

UNSTOPPABLE GOOD NEWS

Phil 1.12-18

Introduction to reading

Will you turn to Philippians 1.12-18 with me please? We are continuing our studies in this letter this morning, a letter written by the apostle Paul from inside a prison cell, probably in Rome, to his Christian friends many hundreds of miles away, in the city of Philippi.

- Paul has **greeted** his friends warmly (vs 1-2).
- He has spoken of his great **joy** for them, because of their partnership with him in the Gospel (vs 3-5).
- He has also expressed his **confidence** in God concerning them, to put all the finishing touches to their lives, right up until the day Jesus returns to earth, so that the God work God has begun in them, will be ready for the arrival of Jesus (vs5).
- And to that end, after expressing his deep affection for them all (vs 7-8), Paul goes on to pray for them (vs 9-11). He prays that their lives will be filled with the very best kind of fruit – the fruit that comes through us enjoying a living, dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ – and all of this, so that God may be truly glorified in us.

So Paul is now ready to share a little of his own news with his friends. It seems that they had been concerned to find out how he had been getting on in prison. But far from being full of self-pity for himself, Paul is filled with excitement as he realises that what has happened to him has turned out to be for the good of the Gospel.

Read: Phil 1.12-18

INTRODUCTION

Hindsight is a wonderful gift, isn't it? It's so good to be able to look back over our life and trace the hand of God through all the twists and turns our life has taken, and its ups and downs. It's good to be able to look back and see that God really has been working out his purposes in us and through us, through the different circumstances he has placed us in.

Illustration. We can think back to the Old Testament story of Joseph.

- As a teenager, he was sold into **slavery** by his mean and jealous brothers, and carted off to a foreign land.
- There he was quite unjustly thrown into **prison**, on a trumped up charge, thanks to the unsuccessful advances of a married woman, who wanted Joseph to jump into bed with her, a temptation he resisted firmly.
- Then while he was in prison, he was **forgotten** about by an absent-minded royal official, who had promised to put in a good word for Joseph once he got out of prison, as Joseph had correctly predicted he would, by interpreting the man's puzzling dream for him.

But many years later, Joseph was able to say to his brothers (Gen 50.20), *You intended to harm me; but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done - the saving of many lives.* That's the Old Testament equivalent of Romans 8.28: *we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

Hindsight is a wonderful gift – to be able to look back and trace God's purposeful hand through all the unexpected twists and turns of our life, to see that he was indeed working out his purposes in the dark and difficult days, as well as in the good times.

But what I believe Paul is calling us to do in the verses we are looking at this morning is something even better. By his own example, what he is saying to us is this: ***given the fact that one day we will indeed be able to look back over our lives, and confirm that God really was working for our good in all the ups and downs we passed through, let that thought transform the way you regard your present situation.***

1. THINK POSITIVELY ABOUT YOUR PRESENT SITUATION (vs 12-14)

Paul wanted the Philippians to know that *what had happened to him had served to advance the gospel – it really had – and in that he rejoiced!*

- What had happened to him was that he had ended up in prison.
- He had ended up in prison the first time he had visited Philippi, you'll remember.
- And now he was back in prison again! He has already spoken about the chains that bound him in verse 7; and now he refers to them again, in verse 14.

But despite the unpleasantness of the situation he found himself in, he was able to look on his circumstances with the eye of faith. He was able to speak very positively about his situation, and would encourage us to do the same – whatever our circumstances may happen to be.

- None of us is in jail, right now – otherwise we wouldn't be here this morning, unless we had obtained a pass to attend church.
- But there may be some who feel *as if* they are in a kind of jail. You feel very restricted, or hemmed in by your circumstances.
 - perhaps you feel you're in a dead-end job;
 - perhaps you feel as if you have got stuck in your career;
 - maybe you have elderly parents to care for, and they are restricting your movements;
 - you might even feel your marriage is like a jail sentence, sadly some people do.

But what Paul is teaching us here, through his own example, is that whatever our circumstances, whether of our own choosing or not, we can learn to look at them very positively, as he did. So what are some of the secrets of being able to do that?

Well, first Paul shows us the importance of

1.2 Cultivating a right perspective on life (v12)

- What mattered to Paul was not his own comfort, but the advance of the Gospel.
- What mattered to Paul was not the fulfilment of all his personal ambitions, however spiritual they may have been, but the advancement of Christ's kingdom.

And this is what can transform the way we look at whatever situation we happen to find ourselves in.

- Paul had the faith to believe that God's hand was at work in his present predicament, and that God could use his unpleasant surroundings to advance the Gospel. And in that, he rejoiced!
- Paul's circumstances are probably not what he would have chosen for himself. He had a burning ambition to take the Gospel to places where it was still unknown, *It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known*, he had written in Rom 16.20.
- But Paul had the faith to believe that God could use his placement in a prison cell to advance Christ's kingdom. The word Paul uses here is a word that a frequent traveller like himself would have often used. It means to make good progress despite all the obstacles standing in the way. He probably looked back on all the storms he had endured at sea, and the bad weather and primitive roads that impeded his progress on land. But despite these obstacles, he had travelled far and wide to advance the Gospel. And the same was now happening from the confines of his prison cell, and he had the faith to see that.

