



Catalog No. 1562  
 Philippians 1:12-26  
 Second Message  
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 July 16th, 2006

# WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH

*SERIES: FRIENDS, MENTORS AND ENEMIES*

## I. Introduction

### A. Message Setting

In our first study in the book of Philippians we learned that Paul carried many burdens and desires for the church in Philippi. We observed three in particular, all critical for our spiritual formation as God's people, his colony of citizens and representatives of the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

First, we discovered that Paul is proud to carry the identity "servant of Christ," and desires for us all to embrace this greatest identity a human can have. We also found that we need to examine our outlook toward hardship and risk. While Paul suffers in a Roman prison, he joyously writes to the Philippians that whether free to roam or locked in chains, he considers it all grace. Finally, we saw that Paul is passionate about his brothers and sisters in Philippi. He loves them with such delight and joy that it flows from the pages of this letter. We are called, like Paul and the Philippians, to be vessels of YHWH's abandoned love everywhere we go.

### B. Introduction to 12-26

Today we enter into a portion of Paul's letter that once again follows the classic form of a letter of friendship. Exactly where one would expect an update on the life of the sender, guess what: it's what we get! Only, it is significantly longer than would be expected (this is Paul after all...), and it is saturated with the gospel. As with everything Paul says and does, it is overflowing with Jesus and the good news. The apostle gives an update on what is happening with him in prison, only he is so excited, he actually spends more time on what is happening *with the gospel* in Rome.

I believe that as Paul relates what is occurring in and around his imprisonment in Rome, we are being given a paradigm for living in and responding to times of oppression. For believers in the first century Roman Empire, trouble was virtually constant, as we saw in our last study. I would offer that in reality, it's pretty much constant in our world today as well, though perhaps not as overt. So the question is, as our nation increasingly moves away from a Christian world view, and as it continues to be acceptable to mock and deride Christians and the gospel in the media, and as we increasingly become a pluralistic society in which the preferred spirituality becomes a pick and choose smorgasbord, how do we respond?

I once had a boss, a senior executive, tell me that I would go no higher in the company because of my priorities. He couldn't say it out loud of course, but what he meant was, your faith and your family mean too much to you. If you want to go higher in the company, something has to change. Another time a friend said to me, "I just can't get past how you Christians treat homosexuals. There's such hatred and condemnation." How do we respond to such things? How do we live in a world that is increasingly hostile to the gospel, the cross and to Jesus? What do we do when someone says, "Well, Jesus is OK. He was a good guy and I like what he had to say, but I'm

not buying this sin stuff"? How do we live in a world in which no other faith can be so freely mocked without general social and media scrutiny?

Returning to Paul's letter to the Philippians, let's see if the Lord has any words of encouragement and instruction for us today on these matters.

## II. When The Going Gets Tough – Philippians 1:12-26

### A. Benefits of Paul's Imprisonment – Advance of the Gospel 12-14

**Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. (Philippians 1:12-14 NIV)**

I am in chains for Christ, not for any other reason. I didn't steal anything, I didn't lie to anyone, I didn't get caught speeding, I didn't trespass or cut down my neighbor's tree, and I'm not here as a political prisoner. Just Christ – I'm here because I preach him. Think about it: Paul's message was so strong, so powerful, so sure and true that it once again landed him in jail.

You know the story. After arriving in Jerusalem from his third missionary journey, during which he had spent an extended time in Ephesus, Paul was arrested for his preaching of the gospel. After hearings and trials before the Sanhedrin, the Roman governors Felix and Festus, and finally King Herod Agrippa, ruler of Palestine at the time, Paul appeals to Caesar. His desire to go to Rome and take the gospel to the heart of the empire will indeed happen. So here he sits in a Roman prison when what he really longs for is to be out preaching the gospel to all who will listen in the great city of Rome.

