

October 25, 2020

A PICTURE OF GOSPEL TRANSFORMATION

Philippians 1:12-18a

(2 of 13 in a series through Philippians)

The phrase, “You learn a lot about a person when . . .” has been uttered often in history. Sometimes we say it about someone who receives a terminal diagnosis or faces economic catastrophe or faces great temptation to evil. And the reason we say that kind of thing is that sometimes what makes up the core character of someone can be hard to see until they walk down a challenging path. This was the devil’s charge against Job in the early chapters of that book, wasn’t it? Satan said to the Lord that the only reason Job was living a life of righteousness before God is because God had blessed the work of his hands. He, therefore, charged God to take away all that he has and see what happens. In other words, Satan was saying, “We’ll really learn what is in Job when you take what he has and even afflict his body.”

Well, similarly, in the book of Philippians we drop into Paul’s life at a moment that is not unlike those early chapters of the book of Job. Philippians gives us a glimpse into the life of Paul as he is suffering. He is imprisoned, shackled to guards, and likely awaiting his execution. If there ever was a moment to say, “You learn a lot about a person when . . .” this would be it. And what do we learn about Paul when he is in these most difficult of circumstances? We learn that he treasures and values the gospel more than we could imagine. It’s not a stretch to say that we encounter no one in the NT (besides the Lord, of course) who treasures the gospel like Paul. And in our text this morning—Philippians 1:12-18a—we get to see Paul’s love for the gospel, willingness to suffer for the gospel, and treasuring of the gospel, but that is not all that we see. We also get to see what transpires in Paul’s life and in the life of others because of Paul’s gospel focus. Therefore, in some ways I’m picking up where we left off last week as we look at what happens when someone loves the gospel, is willing to suffer for the gospel, and treasures the proclamation of the gospel. And my hope is that the glorious results we’ll see in these verses might woo us toward becoming a more gospel-centered people ourselves. So let’s start with a focus on Paul’s love for the gospel.

Loving the gospel produces encouragement in hard circumstances

In order to understand the perspective from which Paul writes the text we’re looking at this morning it is good for us to remember the love that Paul and the Philippians shared. They had been financial supporters of Paul from the very first moment the church was founded in Philippi. They had just recently sent a gift to Paul in prison by the hands of Epaphroditus (which Paul makes reference to in 3:25-30). And we’ve already seen Paul confess to them that he holds them in his heart and yearns for them with the affection of Christ Jesus (1:7-8). It makes sense then that Paul understands that the Philippians are no doubt concerned about him as he sits, shackled to Roman prison guards awaiting his potential execution. It would be reasonable to think that he’s discouraged. It might seem likely that he would be full of second-guessing. After all, if he is in prison in Rome it’s because he appealed to Caesar, and he might not be in prison

otherwise. And so Paul writes to them to let them know what his condition is and what's going on with him as he writes from prison to a people who love him dearly. But what he says might be a bit shocking. He writes, "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel" (v. 12).

He's wants them to know that he's not depressed or discouraged. He's actually encouraged, and he wants them to know that this situation has led to an advance in the gospel, which he identifies happening in two ways. First, he tells us, "It has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ" (v. 13).

Now, if he's in prison in Rome (which I think he is), there are estimates that the whole imperial guard could number 9,000 soldiers. Of course, this doesn't mean that 9,000 soldiers had taken their turn being shackled to the apostle Paul. Most likely, though, there had been several, and in each case Paul was taking the opportunity to tell them why he's in prison. It's because Jesus died on a cross for sinners and has been raised from the dead so that if anyone believes in him, they can have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. And when these soldiers were with other soldiers, guess what their conversation was about? They were saying, "Listen, we've got this one prisoner, and guess what he is saying." In other words, word was spreading throughout the whole imperial guard. Paul may be in prison, but the gospel was spreading.

And it doesn't even seem we should limit it to the imperial guard. Paul says in verse 13 that "it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard *and to all the rest* that my imprisonment is for Christ." In other words, word is spreading throughout the Roman government and perhaps beyond. Give Paul hours a day shackled to soldiers, and Paul has (unintentionally) developed a scheme for spreading the gospel throughout Rome. And this has been a result of him getting himself in prison.

Second, he notes that some have been emboldened to preach the gospel. He writes, "And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear" (v. 14). So not only has Paul's imprisonment led to all the imperial guard and others outside the imperial guard hearing the gospel, but it has also led to other Christians being more emboldened to share the gospel. Now, I want to examine how this precisely works in the next point, but let's just take it for what it is right now. Because Paul is in prison for the gospel, more people are boldly sharing the gospel.

