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 Philippians 1:12-18
 Third Message
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THE TOP PRIORITY

As a young boy I saw the following lines written on the wall of a gym. They have always stuck with me:

For when the One Great Scorer comes
 To mark against your name,
 He writes—not that you won or lost—
 But how you played the Game.

These are the last two lines of the well-known poem by the sportswriter Grantland Rice. They describe the challenges faced by a star college football player in the real world: failure, disappointment, success, envy, competition, and how the young athlete learned from the old coach “experience” to face these adversities with courage.

Sooner or later all of us encounter our share of failure, disappointment, and setbacks. We make our plans, dream our dreams, and set our goals, but life has a way of not turning out in the way we might have hoped or imagined.

This presents a challenge to our Christian faith. Is God still actively involved and working through all of these things? Are God’s plans with us or for us thwarted? That depends on our perspective, our point of view, how we are playing the game. If we are living for ourselves and for success as the world defines it, we will experience frustration and lack of fulfillment. But if we live for God and his kingdom, then we can live with hope and joy even in the face of adversity.

Today we will see how the apostle Paul lived in the face of adversity, how he played the game. In Philippians 1:1-11, he begins his letter with greetings and a prayer. The next section, verses 12-26, has a personal note by Paul on his current situation and future expectations. Philippians is a “friendship” letter, and this section is consistent with this type of communication. However, this personal note is lengthier than one might expect. Perhaps the apostle is concerned that the Philippians might be getting discouraged at either his or their situation and he wants to let them know that God is still working. Our study will focus on the apostle’s current situation, in verses 12-18.

I. The Advance of the Gospel

Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, 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. (Phil 1:12-14 NASB)

Paul is in prison. The mention of the praetorian guard refers to the emperor’s own elite troops, suggesting that the apostle was incarcerated in Rome. He would have had access to visitors, to write letters, and to other routine matters, but he was in prison.

Paul has already mentioned his imprisonment (1:7). We note that the word is used two more times in these verses. “Imprisonment” can mean chains, thus we see in verse 13 that Paul views his confinement literally as “my chains in Christ.” In Ephesians he describes himself as “the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles” (Eph 3:1) To be in chains, to be a prisoner, means to participate in Christ’s sufferings, as we will see in 3:10. Paul is in chains because, as Gordon Fee suggests, he is a man in Christ.

Paul’s single passion in life was the gospel: proclaiming salvation through Jesus and seeing that salvation worked out in people’s lives. Logically, one would think that Paul’s imprisonment would be a huge obstacle to the advance of the gospel, but actually quite the opposite was happening. Instead of the gospel being hindered it was taking new ground both inside and outside the prison.

The praetorian guard would have guarded Paul around the clock, in four-hour shifts. One can imagine the dialogue that took place between Paul and these soldiers:

Hi Joe. Good to see you. I see you have the evening shift.

How are the wife and kids?

Who won the gladiator contest yesterday?

I haven’t seen the sports section yet today.

Hi Paul, what should we do tonight?

We could watch The Bachelor. No.

How about Dancing with the Stars? No.

Do you want to play a video game? No.

We could get all the prisoners together and do a little Rock Band. No

Joe, I think that we should just talk.

What do you want to talk about, Paul?

What do you think we should talk about, Joe?

Hmm ... I suppose we could talk about Jesus.

Good answer, Joe.

The guards would have made a captive audience in a place where there was no television, no video games, no cell phones, no music. All of them would come to know Paul and why he was in prison. All of them would have heard the gospel—the story of a man who had been crucified but had been raised from the dead. They would have heard Paul’s claim that Jesus is Lord, not Caesar. They would have been confronted with their belief in pagan gods. This awareness of Paul and his beliefs was not confined to just the praetorian guard but also to everyone else, meaning others who had dealings with imperial affairs.

So the gospel was advancing inside the prison. But it was making strides outside as well. Under Nero, the persecution of Christians was heating up. One would have expected a shrinking back, a retreat by the Christians into security and safety, but again, the opposite was happening.

Paul’s chains had a very positive effect on the brothers and sisters in Rome, giving them a new found boldness that counteracted their fear and timidity. His chains were an encouragement towards greater trust in the Lord. As a result they were risking their lives by speaking the word, i.e., preaching Christ. Paul was confined and could not do the thing that was his single passion in life. But his brothers and sisters were rising to the occasion and standing in the gap.

No stopping the Gospel

Like the Philippians, we are participants (*koinonia*, in 1:5, 7) in gospel work, and what we read here gives us great boldness. History has shown that all attempts by nations or people to stop the spread of the gospel have failed. Rome could not stop the spread of Christianity in the first century. The attempts of a misguided church were impotent to smother and control the Reformation. When China opened its doors to the west, the world discovered that the gospel was alive and well and had spread to thousands. In fact, attempts to extinguish the flame of the gospel of Jesus Christ through persecution have only caused the flame to burn brighter. There is nothing mankind can do to stop the spread of the gospel. Paul writes to Timothy: “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel, for which I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal; but the word of God is not imprisoned” (2 Tim 2:8-9).

