

The Gospel Driven Life

Our Life in Christ

Philippians 1:12-18a

Nate Irwin

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Philippians 1:12-18a (ESV)

INTRO

Have you ever known someone who marched to a different drummer than the rest of us, who had a unique agenda, a lens through which he looked at life that was, frankly, a bit strange? Elwood P. Dowd was such a man: a middle-aged, amiable (and somewhat eccentric) individual whose best friend was an invisible 6' 3.5" tall white rabbit named Harvey. As described by Dowd, Harvey is a *pooka*, a benign but mischievous creature from Celtic mythology who is especially fond of social outcasts (like Elwood).

The genius of the Pulitzer prize winning play by Mary Chase, made into an Oscar winning movie in 1950, is that Elwood, played by Jimmy Stewart, goes through life with a different operating system than most people. "Years ago my mother used to say to me, she'd say, 'In this world, Elwood, you must be' – she always called me Elwood – 'In this world, Elwood, you must be oh so smart or oh so pleasant.' Well, for years I was smart. I recommend pleasant." The movie's opening clip may give you a little insight into this unusual man. . . . While others are concerned about money, position, prestige, all Elwood cares about is enjoying the moment with whatever company he has, always wanting to make the other person the focus of his time and attention, rather than himself. In fact, he is so self-forgetful that people think he's weird. So much so that his family tries to get him committed to a mental institution. And yet he's so heart-warming, so personable, so affirming, that by the end of the movie, you're wondering who really has the best grasp of reality after all. It's a profound film.

After his dramatic conversion, the apostle Paul went through life, like Elwood P. Dowd, with a different operating system than others. It was not his belief in an imaginary 6' 3 ½" rabbit that set his new agenda in life—it was his personal encounter with the resurrected and living Lord Jesus Christ. In that moment of conversion, everything changed for Paul. Life from that point on became no longer about Paul; he says, "I died"," but about Christ, and therefore, about others. He wanted nothing for himself, but everything for others. And everything, for Paul, was a chance to hear about Christ and enter, with Him, into the abundant life that Christ gives, both now and for all of eternity.

In our text today, we hear the testimony of a somewhat strange man, a man who no longer cares a whit about himself or the things of this world that mean so much to most of us—security, comfort, respect. A man who wears Gospel goggles, a man who lives a Gospel-driven life. And that changes his perspective on everything. And if we will join him in re-orienting our lives like His, to Christ and His values and His agenda, we will find that our whole outlook on life will change as well. We will, first, have a new perspective on:

I. OUR DIFFICULT PROBLEMS, vv. 12-14

v. 12, “what has happened to me.” What had happened to Paul? Well, it’s kind of a long story. It had begun a couple of years earlier, as described in the last few chapters of Acts, which tells how Paul, on his third missionary journey, had felt compelled by the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem. There he was arrested, and the Jews tried desperately to kill him. Paul had become for them an unacceptable thorn in the flesh, a man who was trying to destroy their religion by telling people that you didn’t have to become a Jew to be a follower of Jesus, that anyone could have a relationship with God by faith in Jesus Christ, and they wanted to rid the earth of him and this scandalous teaching. The Romans were governing this part of the world, and they were confused, at a loss as to what to do with this man, for these bizarre religious accusations made no sense to them. Paul had been moved to Caesarea for safe keeping and stayed there in detention for two years while his case dragged on. When Governor Festus, as a favor to the Jews, finally asked Paul to go to Jerusalem for his trial, Paul, knowing that he would certainly be lynched in Jerusalem, pulled out his Roman card and said, “I appeal to Caesar.” So, he was shipped off to Rome, and after an exciting shipwreck, and barely escaping with his life, he finally arrives in Rome. And there he is kept under house arrest while waiting for his trial before Caesar, who, by the way, was a man named Nero.

It is likely from here, from Rome, around A.D. 62, that Paul writes a letter to his good friends and supporting church in Philippi. MAP. They had sent some funds for his needs sometime during the two years that he was under house arrest in Rome, and so the book of Philippians is essentially a missionary thank you letter for their support.

