

Philippians (1:12-30)

The Progress of the Gospel

Introduction

Paul follows his thanksgiving and prayer (vv. 3-11) with a report on his present situation (v. 12). He assures the Philippian believers, and us, that God's sovereign purposes are not placed on hold and that there is every reason to rejoice in the face of opposition. Despite all appearances to the contrary, Paul's circumstances serve to advance the Gospel rather than to stop or suspend it. From this passage we learn that pure joy is the experience of every believer whose primary focus is on the proclamation of Christ.

I. Paul's Imprisonment Advances the Gospel (1:12-18)

A. Two Reasons for Paul's Abiding Joy (1:12-14)

1. His imprisonment promotes the message of Christ among unbelievers (v. 13).
 - a) "Whole palace guard and everyone else" knew he was in prison for Christ.
 - (1) The guards rotated every 4 hours, so over two years most of the palace guard must have heard the Gospel (cf., Acts 28:16, 30).
 - (2) "and everyone else" were most likely all other unbelievers who knew of Paul's imprisonment (cf., for example Acts 28:17-28).
 - (3) Specifically, unbelievers knew Paul was "in chains for Christ"
 - (a) Literally, "my chains are in Christ." This was Paul's way of expressing that his entire life was "in Christ," including his sufferings (see further, 1:21; 3:10; Col. 3:3-4).
 - (b) Paul was no ordinary prisoner. He was incarcerated because he claimed that a Jew named Jesus who had been crucified in Jerusalem, who reportedly rose from the dead and ascended to heaven only to return some day and judge the entire world was the only hope of eternal life after death. Surely word got around about this religious zealot.
 - b) It must have been surprisingly obvious to all that Paul was not awaiting trial for any political or criminal activity.
2. His imprisonment bolsters confidence and courage to proclaim Christ among believers (v. 14).
 - a) With Nero as emperor, it is likely that opposition to Christians was on the rise.
 - b) Just as the September 11 WTC tragedy spawned bravery and courage in a "city of individuals," so too does persecution set the stage for God's kingdom to advance (see Gen. 50:20; Mt. 16:18).
 - c) Paul does not say "some" but "most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly." It was a predominant trait of the Church to evangelize as a result of his imprisonment.
 - (1) The irony here is that as opposition to the furtherance of the Gospel increased, the more active Gospel proclamation became!
 - (2) This irony actually generates joy in Paul rather than despair and frustration for being imprisoned.
3. The net effect of both reasons Paul gives for his rejoicing is the same: The proclamation of the Gospel. Though Paul is in chains, God's Word will not be tethered (2 Tim. 2:8-10).

B. Whether Hollow or Holy, Motives Aren't Everything . . . Christ is! (1:15-18)

1. There is no reason to suspect that those whose motives were impure were unbelievers/heretics.

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Otherwise, Paul would have defended the purity of the Gospel message (see esp., 2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 1:8-9).

- a) Since the church in Rome was not founded by Paul, it is likely that those who were “stirring up trouble” for him had not met him personally. They were operating on hearsay about Paul’s accomplishments in ministry and seeking to piggyback off that trail of success.
 - b) The envy and rivalry are directed at Paul personally, born ultimately out of selfishness (v. 17).
 - c) Though certainly concerned with the personal offense, Paul is able to submit his psyche to God’s greater purposes. Thus, he genuinely rejoices that the Good News is made known.
 - d) In more irony, Paul states that the ill-will of others intended to bring him distress actually proves to bring him joy because the Gospel goes forth (vv. 17-18)!
2. Assuming he was in Rome when writing Philippians, Paul may have mentioned the names of those who preach Christ out of “goodwill” (Rom. 16:3-15).
 3. Regardless of motive or intention, “Christ is preached” and that was all that mattered to Paul (v. 18).

Now That You Know These Things . . .