Now, my point is that if you love the gospel you will find encouragement during hard circumstances. And here's the reason why. If you don't love the gospel, then you're going to be drawn to focus on your circumstances, and if you do, there's not a whole lot there to be encouraged by when your circumstances are hard. I mean, Paul isn't looking down and thinking, "Being shackled to these prison guards is not really uncomfortable, and I'm getting used to this life." No, his circumstances are unpleasant. But if your focus is beyond your circumstances to the Lord's work in spreading the good news, then you'll see the Lord is constantly at work, even in the hardest of circumstances. God is always doing more than we can imagine. So if you love the gospel, you'll be able to find encouragement, even if the hardest of circumstances, because

the Lord is always advancing his gospel, even in the darkest of times. Loving the gospel produces encouragement, even in hard circumstances. Second:

Suffering for the gospel creates boldness in other believers

Here's where I want to come back to that note that Paul provided for us in verse 14. He says, "And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear." Now let's think about this for a second. If you see someone do something, and they are punished for it, do you think it would make you more bold to do that very thing for which they person got punished and to do it without fear? If you see someone break into a jewelry store and get thrown into prison for twenty years do you think, "I feel emboldened to rob a jewelry store"? My guess is no. In fact, my guess is that everyone involved would think that the answer would be no. Even the individuals doling out the punishment assume that this would serve to lessen the likelihood that others would commit this same punishable act. And yet Paul is telling us that because he's imprisoned for preaching the gospel others are looking at Paul's imprisonment and becoming more bold in speaking the gospel without fear. How in the world does this work?

I think I have a pretty good guess. In this situation with Paul's imprisonment emboldening these others to preach the gospel, the group that is finding their courage bolsters are Christians. Now, that's stating the obvious I guess, but it is a crucial detail. In other words, they're individuals who have declared that their hope is not in this world only but are looking to eternal life, the resurrection, and the return of Christ. This is a group that has submitted themselves in obedience to Jesus Christ to live in obedience to him.

Now, when Christians are at their worst is when we lose sight of these realities. When believers remove their focus from looking to eternal life, the resurrection, and the return of Christ and instead focus intently on the here and now as if this is all there is, Christians do not do well. They begin acting like the world. Their treasures become the very things the world treasures. They're passionate about the very things the world is passionate about. Their priorities become the very things that the world prioritizes. Even if these believers somehow manage to live moral lives, they can become a people who—for all intents and purposes—are hard to distinguish from unbelievers who may live somewhat moral lives. And that's the kind of place where the devil loves believers to be.

But then one day those believers open up the morning paper in Rome and see that Paul is in prison for preaching the good news of Jesus and it is jarring—in a good way. It can awaken a believer who has drifted into a slumber. Seeing the willingness of another who is willing to suffer for the sake of the gospel reminds all those around that what we profess is true. It's worth dying for. It's worth living for. It reminds us that this life is not all there is. And because this life is not all there is, you don't have to chase after everything the world chases after. In fact, because eternal life awaits us because of Jesus we can obey him to the point of death and not only not lose but gain. And all of the sudden a believer can think to himself, "Wait a second. What am I doing? I need to obey the Lord just like Paul is doing and stop letting fears that I might lose

something or not gain something in this life control me.” And that’s exactly what I believe is happening with these Roman believers. Paul’s imprisonment is emboldening them and bolstering their courage by awakening them to the reality that Christ is worth our everything. And Paul’s imprisonment is lighting a fire that shines more brightly than Paul could have shone if he’d been left out of prison.

Tom has shared the story of Joseph Tson who was threatened to the point of death for preaching the gospel in Romania. And Joseph responded to those who threatened his life by reminding them that if they killed him, then people all over Romania would realize that he was willing to die for this gospel he was preaching, and they’d start a wildfire throughout Romania they couldn’t control. So the people decided to let Joseph go. And I think Joseph was right, and it had been shown to be true in the imprisonment of Paul 2,000 years earlier. Suffering for the gospel bolsters courage in other believers. And finally:

Treasuring the gospel provides a platform for unalterable joy

This point is similar to the first, but I want to push it a little further. Paul didn’t just mention that some believers were emboldened to preach the gospel, he actually mentions there were two different sets of believers who started preaching the gospel more boldly. He writes in verses 15-17, “Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.” And yet—despite noting this—Paul is going to tell us that he rejoices. Why? Well, let’s first try to understand what Paul is saying.

