

A Gospel-Centered Life

Today, we continue our study through the book of Philippians. We are starting at verse 12, which begins the main body of Paul's letter. In this passage we get a glimpse of what it looks like to live a gospel-centered life. By a gospel-centered life, I mean a life in which we care about others coming to know Jesus and then helping the gospel grow deeper in them. Paul lived this kind of life. And it served as an example to the Philippians in their day and it serves as an example to us in our day.

The first way we see Paul's gospel-centered life in this passage is that Paul cared about the advancement of the gospel more than his circumstances.

I. Gospel above Circumstances (vv. 12-18a)

Paul says:

¹² Now I want you to know, brethren, that . . .

If you were on the receiving end of this letter you would now expect that Paul is going to tell you of his personal welfare. Was he healthy or sick? Was he hungry or well fed? What are his conditions in prison? These are the kinds of things that one would expect Paul to disclose, but this is not Paul's concern. The advancement of the gospel is.

¹² Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel,

Paul's circumstances aren't great. He's in a Roman prison possibly facing a trial and a death sentence. And the Philippians might have been tempted to think that because of his imprisonment the advance of the gospel was being hindered, but the truth is very different. Paul says that his bad circumstances have turned out *for the greater progress of the gospel*.

¹³ so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else,

The *praetorian guard* was a group of Roman soldiers who served as a bodyguard to Caesar. There were about 9000 such soldiers. They had come to know that Paul was in chains for Christ. You could imagine how this happened, right? A guard shows up for duty and eventually asks Paul, "Why are you here?" And you could imagine Paul taking the opportunity to boldly explain the gospel to that soldier. Jesus is king, not Caesar.

Paul also says that his imprisonment had become well known to *everyone else*. Others in and around the area had heard of this prisoner who was in chains for Christ. And so the gospel had advanced in the Roman world because of Paul's imprisonment.

But Paul says that there is a second way that the gospel has advanced and that is the effect that his imprisonment was having on believers. Verse 14:

¹⁴ *and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.*

Paul's example moved other believers to greater boldness. They were *trusting in the Lord because of* [Paul's] *imprisonment*. As they heard about Paul's boldness while in prison they found *far more courage* to speak up for Christ without fear. The word *courage* here has the sense of daring to speak in the face of danger. And so Paul's imprisonment led to a bolder witness for Christ through other believers.

Now, after mentioning the good news that believers had been emboldened to speak up for Christ, he shares the bad news that not all were doing so out of good motives. Verse 15:

¹⁵ *Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; ¹⁶ the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; ¹⁷ the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment.*

Some preached Christ because they loved Paul. They knew that God had appointed him for the defense of the gospel and they joined with him in that endeavor. They had good motives. But there was another group that had very different motives. They were seeking to cause him *distress* in his imprisonment. This group preached Christ from *envy and strife*; they did so out of *selfish ambition*.

And what's especially troubling about this group is that they are apparently believers. The antecedent of both *some* and *some also* (v. 15) is the *brethren* he mentions in verse 14. And he says that they ARE *preaching Christ* (v. 15). And so these are not false teachers. They are believers preaching the right message from the wrong motive.

Now, if you are like me, you want to know who are these people? Why do they want to hurt Paul? But Paul doesn't care about disclosing that information. To Paul that isn't important. What is important is the advancement of the gospel and so Paul says:

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

All that matters to Paul is that the message of Christ is proclaimed. He is not embittered by these fellow believers who were seeking to hurt him. All that matters for is the advancement of the Gospel. And that IS happening and so he rejoices!

Paul lived a gospel-centered life. He cared about the gospel above his circumstances. The advancement of the gospel mattered more to him than his personal discomfort or people trying to hurt him.

When I say that the gospel was advancing it mean that lives were being changed. People were hearing the good news that Jesus is king and has come to rescue people from sin. People were hearing the news that Jesus has made a way for people to have life eternal through His death, burial, and resurrection. This is why Paul rejoiced. People were hearing that message and believing in Jesus!

As we think about what we see here, it is a reminder that **God uses difficult circumstances to advance the gospel**. The question for us is how will we respond when we find ourselves in those difficult circumstances? Will we choose the gospel above circumstances?

So often my first response when I'm facing difficult circumstances is to complain in my heart or to feel badly for myself. I can so easily get wrapped up in my challenging circumstances. This is a self-centered response rather than gospel-centered response. Instead of this kind of response, this passage would suggest that when I find myself in difficult circumstances, that I should look to Paul as an example and look for how God might be working in my difficult circumstances to advance the gospel.