But wait a minute. Look what he says: "what happened has really served to advance the gospel." This oppression, this imprisonment, this being chained to a guard 24 hours a day has actually benefited the truth. How? Well first, the entire palace guard has heard the gospel. They know why I am here. It is for Christ and Christ alone. Now we can't know for sure exactly what Paul meant by the "whole praetorian," but the evidence strongly points to the emperor's own elite guard, stationed in Rome. So Paul is evangelizing the entire palace guard! Think of it: every four hours, a new guard shows up to take his shift with Paul. Every four hours a captive audience for Paul to evangelize. Can't you just hear it?

*"Times up? Darn it! OK, who's guarding me next?"*

*Hey! Have a seat, have a shackle.*

*You ever heard about Jesus?*

*What do we have, four hours? Great.*

*Well it all started when I was on the road to Damascus..."*

So one by one Paul shares the gospel with these men, and not only that, he tells the Philippians that “everyone else” knows that he is in chains for Christ as well. Word has spread so much that anyone who knows of Paul knows why he’s in prison and they’ve heard the message! Paul is thrilled that, rather than hindering the gospel, his imprisonment has actually served to help spread it. Who knew? Gordon Fee points out that already, Jesus’ lordship over Caesar is making itself felt through the penetration of the gospel into the heart of Roman political life.<sup>1</sup>

Best of all, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to be more bold and courageous in speaking the gospel. They are more confident, excited, ignited to follow Paul’s lead and share openly and with joy. This may be in reflection of the situation in Rome in the early 60’s A.D., when under emperor Nero, the church had come under increasing suspicion. The reality that this was not just a harmless sect of Judaism has become clear. The Jews, because of their tenacious refusal to pay homage to Caesar and to worship gods other than YHWH, had been approved and tolerated. But when it became clear that Christians worshipped Jesus as Lord and Savior, not Caesar, oppression increased and apparently boldness decreased. Paul’s irrepressible proclamation of the gospel in spite of his imprisonment inspired the Roman believers.

Why is this? Why is it that we are inspired by boldness under duress? I alluded last week to web logs written by my friend Camille Estrada, who is serving alongside missionaries in Thailand this summer, boldly bringing the gospel to prostitutes in bars and brothels in Bangkok. On one recent blog she writes:

Thai women are not valued, and when I say not valued I mean it to the fullest of the word. Gender equity is a very new concept here. Thailand is a Buddhist country and its culture simplistically can be summed up in three characteristics: appearance, saving face, making merit (keeping the balance of good and evil tipped toward the side of good so that in your next life you will have a higher rank or better position – or, at least, not be born a woman). In the rural villages, selling a virgin daughter (age 13-15) for a bride price (as little as \$500 to \$2000) is still a common practice. Sometimes girls from rural villages are sold to brokers who promise the family that they will find work for their daughter and she can send money home from Bangkok. Often that work is forced labor or prostitution. Sometimes the fathers and mothers knowingly send their daughters to Bangkok with aunts or cousins or friends who work the bars and have been able to send money home to support parents and brothers. There are an estimated 500,000 prostitutes in Thailand. This does not count the children, young girls and women who are trafficked here from Laos, Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam and China...

The prostitute target group for the Home of New Beginnings is the women who work the bars and massage parlors that cater to foreigners: men from affluent countries. In Nana Plaza, just a 15-minute walk from where I live and five minutes from the Center is home to fifty-eight bars. There are 104 in a three-block radius. There are 20-100 girls in each bar – all for sale!

She later followed up with these anecdotes:

Tomorrow I will go visit one of our regular Go Go bars. I am praying that I will have the strength and patience to see them in that environment, the wisdom to know how to care for them, and the grace to love them in very specific ways. The first outreach I had was not as bad as I was expecting. I seemed to have taken

what I saw fairly well. I wasn’t as fortunate the second time. It got pretty emotional for me the second time, so much so that I got a migraine the next day. It gets difficult because you are witnessing young girls sell their bodies to men so they can defile and degrade them to trash. It’s hard when you see it and can do nothing about it, because you know it’s their way of life. They prostitute to support not only themselves but also their families (their parents, siblings, and their own children, sometimes even their husbands). They do it to make a living.

