

View Trials in Light of Eternity
Philippians 1:12-18
Sunday, November 3rd, 2024
By Ryan Perry

Scripture

Philippians 1:12–18

[12] I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, [13] so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. [14] And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

[15] Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. [16] The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. [17] The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. [18] What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

Let's Pray

Introduction

Listen to the following story from retired theology professor and former pastor Dennis Johnson.

Her name was Joy, and it fit her beautifully. I was a young pastor when I was called to shepherd the church to which Joy belonged. Just a few years out of seminary, I treasured my hours in study, interpreting the Bible, and preparing sermons. I was far less eager to visit our aging congregation's shut-ins. It was not that I lacked sympathy for their pain, loneliness, and frustration. It was just that I felt overwhelmed and unable to offer words that would bring them comfort.

I did what I could: I listened attentively, read the Word, and prayed for my suffering brothers and sisters. But often I left with a heavy heart, questioning whether I had brought them the solace that they needed. **My visits to Joy, on the other hand, were different.**

Joy was not elderly. But by the time I met her, rheumatoid arthritis had curled her hands into tiny fists, confined her to a wheelchair, and filled her days and nights with pain. At the start of my pastorate, she had the strength to attend worship services now and then. Later came years of home confinement and repeated hospitalizations. **In her family she alone trusted Christ.**

She took the initiative in our conversations, and the questions were all about our family, our children, or others in the church. Rarely would she mention her physical pain and personal trials.

Gratitude to her God and concern for others overflowed from her heart, so that we all felt that we gained far more than we gave in every contact with this tiny champion of faith and hope.

Hearing my description of Joy, you may be inclined to think, “Some people are just born cheerful, I envy them.” That may be true of some, but I can assure you that joy did not come naturally to Joy. She struggled often with loneliness, and at times with discouragement and confusion over God’s promises and purposes.

She would be the first to insist that the resources that made her so refreshing to others came from outside herself. **Because Joy’s inner reservoir was filled by streams flowing from Jesus her Lord, and the hope of the eternity to come, her joy gave the rest of us reason to trust her Lord and ours could and would sustain our own spirits in times of trial.**

Now, I have shared this story with you this morning because this is precisely the message that the apostle Paul intends to convey to the Philippians and to us as he now turns the corner from his introduction and opening prayer to give an update on his own situation in Roman custody.

Where, instead of just telling the Philippians that he is doing fine in prison and then encouraging them to remain faithful and steadfast in their own trials (which he will eventually will do), he encourages them in their struggles by proclaiming the great kingdom building work that God was doing as a result of his imprisonment.

Paul takes the focus off of the realities of his circumstances now, so that they could see his situation and their own in light of God’s eternal purposes, which he says, will be completed at the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6, 10).

And this morning we are going to be challenged and encouraged to see our trials and struggles in the same way. To view them, **like Joy did. With joy, in light of the eternity to come. Because there is a gospel advancing and eternity preparing purpose in each and every one of them.**

So let’s take a closer look at Paul’s situation in Rome and how he is viewing it in light of eternity. And the first thing that we learn is:

1. Viewing our trials in light of eternity will advance the Gospel (V. 12-13)

Philippians 1:12–13

[12] I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, [13] so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

Before we jump into what Paul is saying here, I think it will help us to have a fuller picture of all that Paul has been through in the process of becoming a prisoner in Rome.

In Acts 21, Paul had just departed the Ephesian elders and was now sailing on his way toward Jerusalem. He didn't know what would happen to him there, but the Spirit continually affirmed through others that imprisonment and affliction were coming.

Once in Jerusalem, he was there about 7 days when some Jews from Asia stirred up a large crowd by saying that he was teaching against the Jews, the Law, and the Temple.

They were about to kill him, but by God's grace, it came to the attention of one of the Roman commanders, who instead, arrested Paul, and put him in chains.

The Romans, desiring to save Paul's life, were going to whip him instead. But before they could do that, he told them that he was a Roman citizen. Which meant that he was supposed to be awarded a fair trial and found guilty before he could be punished.

So he's brought before the chief Priests in Acts 23 to plead his case. When that turns violent, and a plot to kill Paul is revealed, he is then sent with soldiers to Caesarea so that the Roman Governor Felix can decide his case. After being heard by Felix, no decision was made and Paul was left in prison for two years.