That’s all background to the book, but it explains the phrase in v. 12, “what has happened to me.” Notice what he says about what had happened to him: nothing! He could have written reams about how the Jews had beaten him and made a plot to kill him in Jerusalem, how the Romans almost gave him the 39 lashes until he told them he was a Roman citizen, how on the voyage to Rome they almost all drowned in a two-week long hurricane, or how he got bitten by a poisonous snake on the island of Malta after the shipwreck. That’s probably what we would have written, right? Stuff about us? But, no, what had happened to him was inconsequential; it meant nothing, because he had a different operating system that guided his approach to life. All of Paul’s anxiety is reserved for the work he is engaged in. “As long as it goes forward, he cares nothing for himself” (Stott). Speaking to the brothers (and, by implication, sisters) in Philippi, meaning that they are one in the family of God and so they should share his perspective, he says that the only thing that he cared about was that what happened to him had served to advance the Gospel. Instead of talking about how he was doing, he wanted to talk about how the Gospel was doing. And he rejoiced, because the chains that bound Paul released the Gospel.

The Gospel is the theme of this section. V. 12, “Advance the Gospel”; v. 14, “Speak the word”; v. 15, “Preach Christ”; v.17, “Proclaim Christ”; v. 18, “Christ is proclaimed.” Do you get the picture? Paul is a Gospel-driven person. But what is the Gospel? If you have been with us through Romans, you

should know pretty well by now! The Gospel is what Jesus did because of what we did. It is the Good News that “sinful man is justified by grace through faith in Christ alone.” Because Christ died in the guilty sinner’s place, the believing sinner can live.

So how has what had happened to Paul served to advance the Gospel? In two ways. First, a wide variety of unbelievers heard the Gospel. The Gospel “advanced,” a word that pictures pioneers cutting a way before an army so they can keep moving forward. When invading hostile territory, it is hard to advance; there is resistance, and it takes specialists and engineers and ordnance to blast open the way. So with the Gospel. How will it invade the Kingdom of darkness and take territory? God has a very special tool He uses and it is called “difficulties.”

Who were those unbelievers who heard the Gospel because of what had happened to Paul? It’s a long list! For starters, Paul got to preach the Gospel to those who had arrested him in Jerusalem, a large crowd of Jews and the Roman tribune that was guarding him (Acts 22). Two different governors of Judea, Felix and Festus, heard the Gospel. A king and queen, Agrippa and Bernice, were so interested in Paul’s case that they wanted to hear more, and so Paul gives them the whole nine yards in Acts 26 and calls on King Agrippa to believe! Then he’s on a ship with 275 other people, and God sends a storm so they would panic and Paul could testify of his faith in Christ. Then they’re shipwrecked on Malta, where the snake bites him and he doesn’t die, and the father of the ruler of the island is sick, so Paul prays for him and he is healed, and Paul gets to testify to the power of Jesus Christ. And would any of that have happened if “these things” had not happened to Paul? No.

Now Paul is in Rome, and guess what? Acts 28:16 says that the Romans allowed Paul to stay by himself, but “with the soldier that guarded him.” Just to make sure he didn’t give them the slip, the Romans chained a soldier to him 24/7, rotating the guard every four hours. And we would go, “Bummer!” But wait a minute: remember what is driving Paul, what the operating system of his life is? The Gospel. These were probably soldiers from Caesar’s personal security force, what was called the Praetorian Guard, Nero’s Secret Service. This was an elite force of the Roman Empire; they got double pay, a special pension and extra benefits. And Paul goes, “Beautiful! I couldn’t have planned it better myself!” So every four hours, a new guard comes, six a day, for two years. That could have been close to 4,000, men if they rotated duty, and with every new one that comes along Paul says, “Here we go!”

So much so that Paul says in v. 13, “it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard that my imprisonment is for Christ.” And through them, it has become known to “all the rest, “basically the whole of Rome. You see, Paul’s case was a high profile one, a test case. He was the leader of a new group, and the Romans wanted to make sure things didn’t get out of hand. So people knew about Paul’s case, they talked about Paul’s case, and as soldier after soldier heard the Gospel from him, they talked among themselves. They could see that he had not been detained because he was a criminal or a political activist. He was in chains “for Christ,” for his belief in and propagation of the Gospel. And so the end result, as described in Acts. 28: 31, was that Paul lived there two whole years, welcoming all who came to him, “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.” So while he was in chains, the Gospel, as he says in 2 Tim. 2:9 was not in chains!

