to which I've dedicated my life: the work of the gospel.

In 2 Timothy 2:9, Paul writes, *“Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal.”* Listen to the next sentence: *“but the word of God is not bound.”*

What is he saying? He's saying, you can imprison the preacher, but you cannot imprison the gospel. You can throw as many Christians into jail as you want but you will not stop the gospel from spreading. Because the gospel is the Word of God and it is alive by the power of the Holy Spirit. You can persecute those who preach the Word of God, those who take the gospel to the ends of the earth, but the gospel will prevail. We have read the end of the book and we know who wins! It is Jesus who wins. And it is his gospel that will accomplish the sovereign plan of God in the saving of people from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation!

So, believers, he says, I want you to understand that what's happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. **And then he describes how in two ways:**
- first through evangelism.

The gospel is spreading, “so that,” verse 13, *“it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.”*

The imperial guard was the emperor's elite troops, something like the Green Berets or security police. They were stationed in Rome. One commentator says, “They guarded Paul around the clock but would have given him access to visitors,” that explains things we read in his letters about visitors, “and the writing of letters,” explains the writing of Philippians here, “and to other routine affairs.” Since they rotated on a basically four-hour shift, Paul would have had access to several or many of them. From whom eventually the whole guard came to know the reason for his bonds, that he was in chains for Christ.”

Imagine this. Every four hours a new security guard shows up, and history says that security guard would have been chained to Paul, a captive audience, so every four hours the apostle Paul has a new guy to preach the gospel to. So if there were enough guards, we're talking about six different guys every day. To the point where the gospel was spreading through the prison.

Which is why, if you turn in your Bible to the right, you read in chapter 4 verse 21, *“Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.”* Caesar's household included the guards who were under Caesar's control or authority.

“So,” he says in verse 13 *“that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.”* So, the reason for Paul's imprisonment became widely known. And thus, the name of Christ came up often in normal conversation as people throughout the city were talking about this man who was imprisoned because of his faith in Jesus Christ.

So, the work of evangelism benefited from Paul suffering. You see that? The work of evangelism benefited from his suffering.

There's a second consequence you see in verse 14. Not only evangelism, but edification.

So, not only evangelization of the lost, but the edification of believers. Believers were built up and encouraged in their faith. It says in verse 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, Paul says as a result of my imprisonment, other believers saw me imprisoned for the cause of Christ, and that encouraged them! That gave them greater confidence that, here was their great example, the apostle, who was willing to suffer, therefore why should *they* not be willing to suffer? So, they became bolder in their preaching of the gospel. They didn't become more timid and run away but, no, they became bold!

See, suffering for the gospel leads to increased boldness as other believers are made more dependent upon God, and less dependent upon themselves. That's what we see in the book of Acts, in Acts chapter 4. Remember when the apostles were thrown into prison, thrown into jail, and they were ordered to stop preaching Christ. And the church prayed, and they were released. And Acts 4:23-28 says *“When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it they lifted their voices together to God and said, ‘Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the people's plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and their rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’ – for truly in this city...”* Now, he applies that Psalm to the crucifixion of Jesus. *“for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.”*

So, the crucifixion was part of the sovereign plan of God for the redemption of the lost. *“And now, Lord, look upon their threats...”* listen to this prayer: *“Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.”*

And it goes on to say, *“when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.”*

See, suffering leads to boldness because, in between the suffering and the boldness, is prayer. Did you get that? Suffering doesn't just *automatically* lead to boldness. Suffering leads to

boldness when there is an increased dependence upon God for the power to preach in the face of enemies. And that power comes through prayer. And not only the prayer of the person who needs to become bolder, but the prayers of other believers, the churches, who are praying for boldness.

That's one of the ways we need to be praying for our missionaries. Our missionaries who are preaching the gospel and translating the Scriptures, you need to understand that they are on the front lines of a war! Satan hates their ministry, he hates them, and he wants nothing more than to disrupt their ministry and destroy their testimony and eliminate them as a viable effort in the work of getting the gospel to the nations. We should pray for them to have confidence and boldness, courage and strength.

So, these are the consequences of the imprisonment.

Look at the contrast of motives. These are some of the most interesting verses in the New Testament, I think. He says, "*Some indeed preach Christ,*" verse 15, "*from envy and rivalry, but others from good will.*"

He's talking now about those who are now preaching more because of his imprisonment. People he just talked about in verse 14. And he says all those people who are preaching because I'm in prison are now kind of falling into two categories: those who are preaching out of love for me and love for Christ, and those who are preaching out of envy and rivalry.

It's a very strange thing. He says that those who are preaching from good will are doing it out of love. That would be love for Christ but also affection for the apostle – sympathy and empathy for the apostle and the horrible moment of suffering that he finds himself in. They do it out of love because they know that Paul says, I'm put here for the defense of the gospel. They know I'm here for the gospel and so they know that they need to continue the work out of love.