Felix is then succeeded by Festus who, in Acts 25, hears Paul's case again, but tries to help the Jews by getting Paul to stand trial in Jerusalem. But Paul, realizing that it was a trap, appealed to Caesar. To which Festus answered in Acts 25:12, ***"To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go."***

From there he eventually sets sail for Rome, ends up in a huge storm, gets shipwrecked in Acts 27, ends up on the island of Malta for three months in Acts 28, gets bitten by a viper and lives, and then finally finds a ship that can get him to Rome.

And once in Rome he is put under house arrest, chained to a soldier, and is required to pay for all of his own expenses.

So when we hear Paul, with what is probably an excited and cheerful tone, writing in Philippians 1:12, ***"I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel,"*** he is doing it with a large list of trials that have followed him all the way to his current hardship in prison.

But Paul doesn't recount this story for the Philippians. In fact, he barely spends any time focusing on his current situation. The only reason he even brings up his imprisonment in verse 7 is to talk about their partnership with Paul in it. And now, in verse 12, he brings it up for the sole purpose of encouraging the Philippians in their situation.

This is why he says, ***"I want you to know, Brothers,..."*** or ***"I want you to be fully aware."***

Remember, this church is not only concerned about Paul but is living in fear as they deal with their own struggles and persecutions. And because of this, they are beginning to waiver in their faith in the gospel. This is why Paul calls them to stand firm in Phil 1:27 when he writes:

[27] ...so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,

Paul wants them to have a firm and steadfast confidence in Christ, even in the face of intense struggles and persecutions. A confidence that he has already laid the groundwork for by reminding them in Philippians 1:6 that God will sustain them and complete his good work in them when Christ returns.

And it's a confidence that he now grounds in his own experience when he tells them that his persecution and struggles (imprisonment) have served to advance the gospel.

People are hearing about Christ and being saved because of Paul's imprisonment. This includes both the Imperial Guard, which are Caesar's elite troops who would guard Paul, but also "all the rest," which is more than likely the common folk in Rome.

But we need to be clear, people hearing about Christ and believing in him isn't merely happening because Paul is in prison. Rather, It is happening because he is living for Jesus in prison.

Look with me at what Luke writes about Paul's imprisonment in Rome at the end of Acts 28.

Acts 28:30-31

[30] He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, [31] proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

Paul is viewing his circumstances in light of eternity and God's work to redeem a people for himself. Therefore, sees his imprisonment as a God-ordained opportunity to preach Christ.

And he's writing this to the Philippians, and by extension us so that we would have the confidence to live as if God is going to do the same thing in our lives and through our trials.

Application

Now, I realize that it is easy to look at Paul and assume that he was some sort of Christian Jedi or is part of an elite group who must have more of the Holy Spirit than we do, and so his life doesn't apply to us.

But Paul doesn't view himself that way, nor does he view us or the Philippians as people who have less of the Holy Spirit and are somehow unable to live like him.

Rather, he sees us as equals, brothers and sisters in Christ, who can walk through trials in the same way he did. This is why he writes in Philippians 3:17:

[17] Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.

Or in 1 Corinthians 11:1:

[1] Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

However, as I read these verses, I hope you don't think that I am trying to diminish how hard your trials might be. Nor do I want you to feel like you are a bad Christian because you might struggle through hard circumstances.

Things like cancer, depression, loss of family members, job loss, financial hardship, wayward children, addiction, etc... are all results of the fall, and will produce varying levels of mourning and struggle within us.

In fact, remember Joy, from the opening story? The former pastor said, **“she struggled often with loneliness, and at times with discouragement and confusion over God's promises and purposes.”**

Emotion filled faith struggles will happen when we are going through hard times. This has happens to me, to you, and it even happened to Paul, as we will see.

But Paul, believing that God had a purpose in his trials, took his eyes off of his circumstances, and instead focused them on Christ and the eternity to come. **As a result, the gospel was made known, and the imperial guards and others were saved.**

So again, we shouldn't diminish our trials as if they don't matter, and I don't want us to beat ourselves up when we struggle. But instead, I want us to begin to pray and ask God to change our perspectives around the purpose behind our trials.

That we would begin to see them, as God-ordained opportunities to live out our faith, **even when we struggle**, that he will use to draw others to Christ.

And when we begin to see trials this way, God will not only give us opportunities, like Paul, to share Christ with others, but he will also use our circumstances to encourage other believers.