Did Paul plan all this out? Not at all. Paul had long wanted to go to Rome, but his plan was to go as a preacher and not as a prisoner! It would be hard to voluntarily choose your own beating and imprisonment and shipwreck. The tense of the verb here, a passive tense, indicates that Paul

understood that there was a sovereign hand behind and over all that had happened to him. It's the same thought as implied in v. 16: "I am put here," a military term, under orders, issued by the Commander in Chief. It was not by accident, it was not misfortune, it was not being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was GOD! You see, our God is a genius—and He is deeply passionate that the Gospel of His Son be proclaimed to every single person on the face of the earth. All it takes is a willing servant, a Gospel-driven disciple, to say, "You know what, I'm done living for self, I'm going to live for the Gospel, and let God do whatever He will with and to me—if only it will advance the Gospel."

This is what Matthew Henry calls the "strange chemistry of providence," that God can extract so great a good out of so great an evil. It is understanding that God doesn't work in spite of our difficult circumstances; He works through them. And the result is surprising to us. The word "really" in v. 12, means it was unexpected; it turned out quite different than we would have thought. Paul's imprisonment not only didn't slow down the spread of the Gospel; it sped it up! What seemed to be a fatal blow to the mission turned out to be the means of its revitalization. Only God. To the Romans, Caesar may be Lord; but to Paul and the believers in Philippi, only Jesus was Lord, and His lordship over Caesar is already making itself felt!

Kulbir is a student at NTC in India. She was a strong student in a Sikh home in Punjab. After scoring very well on the national exams, she was headed to a university for an engineering degree. She and her father heard the gospel preached and came to the Lord. Her mother was mentally ill—all in the town knew her as the one with mental illness. A pastor came and prayed for her, and she was healed. The whole town noticed a difference, which opened the door to share the gospel, and many came to the Lord. Her father became a church leader. Shortly after this, he was falsely accused of something and taken to jail. He sits in jail waiting for his trial. In 2012, with tears, she asked for our team to pray for her father's release. When I saw her in 2013 and asked about her father, she shared that he was still in jail. Before I could comment, she shared that while in prison he had started sharing the gospel and that many people have come to the Lord. Now he holds a prayer and Bible study time at 4 a.m. with a group of fellow prisoners—his new church.

V. 12, "I want you to know." Paul says today to many of you, "I want you to know" something you may not have known up to now, but what has happened to you has actually turned out to advance the Gospel, through your difficulties. Look at your circumstances as God-ordained tools to advance the Gospel in a way it could never have done otherwise.

But that's just the beginning. There's a second way in which Paul's difficult circumstances served to advance the Gospel (v. 14) and that is that believers shared the Gospel more. You see, we're often reluctant to share the Gospel—and we don't even have the problem that Christians in Rome did. They naturally wanted to be careful about too closely identifying with this new group of Christ followers, in case the Romans decided to rule against them and even wipe them out, which is exactly what Nero, the Caesar to whom Paul appealed, tried to do just a few years later. In fact, Nero became so anti-Christian that, it was said, he used a continual supply of Christians to burn in his garden at night for a source of light. But when these Christians heard about Paul's imprisonment, and particularly about how the Word had spread as a result of it, most of them, the text says, became emboldened, confident, to themselves speak the Word without fear (literally "more exceedingly to dare fearlessly to speak the Word of God.")

Why did they become fearless and speak the word more? Was it because they saw that God would deliver His people from any of their troubles? No, not at all. It was by seeing that even in the

middle of troubles, God's Word was triumphing. And if Paul could be used in a greater way from prison, then if they had to suffer for their witness, God would use that in a greater way too. They became inspired by Paul's example to be Gospel-driven disciples. And so now instead of just one man radiating the Good News of the Gospel out from his little house in Rome, there were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of lights shining brighter in the city—all because Paul lived a Gospel-driven life. He cared not for himself but only that the message get out to as many as possible.

And we? We're afraid to share, simply because we think people will think we're weird. But you know how you're encouraged when you hear another believer share his story about how he shared his faith?

II. OUR DIFFICULT PEOPLE, vv. 15-18

How easy life and ministry would be—if it weren't for the people! But we're not here alone; there are others in the boat with us, and we need to learn to get along. In fact, Paul begins to model here the attitude that he will encourage the whole church to have in chapter 2 and two individuals in particular in chapter 4. You see, Paul's wasn't the only act in town; there were other preachers of the Gospel. And they seem to be divided into two groups—the good guys and the bad guys.