This speaks very much to our own situations, doesn't it? We must never think that our circumstances will prevent God from working both in us and through us to advance his kingdom.

Illustration. Like a grandmaster chess player, God knows exactly where he wants all his pieces at any given moment in time.

- He may want some out front, pioneering new causes;
- He might want some in the middle of the board, consolidating gains that have recently been hard won.
- And he may want to keep some in reserve at the back, for future advances.

God always knows best. And we must learn to trust him. We need to learn to believe that whatever he allows to happen to us can be used to advance the Gospel.

But how? – well that's what Paul turns to next in verse 13.

We need to

1.2 Realise the Purpose of God's placements (v13)

God has put us where we are so that we can be a witness to Jesus, to the unbelievers around and about us.

- Paul had landed up in prison. He would probably have preferred to have been out and about, preaching the Gospel in new, uncharted territories, unreached parts of the Roman Empire.
- Instead, he found himself confined to a prison cell, chained to a Roman soldiers, 24-hours a day.
- But Paul was overjoyed to be where God had put him, because as a result the whole palace guard had come to hear about Jesus!
- The language Paul uses in verse 16, when he says, *I am put here for the defence of the gospel*, is military language. It was a word used of a commanding officer, stationing his troops ready for battle. Paul was as much on duty in that prison cell as the soldier who was guarding him – except that Paul had received his posting from a much higher authority than the soldier's!

It was no accident that Paul had been stationed inside that prison, at the direction of his commanding officer.

- The palace guard were the crack soldiers of the Roman Army, rather like our Royal Protection Force, or SAS even!
- They were all handpicked men, specially chosen to guard Caesar's most important prisoners.
- Membership of this elite squad was highly prized.
- The praetorian guard, as they were known, were on double pay and enjoyed good pension prospects.
- And because of their special duties, they were largely inaccessible to members of the general public.

So how could they be reached with the Gospel? – only through an insider, either one of their own number, or through one of the prisoners they were charged to guard!

- Paul would have been chained to one of these special soldiers 24 hours a day.
- So every time the duty rota changed, it was a fresh opportunity for Paul to share why he was in prison. Maybe some of the soldiers asked him. And Paul was able to explain that he was in prison, not because he had been convicted of any crime, nor because he was a political agitator. ***He was in prison because of Jesus***, his Lord and Saviour, his Master and King.
- And for the entire duration of a soldier's shift, Paul had a captive audience for sharing the Gospel. There was no escape for the soldier!
- As a result, the entire Praetorian Guard, and everyone else in the royal household, had come to know about Jesus.

No wonder Paul was so over the moon! Right in the heart of the capital city, Jesus was being made known.

Paul teaches us that **God has put us where we are for a purpose**. It's ***so we can be a witness to Jesus*** – amongst our colleagues, in our place of work; amongst our friends and neighbours, along the road; amongst the members of our close and wider family. Wherever God has put us, he has put us there to be his witness to the lost and unreached in that place.

- Perhaps your place of work is so bad as to be almost unbearable, and you wonder why God has kept you there. It's to be witness to Jesus in a dark and lost place. It's to reach people that no one else is in contact with.
- Perhaps you end up in hospital for unexpected treatment, and you ask yourself, "Why has God allowed this to happen to me?" In part, it's so you can be a witness for Jesus amongst people who can't be reached in any other way. I know of countless people who have had wonderful opportunities to speak of Jesus in hospital wards, because non-believers are often very open to the Gospel when their life is hanging in the balance, or when illness has caused them to start questioning everything.
- Perhaps you don't much like where you live. Maybe you would prefer to be living elsewhere. But God has put you where you are to reach the people that only you have any contact with.

God hasn't called us to live in monasteries or nunneries, cut off from other people. He has placed us where we are for a purpose – to be a witness to Jesus, to reach out to the needy and lost with his love.

But notice this, from 2.14-16. **How we conduct ourselves where God has put us is all-important** as far as being an effective witness to Jesus is concerned.

- If Paul had moaned and groaned all day about the injustice of his imprisonment, or the conditions he was being held in, he would have been no different from any other prisoner, and none of the soldiers would have paid any attention to him.
- This is why in 2.14-16 he says, *Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life.*

This is what Alex Motyer says about Paul and why he made such an impact from inside his prison cell (p71f). *No every suffering Christian is as fruitful as Paul was, or fruitful in any sense at all. Many a Christian suffers without exercising any influence for good upon the world or the church. In other words, although Paul's fruitfulness stemmed from his suffering, it is not explained by it. Two other factors were involved.*

- *In his suffering, Paul was **self-effacing**. He didn't use the occasion of his suffering either to turn his thoughts in upon himself or to make himself the object of other people's attention and sympathy. These few verses are as outward looking as any found anywhere in the New Testament.*
- *Secondly, Paul **witnessed to Jesus**. One chained man looks much the same as any other. The manacles tell us other; but the man wearing them does. Here was a prisoner whose talk was all of Another. Whether Paul sat alone with his guard, or wherever a visitor dropped by to see him, the talk was always the same – it was about Jesus.*

... Paul relates his experiences with such a light touch that we might be deceived into thinking that what is easily told was easily accomplished. But why should it have been any easier for Paul than it is for us to leave the path of self-pity, to speak more about Jesus than about our complaints; and to accept each and every circumstance as the place of duty that our commanding officer has appointed for us? Such notoriously difficult attitudes of heart and mind are brought about only by practise, by hard-won choices made in the heat of the conflict.