2. Viewing our trials in light of eternity will encourage other believers (V. 14)

Philippians 2:14

[14] And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

One of the greatest and most comprehensive letters that exists within the New Testament is Paul's letter to the church in Rome. It is so comprehensive, in fact, that it almost feels like Paul is writing a theological textbook about Christ.

But one of the reasons that it feels this way is because when Paul wrote it in A.D. 57, he had never been to Rome, nor had he actually met the members of that church. So he wanted to give them a comprehensive teaching on Christ that he couldn't give in person.

Yet, when he writes Romans, he also expresses within it a deep desire to come to Rome so that he can encourage and strengthen that church. As he says in Romans 1:11:

[11] For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—

And I bring this history up because I want you to continue to see the sovereign hand of God in Paul's circumstances.

Paul wanted to come to these Christians, whom he had never met so that he could strengthen them in their faith. However, when Paul wrote those words, he had no idea that God's plan for him was to end up in Rome as a prisoner.

Likewise, he had no idea at that point, that his ministry would be happening within the confines of house arrest as he sat chained to a guard.

And he had no idea that God, through his ministry in chains, would accomplish what Paul had intended to do as a free man, which is strengthen the faith of the believers in Rome.

It is so amazing how God orchestrates circumstances, isn't it?

But why did the church in Rome need to be strengthened in the first place?

To be clear, we don't know all of the circumstances surrounding this church, but there are a couple things that we can pull from that time period and his letter.

First, like I said about Philippi, Rome is obviously a place where they would be loyal to the emperor and were even worshipping him and calling him Lord and Savior.

So Christians in Rome were not well-liked by the Roman citizens because they saw them as a threat to the empire as they talked about Christ as Lord and Savior

This tension ultimately reached its climax in A.D 64 when the emperor Nero blamed the Christians for the “Great Fire of Rome” and began persecuting and killing them. (As a side note, most scholars believe that Paul was martyred in Rome during this persecution)

Secondly, the church in Rome consisted of a large mixture of Jews and Gentiles and there seemed to be intense internal struggles between them over the right way to follow Christ.

All of this points to a church that is being hit with both external and internal factors that are pressing in on them and hindering their gospel witness.

But then Paul comes to Rome in Chains, openly and boldly proclaiming Christ as Lord, and these believers begin to see, through Paul, a renewed gospel witness and people coming to Christ.

As a result, Paul says in Philippians 1:14 that **“they became confident in the Lord and were bold, speaking the word without fear.”**

The timidity and fear that was hindering these believers was washed away as they saw God working through Paul’s chains to advance the cause of Christ.

Which then caused them to become confident, in Christ, to share the gospel even in and through their own trials.

And Paul is now relaying this reality to the Philippians so that they too would not be afraid and would be bold enough to share Christ, even as they suffer and are persecuted.

Again, he says in Philippians 1:27-28a.

[27] Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, [28] and not frightened in anything by your opponents.

Application

If you didn’t know this, we, as human beings are very self-focused. So, when we are going through trials and struggles we tend to focus on ourselves.

Why is this trial so hard for me? Why do I have to go through this? What is God doing to me? What is God trying to teach me? Me, me, me.

But Paul's example, in prison, and the effect that it had on the Christians in Rome, is a reminder that our trials are not just about us.

Now it is true that God wants to teach us things through our trials, and there are many scriptures that point that out.

But we tend to forget the fact that our hard circumstances are meant to have an effect on the people around us, especially within the family of faith.

As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4:

[3] Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, [4] who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

Our afflictions, hardships, and trials are part of God's pay-it-forward program. So that when God comforts and encourages us in our junk, we are able to comfort and encourage others in theirs.

And this is exactly what Paul's chains did. God sustained him, God comforted him, and God used him to proclaim Christ in his trials, not only to spread the good news of the gospel, but so that both the Roman and Philippian believers would be encouraged to live the same way in theirs.

So we must begin to reframe our thinking about hardships and trials. Because they are not only about what God is doing to us or in us personally.

Rather, when we zoom out and take a larger look at them, we will begin to see that one of the main purposes that God has in our struggles, as we walk through them with a Christ-centered perspective, is to build up other believers.

Remember, last week when we talked about how Paul's prayer pointed us to the reality that we are called to prepare others to meet Jesus?

Our trials are part of that same reality.

Meaning, as we walk by faith and live with a hope in the eternity to come, God will use them not merely to comfort and build us up personally, but to encourage, strengthen, and comfort others so that they can be confident in God, bold in their faith, and can endure suffering as they wait for the day of Christ Jesus.