Let me show you how this section is so carefully constructed. It's called a *chiasm* in Greek.

- A Some preach Christ because of envy and rivalry, v. 15a
- B But others from good will, v. 15b
- B' The latter do it out of love, v. 16
- A' The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely, v. 17
- A'' In pretense, v. 18a
- B'' In truth, v. 18b

So you're got two columns forming, let's call them Paul's friends and Paul's competitors

<u>Paul's friends</u>	<u>Paul's competitors</u>
Goodwill	Envy and rivalry (strife)
Love	Rivalry (selfish ambition), not sincerely, hoping to hurt Paul
In truth	In pretense ("not purely")

The first group we can understand pretty well. The text says they preached Christ from good will; they regarded Paul favorably and were well disposed toward him. And so they preached Christ out of love. They knew that the real reason Paul was imprisoned was because he had stood up for the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ even when that defense might have gotten him the death sentence. And because this group loved Paul, they knew how hard it was for him to be housebound, so they carried on his ministry. They did what he would have done if he had been free to walk about: they proclaimed Christ throughout Rome. And they did so "in truth," (v. 18);

their preaching was without hypocrisy because they believed and acted upon the message that they were proclaiming.

Now, who the other group is, is a puzzle. One commentator (O'Brien) gives six different possibilities, almost all of them speculation since the text is not clear. But what does seem clear is that these people were also preaching the real Gospel. So they could not have been the so-called "Judaizers" that Paul excoriated in the book of Galatians for their distortion of the Gospel—saying that there were certain things you had to do (i.e. be circumcised) in order to follow Christ. Paul said that those people can, literally, go to hell (Gal. 1:9), that's how strongly he felt about it. You mess up the Gospel with Paul, and he messes with you.

But that was not the case with this group. Paul seems to be fine with their message; it is their motives that are bad. They preached Christ, but they did so out of envy and rivalry, creating strife, not sincerely, but in pretense, hoping to hurt Paul in some way. These are not good things! In fact, they are listed in the works of the flesh in Gal. 5 and elsewhere. You might ask why anyone would want to preach the Gospel from those motives. And the answer is we just don't know, from this text.

The word "envy" is the same word used in Mk. 15:10, that it was on account of envy that the chief priests delivered Jesus up to the Romans. Notice "chief." You see what happens when we all want to be chiefs. They couldn't tolerate that the crowds had gone over to Jesus. Envy is the desire to deprive someone of what they have, to begrudge them. These were people who were probably jealous of Paul's success and his stature, and now while he was detained, they thought they would make some hay, preach up a storm, get people to join their flocks, and leave Paul in the dust. And in the process, they hoped to cause Paul inward annoyance and distress.

But what is Paul's response to them? It's really quite remarkable! While he doesn't excuse their motives, because motives are important, and he talks about them elsewhere, he instead focuses on the bigger picture. That's always so helpful (v. 18, "What then?", i.e. "So what?")! The "so what" is this: I am actually happy about their ministry, because even though their motives are wrong, their message is right. They are preaching Christ, and people are hearing the Gospel. And in this I rejoice! The message is bigger than the messenger. This is what it means to live a Gospel-driven life, to have so little care for your own comfort, your reputation, your "ministry" or little kingdom, that you can rejoice when people are working against you—if they are preaching Christ. For you see, then the central thing is happening: people are hearing the Good News, the Gospel is advancing, and compared to that, what happens to me is of no consequence.

How can we apply this? We need to avoid a sense of superiority or pettiness or territorialism. We need, like Paul, a largeness of heart toward other Christians. Even if they do things differently than we do, even if they believe differently about the non-fundamentals of the faith. But if they believe and preach the Gospel, then we are for them! We are on the same team, we love them, we wish them the best. We want to have the same attitude towards other believers that George Whitfield had towards D.L. Moody. These two men had their theological differences, but one day when Whitfield was asked if he thought he would see Moody in heaven, he said no. The person then asked, "Aha, so you don't think he is saved?" "No," said Whitfield, "the problem is that he will be so near the eternal throne and I at such a distance, I shall hardly get sight of him." This is the spirit of Paul, the spirit of Christ, the spirit of the Gospel-driven life. We have a new perspective on difficult people in our lives, because we don't care about our reputation or our group; all we care about is that the Gospel is advancing.