The gospel can’t be contained. Several years ago I had the opportunity to teach a Bible study in a prison. Speaking to one of the inmates afterwards, I asked him how he became a Christian. He said that he had found a paper stuck in the wall between two bricks. It was a sermon—in fact, a PBC sermon like the ones we have printed for years. He read the sermon and accepted Christ.

This is the way the gospel spreads and nothing can stop it. No matter what the world does in trying to prohibit public prayer or the singing of hymns at Christmas, we don’t have to be dismayed. The gospel will continue to advance.

Speaking truth plainly

As a result of knowing the power of the gospel we don’t have to water down the message to make it more palatable. But sadly, many spiritual leaders think that is what they must do to get people’s attention. Indian theologian Vinoth Ramachandra comments:

The Good News is packaged and marketed (using, uncritically, all the techniques of modern advertising) as a religious product: offering ‘peace of mind’, ‘how to get to heaven’, ‘health and prosperity’, ‘inner healing’, ‘the answer to all your problems’, etc. What is promoted as ‘faith in God’ often turns out to be a means for obtaining emotional security or material blessing in this life and an insurance policy in the next. ... This kind of ‘gospel’ is essentially escapist, the direct descendent of the pseudo-gospels of the false prophets of the Old Testament. It is simply a religious image of the secular consumerist culture in which modern men and women live.¹

An article in the local paper last week commented on the increasing interest in spirituality. A certain professor was quoted as saying, “The way the word [spirituality] is used broadly in our culture, it’s very eclectic and it can mean whatever a person wants it to mean.” Even Oprah Winfrey has her own version of self-help spirituality!

Vinoth Ramachandra continues:

Biblical faith, in contrast, is the radical abandonment of our whole being in grateful trust and love to the God disclosed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: so that we become willing agents in a costly confrontation with every form of evil and unjust suffering in the world. This faith involves us in embracing the pain and confusion of others, and in being willing to live with uncertainty ourselves while moving towards a future that is already at work among us.²

The advance of the gospel does not depend on the presentation being slick and polished. We are not offering a religious product. As followers of Jesus Christ we speak plainly and boldly, offering salvation through Christ. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians: “we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1:23-25).

We live in constant awareness and expectation of the gospel’s advancement. And how is God using us in this process?

II. The Advance of the Gospel Despite Competition

The first problem that Paul encountered was being in prison; the second had to do with some people who were preaching the gospel with wrong motives.

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

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.

18 What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. (1:14-18).

Two kinds of people outside the prison were preaching the gospel, each with different motives. You might notice the ABB'A' pattern in verses 15-17 describing these two sets of people.

Some people were preaching Christ based on goodwill and love. They knew that Paul had been appointed or set aside for the defense of the gospel and they saw themselves as participants with him. Love was spilling out of these people—the very thing that Paul prayed for the Philippians in the previous verses (1:9).

On the other hand, some people were preaching Christ from envy and strife. These two words are included in the deeds of darkness, listed in Gal 5:20-21, and also in the outworkings of a depraved mind, listed in Rom 1:29. In 1 Tim 6:4 they appear together to describe false teachers whose motive was selfish ambition. They desired to add to Paul's afflictions while he was in prison. Their focus was on the apostle while Paul's focus was on the gospel.

Who were these people? We can't be certain, but they seem to have been brothers and sisters in the Christian community in Rome, since Paul uses the term "brethren" in verse 14. They do not appear to be Jewish Christians seeking to convert Gentiles to Judaism, the opponents whom Paul was hounded by and whom he refers to in chapter 3.

These people were envious of Paul and jealous of his success. They regarded themselves as being in competition with him and wanted to assert themselves over him. They were passionate about their view of things; they felt they were right. They were evangelizing and sharing Christ but doing so with impure motives. They were thinking of Paul not Christ.

How does Paul respond? So what? is his answer. To him it doesn't matter. The gospel is being preached. That is all that matters to Paul, whether the preaching was done with pure motives or false. He doesn't care who gets the credit and doesn't worry about getting into a competition game. As long as Christ is proclaimed Paul rejoices.

Because of the flesh, the world, and the devil, the established church has long been plagued by competition and jealousy. That has always been there and it will continue until the Lord returns. Leaders are concerned with the size of their church. They are preoccupied with a sense of competition and tempted with selfish ambition. Most of you have witnessed this first hand in one form or another. Paul's perspective is helpful. As long the gospel is preached we can say, with Paul, So what? I know this is an oversimplification, but it keeps our eyes focused on Christ and the cross. We don't have to get all worked up about and entangled in petty arguments. Our concern is the working out of redemption in people's lives, not the correction of everyone's motives.