But there's others who preach Christ out of selfish ambition. That's a kind of a clamoring for position. In other words, they see Paul is now in prison. Aha, there's a vacuum that they will quickly slide into because, yes, they may love Christ and may know Christ, (I don't think Paul is saying they're unbelievers), but they have a lot of pride. A lot of immature arrogance and pride in them and they want the power that the apostle had when he was doing his work. Now he's in prison so it's a good time for them to come out of the woodwork and become prominent.

"*They do it,*" he says, "*not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.*" That is so strange. Not only are they doing it for themselves out of selfish ambition, but there's even some wicked vengeance in their hearts that they want to do his work while he's in prison because they want him to feel worse about being in prison than he already feels! But this is how wicked the human heart can be, even in the believer, may I say. So, there's a contrast of motives here.

And so, one wonders then, how would Paul respond to this? How would he respond to knowing the differences of the motives of the people who are preaching Christ? Well, look at verse 18 because he tells us.

In verse 18 we see the choice to rejoice! This is so contrary! What Paul does in verse 18 is so contrary to human nature! I have to say, it's certainly contrary to what *I* would do at first response! My first response would not be as godly as his is here, I'm ashamed to say.

Look at his example. "*What then?*" What should I do then? What should I do about these guys? "*Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.*"

See, he's not saying, it doesn't matter that some of the motives are corrupt. That's not what he's saying. What he's saying is, I trust God to deal with all of those things to the point where I can rejoice that the name of Christ is being preached. I can make sure that *my* ministry is faithful to the Word of God, and I can be making sure my motives are pure before the Lord and examining myself over and over again. But I can't do that for anyone else. And it's not my job to do that for anyone else. And so, instead, what I choose to do is I choose to rejoice that the name of Jesus is being proclaimed.

This doesn't mean that the apostle doesn't care about doctrinal distinctives. We know that's clear in all of his other letters, but when it comes down to judging the motives of another minister's heart, Paul leaves that with God. And he says I will rejoice in that person's ministry to the extent that they exalt Christ. Do you see how Christ-centered Paul is? Do you see how gospel-centered he is in this passage of Scripture?

Paul's gracious response to those whose motives for ministry are not pure, I believe, is further testimony that, for Paul, *the gospel was central to everything*. That Christ is central to everything.

Harry Ironside pastored Moody Church in the early 1900s. And I was so blessed this week to read his comments on this passage and I thought, well maybe I'll just try and say what he said in my own words, but I can't. He says it so carefully, so beautifully, it was such a blessing to my heart. I want to read them to you. Just think about what he's saying about this passage of Scripture and the apostle Paul's example to us.

Ironside wrote, "It is always a sad sign and an evidence of spiritual decline when the heart loses its interest in the message of grace. Some there are so occupied with the deeper truths of the Word of God that they allow themselves to speak slightly of the simplicity of the gospel. Paul was the preeminent teacher of the church, but to his last hour his heart was filled with gospel zeal and his sympathies were with the evangelists carrying the Word of Life to men dead in trespasses and in sins. Even in his prison house he rejoiced that his affairs had really tended to the progress of the gospel. Satan, doubtless, hoped to hinder that work by locking up the apostle in a jail. But even there it became manifest to all in Caesar's court and to all others that his bonds were for Christ's sake. The very soldiers appointed to guard him were brought thus to hear the glorious proclamation of grace to a guilty world. And it is evident both from the 13th verse and the 22nd verse of chapter 4, that numbers of them believed. Who can fathom the joy that must have filled the heart of Paul as he led one guard after another to the Savior's feet! Just as when cast into the Philippian dungeon, he and his companion, Silas, were used to the

conversion of the jailer and his household, so here grace triumphed over all seemingly untoward circumstances. And the prison cell became a gospel chapel where souls were being born of God and stern Roman soldiers became, themselves, the captive servants of one greater than Caesar.”

Isn't that glorious? May God work in our hearts to give us such a Christ-centered gospel-focused mentality – a love for the Savior that will endure whatever persecutions come against us in the days and years and decades ahead of us. That we may keep Christ preeminent. We may love him and live for him and continue to lead others to him.

Let's pray. Father, it is with such great joy that we see such an amazing example from the apostle. Lord, we know he was of the flesh just as we are. We know that from Romans 6 and 7 he was a man of like flesh. He did things he didn't want to do. He didn't do things he wanted to do. He wrestled against the flesh. But we're so thankful that your Spirit preserved for us in the book of Philippians this marvelous example of his willingness to suffer for the sake of the gospel, willing to be judged and imprisoned. Willing even to be mistreated by others who preached Christ. Because in the end he knew that each servant will one day stand before his own master, the Lord Jesus. And he knew that the good news of Jesus is what people need to hear. And so he was able to rejoice that the name of Christ was preached. Give us that kind of grace in our lives, Lord. Make us Christ-centered gospel-loving people, and gospel-centered Christ-loving people, that others may see Jesus in us. And when we open our mouths and by the Spirit of God tell others of Christ, may you bear marvelous fruit. For it's all in your power that we serve you, Lord, and for your glory. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

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