Now, I don't think the scriptures teach that we are to just put on a happy face and act like we are not affected by our difficult circumstances. Some of you are going through some really difficult things right now and the pain of that matters. God cares about you and what you are going through. And so gospel above circumstances doesn't mean our circumstances don't matter. But what I am saying is that in the midst of whatever we might be going through there is a way to be gospel-centered. We trust God. We keep clinging to Him and trusting that He might be working in our difficult circumstances to advance the gospel.

A few weeks ago a friend of mine was rear-ended at a stoplight on Tuttle Creek Blvd. The accident did some significant damage to his car. As it turns out the lady who hit him did not have insurance and my friend only had liability insurance since it is an older car and so if he was going to fix the car it would be on his dime.

This is a crummy circumstance right? It would be really easy to just get mad in this situation. "It's unfair! It's not right! That woman who hit me ought to have insurance! She should have to fix my car!!" But you know what my friend and his wife did? They choose to be compassionate to this woman. They actually called her up and invited her and her little boy over for a meal. And she said, "yes"! They had to go pick her up because her car was totaled. During dinner my friend had a chance to share the gospel with this woman and she was very touched by it. Since then my friend's wife and this woman have developed an ongoing relationship. This lady calls my friend's wife up and tells her

exciting news and she confides in her. That's the gospel over circumstances, right? Who knows what God is going to end up doing in this situation, but the gospel sure has a better chance to advance because my friend and his wife chose the gospel over circumstances. That's a gospel-oriented life.

How about us? Will we choose to live gospel-centered lives where we value the advancement of the gospel above our circumstances? That's what Paul models for us in these verses.

Now, as we continue in this passage, the next thing we see is that a person who is gospel-centered sees the deepening of the gospel in other people's lives as more important than his or her personal desires.

II. Gospel before Desires (18b-26)

In the middle of verse 18, Paul transitions from the present ("I rejoice") to the future ("I will rejoice"). As Paul talks about how he thinks of the future, we see how he is devoted to the gospel above his personal desires. Paul says:

Yes, and I will rejoice,¹⁹ for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ,²⁰ according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

Paul says that he has confidence of rejoicing in the future because he knows that he will be delivered. What does he mean by *deliverance*? I don't think he is talking about being delivered from prison and possible execution because in verse 20 he understands that he very well may die. He could mean *deliverance* in an ultimate sense of eternal salvation. In other words, regardless of what a Roman court may decide about his fate, he believes that he will stand vindicated before God.

I do believe that Paul believes that, but I think what Paul is talking about here is made clear by verse 20. Paul says that he has an intense desire and hope to *not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body*. What Paul would really hate would be to lose his courage and to shrink back from declaring Christ. This is the deliverance he expects – deliverance from shame.

Now, the means by which he says that he will be delivered is through the Philippians' prayers for him (v. 19). The sense of what Paul is saying here is that through the Philippians' prayers, the Spirit of Jesus himself is supplied to Paul. Of course, Paul already has the Spirit dwelling within him. He teaches this truth elsewhere (Rom. 8:9). But he is saying that through the Philippians' prayers, Jesus' presence is manifested to Paul in a way that sustains him, and strengthens him, that he is enabled to keep making Christ known.

Sometimes we can wonder about prayer right? Do our prayers really make a difference? Paul says that his ability to continue to be a bold witness for Jesus was BECAUSE of the Philippian's prayers for him. Pray is mysterious. We don't understand everything about it. But I hope you see here that Paul does not doubt the importance of it for his ministry!

Now, as Paul considers exalting Christ either by life or by death, he goes on to state how he thinks about life or death. Verse 21:

²¹ *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*

As Paul considers his future, there is no bad option. If he lives, his life will continue to be all about Christ – knowing Him and making Him known. If he dies, that is gain. Death would mean union with Christ. But I believe that Paul is also saying that death would be gain because if he died a martyr's death it would be a way to exalt Christ in his body like he talked about in verse 20. History has shown that so often a martyr's death is the loudest proclamation of the gospel. And that would be gain!

Paul goes on to reflect on living or dying for Christ.

²² *But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose.* ²³ *But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better;* ²⁴ *yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.*

Without a doubt, Paul wants to go and be with Jesus. That would be *very much better*. But Paul doesn't think first in terms of his own desires; he thinks about the interests of others. And as he considers the Philippians he knows that to *remain on in the flesh* would be better for them. And this is fine too because it would mean *fruitful labor* for him as he continues to invest in the Philippians and see the gospel deepened in them.