Some of those emboldened to preach the gospel are preaching from “good will” and “out of love.” In other words, they’ve been stirred in love for God and neighbor, and they’re preaching. But there’s another group who “envy” Paul and feel some kind of “rivalry” with Paul, and they have a “selfish ambition” that is driving them to preach the gospel in hopes that it will “afflict” Paul in his imprisonment.

Now how does this work? Well, we can’t be sure, but once more we can try to imagine. Do you remember when some of John’s disciples came to him in John 3:26 and pointed out that the crowds were going to Jesus, saying, “He is baptizing and all are going to him”? Why would they say that? It’s because although their mentor John had been pointing people to Jesus—and did on this occasion as well, saying, “He must increase, but I must decrease”—John’s disciples still had this feeling of wanting to receive the glory that comes with being with the popular preacher. In other words, even believers aren’t immune to the desire to receive praise and glory from others, and there are things that you can do as a believer to receive praise and glory from men. If you start preaching and get enough of a following that is one of those things. And I think that’s what is going on here.

There were some believers who were preaching the true gospel. If they weren’t truly preaching the gospel then Paul’s rejoicing that they’re preaching wouldn’t make any sense. But these

believers were drawn to the glory that can come with preaching and getting attention or praise or glory from it. And as they looked at Paul and saw that this is one of the leading disciple-makers that the church has ever known, instead of feeling with joy, they felt envy because they thought of Paul as a rival. He's getting some of the glory they wanted. When others reported things like, "Paul preached and a hundred people came to know Jesus," instead of rejoicing, they felt envy. When Paul was shipwrecked, they have secretly felt a little joy. They envied him and made him their rival of sorts—as odd as that should be to us. And so much of their life had to be miserable because the Lord had used Paul greatly.

But now the tables have turned, and Paul is in prison. And so they see this as their chance. Now is an opportunity for them to get out and preach the gospel and gain a following, and Paul is going to have to recognize that the crowds coming to listen to them are much bigger than any crowds he has in prison. And they think that when Paul hears about all of those who are coming to listen to these preachers proclaim the gospel, it'll afflict him.

But they've misjudged Paul. He's doesn't prize his popularity or glory or praise more than he prizes the preaching of the gospel. And so instead of saying, "I hate it that I'm in here while these guys are getting all these followers, all this praise, and all this glory," Paul actually says, "What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I will rejoice" (18a).

Do you see how this works? Jesus has told us that in this age we will have wars and rumors of wars. Nation will rise against nation. There will be earthquakes and famines. In other words, this world will be in upheaval. But he also tells us that the gospel will also be proclaimed to the nations. He tells us that on the day of judgment there will be redeemed people from every tongue, tribe, people, and nation. And if you treasure that gospel going forth and not being able to be contained, then you may have to say in any one moment, "I am chained," but you will also be able to say, "But the gospel isn't." And the gospel won't be. No matter, Jesus tells us, how dark it gets, the light of the gospel is going to keep running and will accomplish his purposes.

What this means then is that if you treasure the spread and advance of the gospel you are providing for yourself a means of having unalterable joy. It would be like having joy in gravity. No matter my circumstances, gravity remains. Well, no matter my circumstances, the gospel keeps moving forward. The gates of hell will not prevail against the church. And so when Paul hears another report about the gospel spreading, it doesn't matter that those preaching the gospel want to cause him pain. They've made a miscalculation because Paul treasures the gospel advancing more than he treasures even his own life. And so news of their preaching simply brings him cause for rejoicing. They're not afflicting him but giving him reasons to praise God.

And so here we have a really good setup. If you love the gospel, then you can be encouraged even when you're in hard circumstances. Even if you're suffering for the gospel, you can trust that the Lord is using your suffering as a means to bring about greater spread of the gospel. And if you love the gospel advancing, then that brings you right back around to feeling encouraged

and having joy. Thus, you've provided for yourself a platform for unalterable joy because you love, treasure, and delight in the gospel. That's what we're seeing in Philippians 1:12-18a as Paul writes from prison, shackled to prison guards, while awaiting his execution.

And doesn't this appeal to you? In the midst of so much craziness in this world or reasons to be discouraged or happenings that could toss you about, isn't it appealing to think of providing yourself a platform for encouragement and rejoicing even in the craziest and harshest of circumstances? We can have this. It comes with loving the gospel and trusting that Christ will succeed in gathering his people for himself. So let us this morning pray that the Lord would give us greater love for the gospel and a heart that treasures the gospel more and more, even to the point that we would happily suffer for the sake of the gospel if necessary. And let us delight in this gospel now as we come to the table. Amen.