- Read Rom. 9:1-3. If our ultimate goal in life is the advancement of the Gospel, then how should we view personal inconveniences, financial calamities, relational frailties, and internal anxieties? When God’s priorities are ours, then we can safely say “No regrets!”
- Do you really rejoice with those churches that faithfully proclaim the Gospel, despite doctrinal differences you may have with them? Or do you find yourself sneering because of opposing views on peripheral issues?
- Paul’s ability to see the “irony” in his sufferings is not the product of eternal optimism, but the result of a deeply spiritual man whose life was consumed with God’s will and purposes. Do you see the divine “irony” in your disheartening circumstances?
- Has the Gospel been pushed to the periphery of your central focus, such that your time and energies in ministry go to concerns like abortion, feminism (for or against), end times, home schooling, particular styles of worship, et al.? In what way(s) does your life reflect the centrality of the Gospel message?

II. Paul’s Release Promotes Sacrifice for Others (1:19-26)

A. His Future Vindication Will Exalt Christ (1:19-20)

1. Whether by release or execution, Paul’s entire existence is consumed with the exaltation of Christ (cf., 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 2:20).
2. Note that Paul’s deliverance is a product of others’ “prayers” and the “Spirit of Jesus Christ.”
 - a) This is not to say that God reacts to our prayers in a strict cause/effect relationship. God will not be bullied nor badgered, no matter how sincere the request. Rather, God’s sovereignty entails ordaining the means as well as the ends and prayer is the God-ordained means to His ultimate ends (cf., Mt. 6:8). Should God choose to answer affirmatively because of prayers offered, it is on account of His eternal plan. No one knew this more than Paul (cf., Eph. 1:11).
 - b) This may be a subtle way of supplying the Philippians with a prayer request (Paul often requested prayer; see Rom. 15:30-32; 2 Cor. 1:11; Eph. 6:19; Col. 4:3; 1 Thess. 5:25; Phm. 22).
 - c) Jesus promises the Spirit’s assistance to those who suffer for testifying of Him (Mt. 10:17-20).
3. The certainty behind Paul’s conviction that he’ll be released had nothing to do with being set free from prison, but everything to do with his vindication in God’s court of justice (“for my deliverance” literally, “unto salvation,” *εἰς σωτηρίαν*).
4. The potential shame Paul alludes to is not his personal reputation, but all that his ministry stood for

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in relation to the Gospel.

- a) Since Caesar's (a.k.a. Nero's) verdict made little difference to Paul's ultimate salvation, he had nothing of which to be ashamed.
- b) The only shame that concerned Paul was if Christ were not exalted by his life [death].

B. His Present Situation Means Submitting Desire to Duty (1:21-26)

1. For Paul, "to live" entailed nothing but Christ-centered, Christ-empowering ministry, whereas "to die" was to be in the glorious presence of Christ Himself. "What can you possibly do with Christians like that? Kill them?!" (Carson, Basics for Believers, p. 29).
 - a) Paul was certain that death ushered him immediately into the presence of Christ. There is no hint of unconscious existence or "soul sleep" here—only conscious existence with Christ.
 - b) Paul implies a disembodied state when present with the Lord (cf., 2 Cor. 5:8; 12:2-3). This is not to say that this state is indefinite, since elsewhere he speaks of inhabiting a resurrected body (1 Cor. 15:35-58).
 - c) Most likely Paul believed in some kind of intermediate-disembodied state and a future-embodied state of the believer (see further, John W. Cooper, Body, Soul & Life Everlasting).
2. Being merely human, Paul expresses ambivalence toward the two alternatives (1:22-23). However, he is unwavering in his pastoral commitment to others (1:24-25). Paul's choices are motivated by what is best for his converts, not what is best for him.
3. Convinced that his life would be spared (1:24-25), Paul eagerly anticipates their "progress and joy in the faith."
 - a) Although we're not told how Paul gained this certainty, we are told that Paul had certainty.
 - b) His certainty was tied to a conviction that his entire existence found its purpose in others' progress and joy in the faith.
4. Moreover, should Paul have opportunity to visit them again, their joy will overflow "on account of" his presence with them (1:26). This is not some kind of self-aggrandizement, but signs of a man whose anticipated reunion with those he saw come to Christ generates nothing but enthusiastic expectation at seeing their progress.