Now, I don't think Paul is saying that he is the one who will actually decide if he will live or die. It's more of a rhetorical question that he is processing. But the thing we see as he wrestles with this question is how he values the gospel over personal desires.

Ultimately, Paul expresses his belief that he will continue living because of the need that the Philippians have. He sees that to *remain in the flesh is more necessary for* [their] *sake*. And in verse 25, we see what the need is.

²⁵ *Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith,* ²⁶ *so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again.*

The need is their continued development in the faith. He wants to help them continue to progress in their faith and to experience the joy of their faith.

When we reflect on Paul's situation and how much he had suffered and currently was suffering for Christ, we can understand why he had such longing to be with Christ. To be released from all of the difficulties of his life and to be in the very presence of Jesus would be amazing. That was his desire. And yet, Paul, out of a gospel-centered life, chose the gospel before his desires. He chose to keep investing in others that they might progress in their faith and experience the joy of that.

Do we want to be part of seeing the gospel go deeper in the lives of others more than we want our personal desires to be met. Paul's desire was to go and be with Christ. But for Paul, there was this greater passion to see the gospel deepened in the lives of others such that later in Philippians he says that he joyfully pours out his life for them (v. 2:17).

And so here's some ways we might choose the gospel over personal desires. Maybe your desire is to just attend worship on Sunday mornings, enjoy some coffee and conversation with friends, but out of a desire to see the gospel deepened in other people's lives you decide that you are going to serve in NextGen helping our young people learn about Jesus. Or though you love having your nights free, out of a desire to see the gospel go deeper in other people's lives you choose to facilitate a group that is learning about Jesus every week. Or maybe it's late at night and you are ready for bed, but you get a call from a friend who is in a tough spot. And instead of doing what you desire, you go meet your friend to pray with then and encourage them. There are all sorts of ways that this the gospel before desires can work out in our lives. And when we do that we are living a gospel-centered life.

A gospel-centered life. As we look at Paul and this kind of life it might sound hard. It might sound full of sacrifice. It probably will be. But this passage also teaches us that it is a life of joy. Paul experiences joy in the midst of some really tough stuff because he is gospel-centered.

Joy is not found in having everything going our way, but from making the gospel the focus of life. If my joy is going to be dependent on all my circumstances being great, I'm probably not going to experience much joy. But if instead I place the source of my joy the gospel, both it's advance and it's deepening in the lives of others, then I can experience joy regardless of what life brings.

Last year I read a book called, *The Insanity of God*. The title doesn't mean that God is insane, but rather that from our human perspective how He works at times can seem that way.

The author of the book is Nik Ripken, which is not his real name to protect people that he talks about in the book. For six years Nik did relief work in war-torn Soma-

lia. During that time his family experienced some deep personal loss, and he saw so much evil and suffering all around him. He had Somalian friends who were martyred. Eventually he came to a crisis of faith and left his relief work.

Over time he got to a place where what he had experienced in Somalia led him to want to understand how faith can survive in places of such darkness and hopelessness. To make a long story short, he ends up traveling around the world to listen to the stories of over 600 believers in over sixty countries to learn how they have walked with Jesus in the face of persecution.

One of these stories is about an 83-year-old man named Pastor Chang that Nik met three days after Pastor Chang was released from prison. Pastor Chang had spent his adult life preaching and teaching the gospel. And he had paid a high price for this. He had been in prison three times. First, when he became a believer; second, for leading others to faith in Jesus and leading a house church; and then this final time for his role in leading a house-church movement.

Nik met Pastor Chang in 1998, along with six other men who were church planters in this movement. All of these men who ranged from 20 to 40 years old had been led to faith and then mentored by Pastor Chang. They were his Timothy's.

For several days Nik listened to these men tell their stories. All of them had been in prison and suffered for their faith. As each would tell his story, Pastor Chang would sit in the corner with his eyes closed. And as he listened he would softly hum praise songs and smile with a sense of satisfaction as he heard these stories of faith and faithfulness of these young pastors that he had mentored. Nik writes this about Pastor Chang:

This old man, only days out of prison without a penny to his name owned nothing, but the clothes on his back and one extra pair of underwear. He had no home to return to and no surviving family to take him in. . . . By any standard Pastor Chang had lived a hard life. He had nothing tangible to show for all his labor, even so he seemed more content, more filled with the spirit of peace, and more aware of the joy of living than anyone I have ever met.

There is a kind of joy that we can only experience when we live a gospel-centered life. What the Apostle Paul and this 83-year-old Chinese pastor experienced can be ours as well if we choose to live gospel-centered lives.