CONCLUSION

1. Paul was a fanatic, some would say a lunatic, in his passion for the advance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If you're visiting today, or if you have not yet decided to follow Christ—you're just kind of checking us out—there's probably something about this message today that freaks you out a little bit. If I were in your shoes, this is what I would be wondering: how can we honor a man like Paul, who is so totally committed to what feels to me like an intolerant viewpoint? OK, so he's tolerant of other Christians, but he's not tolerant toward anybody else. I mean, he has sold his life out to tell people that there's only one way to get to heaven, and that's through faith in Jesus, and that if you don't follow that one way, he believes you will go to hell. Well, as strange as this might sound to your ears, that's exactly what we're saying. That is what we believe. That's what Paul believed. But listen carefully please: it's not because Paul made it up or because he thought he was better than everyone else. It was because Jesus, God Himself, said it; and then He revealed it personally to Paul, and Paul wrote it down in the Bible so we could read it this morning. This is not an opinion, one in a cloud of man-made ideas; it is the truth and the revelation of God, the creator of the world.

But it's not bad news; it's good news. And it was not out of some superiority complex that Paul wanted to share it with everyone. He was a beggar telling other beggars where he found food. It was because he loved them, and he wanted them to have a chance to be saved from God's eternal punishment, just like he had been. What he's doing is modeling for the Philippians what he had just prayed for them in v. 9, that their love would abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment. What does that look like? By changing the operating system of your life so it's about others, it's about the Gospel, and it's no longer yourself. This is how you love—by proclaiming the Gospel of salvation, the greatest news ever! Paul understood what Jesus taught, that it would be an eternal disaster to gain the whole world but lose your soul. And so in love he helps people save their souls, through Christ.

2. Note also that Paul's focus in this text is not on the results of the preaching; it's on the preaching itself. Paul understood that as humans, all we can do is sow the seed and maybe water it a bit—but it is God who gives the increase, it is God who opens hearts and eyes, it is God who shines His light into the darkness of the human mind and allows blind eyes to see the light of the glorious Gospel in the face of Christ. So we must be faithful simply in getting the Word out, in proclaiming Christ, in sowing the seed, in telling people about Jesus—and let Him produce the results. And usually, our work will not be without result, for God's Word, when sown, does not return void. And notice as Paul closes this book, he says, I think with a wink in his eye, "All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household."

3. Finally, we who are followers of Jesus must ask ourselves this question: What drives my life? We don't just need a purpose driven life—we need a Gospel driven life. This is part of what Paul meant in his prayer in v. 10, that we may learn to approve what is excellent. What things would your life say you believe are excellent, what drives your life? Not what would you say drives it, like when you're sitting here, pretty in church. But what actually drives it out in the world, out in my neighborhood, out at my work? What drives it when things are tough—cancer, family struggles, desire to be married, unemployment, worry about money, worry about what others think of me. Do I look at all of those circumstances, as difficult as my problems may be, as God-ordained

opportunities for me to proclaim Christ in a way I never could had I not been in those circumstances?

Gospel glasses change our perspective on everything. Our difficult problems, our difficult people. You see, when we do that, we can begin to rejoice. We begin to see “hindrances” as opportunities. Joy is not self-satisfied delight that everything is going our way, but the settled peace that comes from making the Gospel the focus of our lives and from understanding that God is able to use the worst circumstances to advance the Gospel. And so we learn to rejoice in what God is going to do through our circumstances, not complain about what He has not done for us. If we lack joy, perhaps it is because it is too firmly connected to our physical and emotional comfort than the goals of the Gospel.

“Paul was so gospel intoxicated, so centered on getting the good news of Christ out to the lost in Rome, that his feelings and aspirations were subsumed and subject to the gospel.” (Hughes, p. 51)

“Paul’s example is impressive and clear: Put the advance of the gospel at the center of your aspirations. Our own comfort, our bruised feelings, our reputations, our misunderstood motives—all of these are insignificant in comparison with the advance of the gospel and splendor of the gospel. As Christians, we are called upon to put the advance of the gospel at the very center of our aspirations.

“What are your aspirations? To make money? To get married? To travel? To see your grandchildren grow up? To find a new job? To retire early? None of these is inadmissible; none is to be despised. The question is whether these aspirations become so devouring that the Christian’s central aspiration is squeezed to the periphery or choked out of existence entirely.” (Carson, Basics for Believers, pp. 25, 26)

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