



Paul's letter to the
PHILIPPIANS

LESSON 2

PHILIPPIANS 1:12-26

RECAP FROM LAST WEEK

Paul writes this letter, this commentary on the story of the suffering-but-now-exalted-Messiah-and-Lord, while in chains and suffering himself. The Philippians are suffering, like Paul, “on behalf of the gospel” (1:29-30), and they are doing so, it seems, in a certain similarity to their Lord, whom the Romans had crucified (Phil 2:8).

Philippi was a *very* Roman colony, and there was a particular draw to the Emperor Cult. Thus, as many scholars have suggested, the most likely reason for this persecution is that the Philippians appeared to be a threat to the Roman colony in which they lived, because they no longer honored the colony’s sovereign lord—the emperor—as such.

As Dean Flemming suggests, these believers could have experienced harassment from their neighbors and various forms of economic suffering: “*We might imagine that Christian tradespeople would lose their customers. Patrons could withdraw support from Christian clients. Magistrates might drag believers to court. In short, Christians in Philippi might experience the kind of ostracism or even violence that has accompanied loyalty to Christ in many times and places.*”

Thus the Philippians share in Paul’s struggle for the gospel and sufferings similar to Paul’s (see 1:29-30). This means, Paul says, that they are his partners in the gospel (1:5, 7), not merely financial support of his ministry or simply in emotional support during his imprisonment, but in the actual confirmation of the gospel (1:3-8). All of the Philippian believers are part of the living witness to and for the gospel.

For the Philippians, as well as for Paul, the gospel’s grace brings both **salvation** and **suffering**, both **joy** and **challenge**, but it also requires **faith** and **faithfulness**. In the dynamic back-and-forth of challenge/suffering and trust/faithfulness lies the Philippians’ public testimony and identity.

— Michael Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (100-11)

Philippians 1:12-26 (NIV)

12 Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. **13** As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. **14** And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

15 It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. **16** The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. **17** The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. **18** But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, **19** for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. **20** I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. **22** If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! **23** I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; **24** but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. **25** Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, **26** so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

Philippians 1:12-26

Philippians 1:12-14

What has happened to Paul when he writes to Philippi has been for the good of the gospel. He may be suffering, but the gospel is spreading—the whole imperial guard knows that Paul is in chains for his message about Christ.

Paul is convinced that his suffering will not derail the progress of the gospel. In fact, it will help advance it (1:12), and he wants to be sure that the Philippians know this about their situation too. He tells the Philippians that “most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear” (1:14). This is to encourage the Philippians themselves as they face suffering themselves, as they have done and will do.

Verse 14 is significant in a number of ways. First, it reveals that normal, everyday believers have been “speaking the word” — sharing the gospel with family and friends — and are, for the most part, continuing to do so, with even greater confidence, despite Paul’s imprisonment.

Second, it seems that from Paul’s perspective, “speaking the word” — bearing witness to Christ, telling his story — is a normal activity for all Christians and all Christian communities. Paul will call this the “word of life” or life-giving word in Philippians 2:16.

Third, the example of other believers remaining faithful in spite of the persecution of Paul is meant to encourage the Philippians also to remain faithful, even in their own difficult circumstances.

Philippians 1:15-18

These sentences describe two kinds of “preaching Christ” (in terms of motivation) that are taking place in Rome in response to Paul’s imprisonment. The pure motive of some who do so is *goodwill* and *love* (for Paul). They see that Paul can no longer be involved in preaching Christ publicly, so they have stepped in to pick up the slack—“knowing that [Paul is] put here for the defense of the gospel” (v. 16). From Paul’s own point of view, the gospel itself is on trial, and his imprisonment is a divinely appointed defense of the gospel at the highest level.

That’s where the others have gone wrong. Their preaching of Christ, according to Paul, is predicated on *envy*, *rivalry*, and *selfish ambition*, aiming to gain for themselves. They are preaching Christ, but from false motives, supposing that they will “stir up trouble” for Paul while he is in chains (v. 17). Though they are probably an annoyance, Paul appears unmoved; even their “false motives” (v. 18), Paul says, still advance the gospel.

“**So what?**” Paul asks at the beginning of 1:18. He began this paragraph by explaining that the net result of his imprisonment has been to advance the gospel. That alone is the cause of joy. “*Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.*”

His joy is not over his imprisonment as such. The pain is obviously there (despite Paul’s joyful tone), and some are indeed preaching Christ from false or impure motives. **Ultimately, Paul’s joy stems from his perspective — his ability to see every circumstance both for its own beauty and for its place in the bigger picture.** He had desired to go to Rome to share with the Roman believers his understanding of the gospel and proclaim Christ to those who did not know him (Rom 1:11-14). Now he is there, although in circumstances that are not his choosing. But neither are these circumstances a cause for complaint, but for joy, because God in God’s own wisdom is carrying out God’s purposes, even through Paul’s imprisonment.

Paul can write things like this because he has learned by the grace of God to see everything from the divine perspective. This is not wishful thinking. Rather it’s a deep conviction that God has worked out God’s intentions through the death and resurrection of Christ, and that by his Spirit, God is carrying them out in the world through the church, and therefore through both Paul and others.