Now That You Know These Things . . .

- Read Mk. 8:34-38 and Rom. 1:16. In our heavily therapeutic society where "shame" has all but vanished or, at best, viewed as some kind of pathology, what area(s) of your life need adjustment so that "now as always Christ will be exalted" in you, "whether by life or by death?"
- Outside of family members, in what ways have you sacrificed for your brothers' and sisters' "progress and joy in the faith?"
- Paul's commitment to Christ and others ought not be the exception, but the rule. This is no "special calling" of any sorts, however, but the example of a life fully and finally surrendered to the Lord Jesus (Lk. 9:23). Precisely how does your life express this degree of commitment to others?

III. Three Exhortations

Paul begins a series of exhortations (1:27-2:18) intended to correct some misunderstanding on the nature and purpose of suffering, encourage unity through humility, and motivate godly, Christian living. Although this section seems abrupt and not directly linked with what came previously, O'Brien states the connection well: "Just as the apostle read his own circumstances in the light of the gospel's progress, so now he desires that the Philippians' behaviour be entirely worthy of that same gospel of Christ" (Peter T. O'Brien,

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The Epistle to the Philippians, NIGTC, p. 143).

A. Exhortation to Courage in the Face of Suffering (1:27-30)

1. Paul begins with a broad but strong petition, "Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel."
 - a) This is no demand to become worthy of the Gospel of grace, as if we tried hard enough that we might achieve worthiness.
 - b) Rather, this is the notion that since we are recipients of God's grace in salvation, our lives must bear the signs of grace (see also, Eph. 4:1; Col. 1:10).
 - c) "Conduct yourselves" literally means to live as citizens politeusesthe. The appeal is to our heavenly allegiance over and above our earthly one.
 - d) This conduct must be consistently true of us, whether others notice or not.
2. In the latter part of 1:27, Paul begins to unpack the broad petition. Specifically, he insists upon unity in defending the Gospel.
 - a) He does not say to agree on order of worship, or contemporary versus traditional music, whether to vote Republican or Democrat, et al. His call and cry is for unity in Gospel truth.
 - b) "Contending as one man" (*συναθλοῦντες*) would have reminded the Philippians of side-by-side, closed ranks gladiatorial battle (Paul uses the same expression of Euodia and Syntyche in 4:3).
3. The manner in which they are to stand firm in unity is in fearless courage.
 - a) Courage is the natural outcome of those who have neither life nor death to fear.
 - b) A courageous life serves as a twofold sign:
 - (1) Judgment on those who oppose the Gospel (Paul does not say who the opponents are)
 - (2) Confirmation of eternal life for us who embrace the Gospel
4. Paul offers a theological explanation for the existence of and purpose for persecution and suffering (1:29).
 - a) Suffering is granted by God as gift (*ἐχαρίσθη* aorist, passive) on behalf of Christ! "If their salvation has been secured by the suffering of another on their behalf, their discipleship is to be demonstrated in their own suffering on his behalf . . . In what sense could it be said of us that we follow Jesus Christ, if there is no cross-bearing in our life?" (Carson, *Basics*, p. 55).
 - b) We are assured that pain and evil in this world are not only under the sovereign control of God, but being used by God for His glorious purposes (Gen. 50:20; 2 Cor. 1:3ff).
 - c) Not only does God permit ("grant") suffering, but also the faith to rise above it and the assurance of our future salvation!
 - d) Though circumstances differ, Paul wants them to know that they and he can gain strength from knowing that their sufferings for the Gospel are common.

Next lesson . . . The second exhortation (Phil. 2:1-11).