I had a better experience yesterday at a beer bar. Another leader [and I] went to visit one of our English students who is a freelancer [there]. She shared with me part of her life, as best as she could with the English she knew. That time I spent with her I will cherish. Hopefully I can go back sometime soon to visit her again, as she was ecstatic the first time. Even when I walk to work in the morning I see girls that I have met (maybe once), standing outside. They immediately recognize me and are so excited to see me. I think a part of that is their craving for friendship, and maybe to be cared for and loved.

I don’t know about you, but when I think of Camille walking into these hellish places to bring the love of Christ to these women, I nearly burst. Here is a young woman moving out of her comfort zone and taking tremendous risk for the gospel. What does that do to us? It makes us excited and creates desire to be bolder and more courageous.

I think that this is because within each of us is a deep desire to be a part of a bigger and more important story, to be a part of God’s transcendent story of salvation. That’s why when we go to Mississippi, so many of you are willing to give up vacation time and money to go and serve. That’s why so many have taken trips to Mexico, to Romania, to the Philippines, to Indonesia, to Africa – to step out boldly, with courage, for the sake of the gospel. And now it is time to do that right here in Silicon Valley in our workplaces and communities.

Paul next tells us of challenges to his preaching of Christ within the church:

#### **B. Challenges to Paul’s Preaching of Christ 15-18a**

**It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. 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. (Phil 1:15-18a)**

Not only is there opposition from outside the church, but apparently within the church as well. Paul doesn’t elaborate much on exactly what is happening, but clearly there are those preaching Christ with impure motives. It seems as though sheer jealousy and rivalry are at work. This is a surprising turn in Paul’s letter, especially when, grammatically, he seems to include these people, whoever they are, in verse 14, when he speaks of the brothers in Christ. So what do we make of these who are more aggressive in their preaching of Christ in order to add to Paul’s affliction?

Elsewhere in his writings, Paul clearly directs the churches to cut off those who would infiltrate the church and insist that believers adhere to the critical markers of Judaism, e.g. circumcision and food

laws. In essence, they are stealing converts to place them back under Jewish law.

Given Paul's comparatively light reaction to these people, he is clearly not grouping them in the same category. So even though there are those trying to hurt him personally, Paul is not engaging in the conflict. Maybe they view this as opportunity to preach Christ in a way they deem more correct. Maybe they view Paul's imprisonment as evidence of God's judgment. Perhaps it is just sheer jealousy at the love, affection and respect that Paul receives. Whatever it is, Paul's response is wonderful. It's OK! As long as Christ is preached. Clearly, regardless of motive, in this case Christ is being preached with sufficient clarity and accuracy that Paul is not concerned.

Why does Paul include this in his letter to the Philippians? By implication later in the letter, in 2:3, 13 and others, the Philippians are likely dealing with a similar issue and he desires them to focus on greater issues as long as Christ is being preached.

The bigger issue is that which is saluted by Paul's comment in verse 16. He is put where he is for the defense of the gospel. What's at stake is the issue of whether the preaching of Christ and worship of him as Lord and Savior falls under the umbrella of protection given to first century Jews. Once the Romans realized that the Jews would indeed die before they would compromise and pay homage to Caesar and/or the gods or Rome, their belief systems were given dispensation and tolerated within the empire. As long as followers of Jesus were perceived as simply a branch of Judaism, there was tolerance of their movement.

As it became clear that Christians were indeed an identity apart, it increasingly became open season for persecution. This is Paul's concern then. Not that Christians maintain that umbrella of protection, but that all these events would serve as opportunity for the clear defense and advancement of the gospel even in the face of this oppression. These are his burning concerns. As a result, Paul can distance himself because these are not people trying to steal converts but apparently preaching Christ with a somewhat different theological point of view. In short, Paul is simply on a different plane. While these others proclaim Christ for personal gain and diminution of Paul, he sees all this as a divinely appointed time to preach the gospel to the highest echelons of the empire.