It is not that Paul sees things through rose-tinted glasses. Rather, he sees everything in light of the bigger picture; and in that bigger picture—which is on display in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—there is nothing that does not fit, even if it means suffering and death on the way to resurrection.

Philippians 1:12-26

Philippians 1:19-26

Paul's own situation remains uncertain. He may well die in prison; but despite what happens, it won't mean that everything's gone wrong. If news of his death suddenly arrives, the Philippians need to know that he was ready for it.

Paul is absolutely convinced that his sufferings are not the end of his story. Were they the end, as he writes to the Corinthians, he would be first among many fools who believe in resurrection (see 1 Cor 15:12-32). Rather, Paul finds comfort and joy in the knowledge that the end of his life will be the beginning of a new life, a new experience of God. When Paul dies, he will be “with” the Lord, whereas now he is absent from him; he will be “home,” whereas now he is away:

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far, but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.” (1:21-24)

Paul is transparent here. He admits that he would prefer to die and be with Christ, but he realizes that continuing on to be with and for the Philippians, even in prison, is better for them. Ultimately, he hopes for the outcome that most clearly advances the preaching of Christ. He says, whether in life or death, he wants “Christ...[to be] exalted now as always in my body” (v. 20), and that can only happen when he chooses the way of **cruciform love**, the way of **preferring the needs of others** (in this case the Philippians) **over his own desires**. The pattern of cruciform love is clearly expressed, especially in verses 23-26:

- Although I prefer to die, for it is far better (v. 23)
- I will not choose death (v. 25a)
- But life, because that is more necessary for you, for your progress and joy in the faith (vv. 24, 25b-26)

We will see this pattern of self-emptying again next week (2:6-8) within the Christ Hymn. Here, Paul sets himself up as an “imitator” of Christ's self-emptying and thus as a worthy model for the Philippians, whom he will urge, beginning in 1:27, also to embody cruciform love.



Reflections

1

“Everything that has happened to me has helped to spread the Good News” (1:12)

In this passage Paul offers a sincere thank you to God, not only for the privilege of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well. He saw his situation in a positive light by reframing it in terms of how it helped the good news of Jesus to spread. Indeed, God had transformed Paul’s dismal circumstances into a powerful opportunity to communicate the gospel. Consider what would happen if we reframed our current circumstances the way Paul did—an exercise which may open our eyes to see those who God might be trying to reach now through us.

2

A Joyful Heart & Mind

Paul reminds us that joy is not dependent upon our circumstances—that it is possible to be joyful and to have a joyful heart and mind, even when circumstances are not cheerful. He is able to find God in all things and in the midst of all his situations. He celebrates that the palace guard now knows of Christ as a result of his imprisonment, that courageous believers are now speaking without fear, and even rejoices over Christ being preached by people with impure motives. He can live satisfied without closure in his current situation, being content with whatever the present offers and the future holds. He is able to claim joy wherever he is.

3

Intercession and the Spirit’s Work (1:19)

This passage teaches us that we should pray for and expect the Spirit to come with abundance on Christians who are undergoing suffering, particularly suffering for their faith. Paul hopes that the Spirit’s abundant presence will lead him to bear courageous and clear witness to the gospel so that whether he is spared or executed by the Roman authorities, “Christ will be exalted” (v. 20). This is why he coveted the Philippians’ prayers during his time of testing, and why we should be just as vigorous in our prayers for others.

4

“To live is Christ and to die is gain”

Physical life or death are not of ultimate importance to Paul. Living means carrying out his calling to preach Christ (v. 21a), and dying means both the gain of conformity with Christ’s death (v. 21b; 3:8-11) and fellowship with Christ (v. 23). He hopes for the outcome that most clearly advances the preaching of Christ. Paul faced death with the same resolve that marked his approach to life, for both death and life to him meant service to Christ, and service to Christ was his primary goal. Paul reminds us that in both life and death, Christ ensures a hopeful future for himself, the Philippians, and us today.

Reflection & Discussion

1. How did you first come to know Jesus? Who were the key people in your life who informed you of Jesus?
2. What were Paul's circumstances and how did he see them advancing the gospel?
3. The Philippians had trouble seeing how anything good could come from Paul's circumstances. Describe how we might struggle with the same problem, both in how we view Paul's difficult circumstances and in how we view our own.
4. What can we learn from the perspective Paul takes? Is suffering really any easier to endure if you can make sense of it (i.e., if you can see a reason for the suffering)?
5. What are some difficult circumstances you are facing? How have you seen God walking with you through them? How might God be using them to advance the good news of Jesus?
6. Take a moment to reflect on your current circumstances, feelings, and outlook on life. Would any of these things change if you reframed them the way Paul reframed his own? Describe what this reframing looks like for you (i.e. being honest about your current circumstances or state of mind—while also being intentional about pursuing joy in the midst of difficulty; turning your focus away from self and toward the needs of others; helping others grow during this time and experience the joy and hope of their faith; etc).
7. With this renewed perspective, who might God be trying to reach right now through you? On a basic level, who can you check in on or connect with today?