So I know that I have spent most of our time this morning talking about the external realities of our trials. How God will use them to spread the gospel and to encourage others in their afflictions. But I also said that there are still things that God wants to teach us through them. And according to Paul's testimony when we view our trials in light of eternity there is also something that God will do in us.

3. Viewing our trials in light of eternity will transform our own hearts (V. 15-18a)

Philippians 1:15-18a

[15] Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. [16] The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. [17] The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. [18a] What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

So far in his update, we have been getting this version of Paul that seems to be super upbeat and energetic about his imprisonment. However, in verse 15 I think we get the first little glimpse from him that everything isn't perfectly okay.

Because, even though the gospel is being proclaimed through his chains, and the Roman believers are being bold in their faith, there are some within that church who are competing against Paul because they are envious and jealous of him.

To which we might say, "What? That doesn't happen in the church, does it?!"

Unfortunately, yes, yes it does!

Now, this is another place where we can't perfectly piece together what is happening here, but we do know this:

- One, some in the church of Rome are jealous and see themselves as Paul's rivals.
- Two, even though they are Paul's rivals they are still preaching Christ.
- Three, they are preaching Christ, or the true gospel, but are doing it with impure and selfish motives, thinking that they can somehow afflict Paul in prison.
- Four, Paul makes it clear that it wasn't everybody.

And when we try to fit this together, we begin to see a group of people, who don't like the fact that people are coming to faith through Paul. He's beginning to gain a following in Rome, and frankly their jealous.

So they decide to become bold and share the gospel, but they are doing it so that they can gain popularity and people will look to them instead of Paul. **Now, this is an educated guess at best, but it makes the most sense when we realize that Paul says they are preaching the right gospel, but with wrong motives.**

But whatever the situation is, this is the first hint from Paul that his struggle in prison, especially when other supposed Christians are against him, is real.

Paul is in chains because he wants so badly for Christ's kingdom to be built and for the gospel to advance, and yet, there are others, who are supposed to be his brothers and sisters, who are taking that gospel, and using it for their own selfish purposes because they are filled with envy and jealousy.

But instead of lashing out or trying to fight back, Paul keeps his eyes on the purpose of his trials and chains, the building of God's kingdom, which allows him to respond to these believers and to the Philippians with the same energetic and upbeat tone that he started with. As he writes in the first half of verse 18.

[18] What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

Yes, I am in chains, and yes, these people are trying to use the gospel against me, but I don't care, because what matters most is that Christ is proclaimed, and the gospel goes forward.

Paul could say this because he didn't view his trials and chains as a curse or a punishment. Rather, he viewed them as a vehicle of God's blessing and transformation both to other and to himself.

As he writes in Romans 5:3-5:

[3] Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, [4] and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, [5] and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

And then in 2 Corinthians 4:17 he says:

[17] For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,

Paul didn't lash out at the brothers or become angry at them, despite their working against him, because he understood that his trials, no matter how they came, are not only advancing the gospel in the world, but that God is using them to advance the gospel in his own heart as he prepares Paul for the eternity to come.

And this is a truth that the Philippians needed so that they would continually see their internal and external struggles in light of the eternity preparing work that God was doing through them and for them.

As Paul says in Philippians 3:13-15:

[13] Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, [14] I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. [15] Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.

Application:

Brothers and sisters, our trials are all about the upward call of God in Christ Jesus, so that we would all be prepared to meet Jesus.

The question is, when the rubber meets the road, and our hardships come, do we believe this?

That there is a heart transforming, eternity preparing work that God is doing in and through each one of us, even in the hardest of hard situations, and that this is a part of God's plan for us? Because Paul tells us, suffering isn't optional.

Philippians 1:29

[29] For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake,

However, what is up to us is how we will walk through them. Will we be people who are continually crushed, downtrodden, depressed, beaten down, and discouraged by our hardships, or will we be a church who views them in light of the eternity to come?

Believing that God will use them to bring people to faith, to encourage other believers, and that he will use them to transform us, so that we are able to endure suffering, like Paul, and will be ready and excited to meet Jesus.

Does this mean every trial will be easy? No. Does this mean that we won't struggle? No.

But when we walk through trials in this way, in light of the eternity to come, we will become a people who can endure the deepest valleys and the darkest oceans, and yet still be filled with the overflowing gladness and hope that God provides.

So that we will genuinely be able to say, as Paul does in verse 18, ***Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.***

Let's Pray