So, he goes on with his report, digging still deeper into his overwhelming passion. Picking up at the last phrase of verse 18, we read:

### C. Paul's Ambition – Christ Glorified – 18b-24

**Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. 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. 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. (1:18b-24).**

Paul does not live in denial; he's a very sober man. His joy is not just putting a happy face on a bad situation. Paul's joy lies in perspective. He has long desired to preach the gospel in Rome, and although he certainly would not have scripted it this way, he sees that God is powerfully at work. Paul understands discipleship – giving up all in

order to follow Christ, even to the point of entering into Christ's suffering.

So Paul stakes his claim on confidence in Christ and the message of Christ. He is greatly encouraged by the prayers of the Philippians and the supply of the Holy Spirit, which is Christ himself dwelling in Paul, living through him and giving testimony through Paul as he stands trial.<sup>2</sup> It is an unbeatable combination that will result in his deliverance.

But Paul doesn't define deliverance the way in which we likely would. Deliverance to Paul is not release from prison, but it is the fulfillment of his burning desire that whether he lives or dies, *Christ will be exalted*. Paul full well knows that ultimately, the results are not up to him. But he has an earnest expectation: that he will not be brought to shame. Right where we might expect him to say, "I'll be acquitted," we realize that he speaks not of his own innocence and justification, but of his expectation that Christ will be magnified! This is what would be the ultimate shame to Paul: that he would in any way compromise and fail to boldly exalt Christ, regardless of his personal destiny in Rome or elsewhere! That is why earlier we read from Psalm 34:5: "Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame."

Paul then gets deeply personal in verses 21 through 24, where we get a unique and deep look into his heart. He is remarkably transparent. Who knows who might use this against him? But he doesn't care. He is God's man, preaching Christ, doing what he is supposed to be doing, and that is all that matters. His musings exude profound confidence that God will fulfill his eager expectation and hope, and they stand as encouragement to the Philippians regarding their priorities and the certainty of their future

Verse 21 is one of the most profound and heart stopping verses in all of scripture: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." He wins in either case. If Paul is executed, his goal of living has been reached, as to be with Christ is his ultimate passion. As Gordon Fee states and I quote loosely, it is not a wish to be done with troubles or trials, it is a clear assessment of one whose future is certain and desired. Death after all, because it is ours in Christ Jesus, has thereby lost its sting.<sup>3</sup>

Even more, death becomes not just a neutral event with no sting – meaning it is not a mortal wound inflicted by the enemy – but it is actually a positive event in which the follower of Christ gains the ultimate prize: Christ and eternal presence with him of which the Spirit is just a foretaste here on earth. That's why Paul can say, I have gained Christ, but I press on to gain the prize.

So, what does this mean for us? If not death and the ultimate prize, that is to be with Christ, what's left for those of us still here? Nothing? A lifetime of longing? No. Look at verse 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!**

Paul labors over the choices not because he has any control, but he ponders what each would mean. He'd prefer the first – be with Christ, but the second is great – fruitful, meaningful labor. To put it in California speak, meaningful stuff to do! It's like a child at his birthday party with two great presents. Which one will be given to me? Paul is torn. He says, I'd love to go home, but I think God is going to have me stay. To live is Christ and to die is gain puts everything in focus in our understanding of Paul. And it's his desire for the Philippians, and for us.

So now Paul ends this time of personal reflection with a summary restatement of his thoughts. He ends with verses 25 and 26 before going on to exhort the Philippians, which we'll look at next time.

#### D. Paul's Conviction – Expected outcome – 25, 26

**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, so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me. (Phil 1:25-26)**

Paul again comes back to his deeply rooted sense of joy. Linking back to verses 4 and 5, in which he tells the Philippians that he always prays with joy because of their partnership, Paul returns to the theme of their progress, with the goal that their boasting in Christ would abound on account of Paul. So we see his delight in his less preferred option: he is so taken with the gospel and loves the Philippians so much that he desires for them to experience the joy he experiences. Why? Simply so that they can enter more deeply into the life that is every believer's in Christ, with the result that Jesus would be glorified and still more people might enter in!