Responding to adversity

Paul had two big problems when he wrote this letter. First, he was in prison; and second, there were people who wanted to inflict him with harm. And yet these problems had no bearing on the impact of what God was doing. Paul was not grumbling but rejoicing. The gospel was advancing and that was all he cared about.

Joseph and his brothers

Joseph, one of Jacob's sons, was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers and ended up in Egypt. There the Lord was with him and he prospered as the right hand man for one of Pharaoh's officers. When Joseph refused to sleep with his master's wife, he became the object of a rejected woman's scorn. Her deceit landed Joseph in jail, but still the Lord was with him. Pharaoh had a dream and Joseph was able to interpret this dream that foretold of a famine. As a result he became Pharaoh's right hand man and was put in charge of storing food to survive the famine. When the famine reached Canaan, Joseph's brothers came to Egypt for food and he was able to provide for his family. He eventually revealed his identity, telling his brothers: "Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life." When Jacob died, Joseph's brothers were afraid that Joseph would seek revenge, but he told his brothers: "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen 15:19-20).

The Romans meant evil against Paul, and so did some of the brethren in Rome, but God meant it for good. Paul's future is uncertain. As we learn in subsequent verses, he doesn't know whether he will live or die, although he expects to be set free and see the Philippians again. But either option is fine with him. He isn't whining or complaining or beset with worry. He rejoices in the present and he will rejoice in the future no matter what. He has learned from the life of Jesus to see death as a means to life, defeat as a means to victory, failure as a means to success. "For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us, but life in you" (2 Cor 4:11-12). "There are some defeats more triumphant than victories" (Michel de Montaigne 1533-1592).

Paul becomes a great example to encourage us. Life will deal us severe blows and setbacks. Disappointments and adversity are unavoidable. At times evil will seem to have the upper hand. We feel boxed-in, confined by health issues, family issues or work issues and we don't have a get-out-of-jail card. We are tempted to dismay and discouragement and fear.

But perhaps our focus is blurred. Perhaps our goals are too shortsighted. Perhaps success and failure are overrated. Maybe it isn't about our comfort and security. Maybe it is all about the kingdom of God and the advance of the gospel. Maybe the top priority is Jesus. When we look not at the things that are seen but unseen, when we have the kingdom of God as our top priority we will see that God is working out his eternal purposes in and through our lives. We can live with confidence, hope, and joy.

As I reflected on this text I could not help but think about the economy. I am sure many of you are thinking of this right now. The economic climate is gloomy, and many have felt the effects of this dark cloud. Many of you have lost jobs or are living in fear of that possibility. Things are uncertain. Maybe God wants to take away our security so that we trust him more fully. Maybe we can view the current economic climate as a great opportunity for the advancement of the gospel and an opportunity to love and serve others. People don't need Oprah Winfrey, they need Jesus Christ.

What I find quite remarkable is that in the middle of the economic meltdown we have never had so many missions trips in one year at PBCC. Two weeks ago we heard from the Galveston team. Last week we talked about the high school kids, and today we heard about Liberia. In the next few weeks we will be praying for other teams. As it was with Paul, often-times God is doing the opposite of how logic might guide us.

Our confidence is not in the economic recovery plan or a stimulus package. Our hope is not in the working out of our plans. Our confidence and hope is in our God who raises the dead and works out his plans in our lives for his purposes. We can live boldly, trusting in the Lord no matter the circumstances. What matters is not winning or losing, but how we play the game—living for the kingdom of God.

Communion

Today is Palm Sunday, the day that marks the beginning of Holy Week. "Hosanna. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." It is also the Sunday we set aside to partake in communion. As we continue through the week we will read the gospel story of the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus. We will gather again on Good Friday to reflect on the suffering of Jesus and the meaning of the cross. And then we will gather next Sunday to celebrate his glorious resurrection.

We remember Jesus through the bread and wine. We remember that salvation came through a broken body and spilt blood. We remember that our life in Christ comes by feeding on him and drinking from his fountain continually. The things I talked about this morning can never come from our strength or abilities. I really wish I could do something, but I can't. You can't either. But we have Christ. The new covenant comes through the provision, strength, and wisdom of Christ to heal and transform and empower. As we partake of the meal we throw ourselves in total dependence and trust on him.

We come to the table soberly, remembering the suffering and the cost of the cross. We come thankfully, because what we could not do, Jesus did. We come empty and without complete understanding. But we do not have to understand. We come as an act of faith, believing in God's promises.

To Him who was revealed in the flesh,
 Was vindicated in the Spirit,
 Seen by angels,
 Proclaimed among the nations,
 Believed on in the world,
 Taken up in glory.

Be praise, and honor, and glory. Amen.

¹ Quoted by Paul David Tripp in *A Quest for More* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2007), 74.

² Paul David Tripp, *A Quest for More*, 76.