Once again, Paul has one eye firmly fixed on the future. His concern is that they too would share in that joy that can only come from one whose radar is firmly locked on Christ and the future that is secure as a result. And the more deeply they enter in, the more they, and we, will be able to freely love one another, setting aside personal agendas for the sake of the gospel and others.

So, how do we respond in times of oppression? What is to be our attitude when the going gets tough? There are a few conclusions we can draw today.

### III. Reflections

**A. When the pressure is on and the oppression comes, remember that you are part of a greater story, a transcendent story with eternal ramifications.** The story is so great, the stakes are so high that the enemy will not rest – he will resist. When he does, be reminded that it is so because there is reason to resist. God is using you and your life for the advancement of the kingdom, and God is maturing you into the man or woman he desires you to be.

“Consider it pure joy my brothers and sisters,” says James (1:2a TNIV). Not a naïve, divorced-from-reality joy, but a true joy rooted in the reality of your salvation and your future with Christ.

**B. Hold fast to the truth you have been taught. We must make sure that we do not buy into the world's view that there are many ways to God.** The Father has been clear, Jesus is clear, Paul is clear: the gospel is God's singular message of salvation. Scriptures don't apologize for that, neither should we. Those who would claim that scripture gives room for any other claim just don't know scripture. Just give the gospel message with clarity and with humility and most of all LOVE – and let the Spirit work! In all areas of our lives we expect clarity and consistency. Why then would we not acknowledge the same from God?

**C. We need to tell the stories of hardship and evidences of God's grace amidst our struggles.** They inspire, they enlighten, they embolden. Who hasn't heard a great story and not been inspired to be bolder? We all have in us the desire to be a part of something greater, larger, and more important than our own myopic worlds. When we hear stories, they resonate in our hearts and spark the desire to move out, take risks, be a part of something great. It's no wonder the Roman believers were sparked to be bold. They looked at Paul and his stance for the gospel and motivation behind it and said yes. This is real, this is important, this makes a difference. This is radical, meaty and worthwhile, and I want to be a part of it!

**D. The highest good in life is the advancement of the gospel.** The gospel is the singular most important truth of the Universe, for without it, mankind would have no hope, no future, no reason to live beyond self-aggrandizement. To advance it is the singularly most important thing we can do. The amassing of wealth, status, influence, power, possessions, even good, legalistic behavior is all garbage compared to the greatness of knowing and giving testimony to Christ.

And finally:

**E. To live is Christ, to die is gain.** The Philippians' problem and ours as well is the strong tendency to speak like this but to live otherwise. Too often for us, and believe me I fully include myself, it is “To live is Christ,” plus work, leisure, accumulating wealth, possessions, relationships and more in which all too often the plus factor has become our primary passion.

Earlier I mentioned that boss who let me know that I had topped out in my business career due to my priorities. I have to say, though I was aware of the cost of the choices I was making, hearing it verbalized was stunning. It threw me into a time of doubt and insecurity, and I confess, a time of temptation to change my priorities. The kids could wait awhile, Liz would understand, there would be time later for ministry. God was gracious and didn't let me fall into that, and while the bigger bank account that could have resulted would be great, I have no regrets. I am thankful that God in his grace overruled my temptations and covered my weakness, keeping me from giving in to the pressure to trade his priorities for mine.

In a world that has lost its way, believers in Christ have the singular word of hope. Surely it is greater than the culture of self-gratification that dominates our world. For Paul, this deepest yearning is all too often an addendum in our lives.<sup>4</sup> May it not be.

<sup>1</sup> Fee, Gordon F., *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 114.

<sup>2</sup> Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 133-135.

<sup>3</sup> Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 142.

<sup>4</sup> Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 150, 152.