People came to know that Paul was in prison because of Jesus, it was as simple as that. People often don't want to hear about us – especially our moans and groans. But they do need to hear about Jesus. And when we conduct ourselves in a manner that is distinctive and positive – especially when the circumstances we find ourselves in are trying or unpleasant – people will start to notice that we're genuinely different from them. And then they might start to ask us questions about why we are different from the. And that's when we need to be ready to point people away from ourselves, to Jesus. *In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord*, Peter tells us (1 Peter 3.15). That's where we must start; and then he encourages us *always to be ready and prepared, to give an answer to everyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope we have.*

- We need to cultivate a right perspective on life – what matters is the advance of the Gospel, not our own comfort or convenience, dreams or ambitions.
- We need to realise the purpose of God's placements – it's so we can be a witness to Jesus in the place of his choosing.

And then we should also

1.3 Realise the Power of a Positive Example (v14)

Paul wasn't just a witness to those inside the prison; he was an inspiration to those outside the prison too! Verse 14 speaks of the way in which many others were emboldened to speak about Jesus *outside* the prison, spurred on by Paul's example. In fact, he tells us that this is what *most* of the Christians were doing – not just a dedicated minority, the 10% who, so we are told, are natural personal evangelists. The overwhelming majority of Christians were sharing their faith freely - and all because Paul had given them a positive lead from inside his prison cell.

- Sharing our faith, telling other people about Jesus, is something contagious. As we see other people doing it, we will be encouraged to do it ourselves.

- When we've gone out and about with the Jesus videos, or Carol Singing around the streets, I have been amazed at how many other opportunities have cropped up to speak about Jesus in parallel with those activities. It's almost as if they help to get us into the right groove.

And so Paul has encouraged us to think positively about the situation we find ourselves in *right now*, whatever our circumstances might be.

- We must believe that God can use our circumstances to advance the Gospel.
- We must see that God has placed us where we are quite deliberately, so we can witness to Jesus there, amongst people no one else may be able to reach.
- And in such circumstances, we should never underestimate the power of our own positive example to other believers.

And so in verses 15-18, Paul moves on from encouraging us to think positively about the situation we find ourselves in. We also encourages us to

2. THINK POSITIVELY ABOUT OTHER BELIEVERS WE KNOW (vs 15-18)

- particularly those who belong to other traditions or denominations. We sometimes have a terrible tendency to look down our noses at those Christians whose backgrounds are different from our own, those who aren't 'Baptists' perhaps! But this wasn't Paul's attitude.

In verse 15 and 17 he recognises that other Christians'

2.1 Motives aren't always pure (vs 15-17)

He is quite open about that fact here. He recognises that some in Rome were preaching Christ out of *envy, rivalry, or selfish ambition – or even to stir up trouble for Paul.*

- Perhaps some were jealous of the success Paul had enjoyed as a global evangelist, and rather resented his arrival in Rome, because they felt he was intruding on their patch.
- Perhaps some were preaching Christ to try and create a bigger congregation than the one down the road.
- Perhaps some were in it for the money, or for personal prestige, unholy ambition.
- Incredibly, some were preaching Christ to stir up trouble for Paul, who, of course, was unable to defend himself against their snide remarks and thinly veiled criticisms from inside his prison cell. Alex Motyer speaks about the double standards of such people. They preach Christ with words he wouldn't own.

But far from being depressed about all this, far from being filled with a sense of outrage, or wanting to exact his revenge on this people, Paul is completely dismissive of it all. *What does it matter*, he asks in verse 18. *The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this, I rejoice.* Paul teaches us the importance of not taking personal attacks too seriously here. As one of my former pastors used to teach us, *When you are criticised* ['when', not 'if!'], *if the criticism is valid, take it to heart. And if it is not, take it to the Lord and leave it there.*

This is what Paul does here. And he does so because he recognises the over-riding

2.2 Priority of Christ being preached (v18)

Now it is very important to notice what Paul is, and isn't, saying here. What he is not overly concerned about are people's **motives** in preaching Christ, so long as the Gospel is preached accurately.

- Paul isn't saying that our motives don't matter. Clearly they do. He has just been praying, in verse 10, that our motives will always be *pure*, shaped by an ever-growing love for God and the people we are trying to reach for Christ. Paul doesn't want our motives ever to be tainted by ugly sins like jealousy, rivalry, selfish ambition, insincerity, or muckraking, a perverse delight in making life difficult for other people.
- Our motives matter deeply. But we are accountable to God for them, because only he can truly see what's going on in our hearts, deep within us. It's not for us to judge other people's motives.

But when it comes to the **content** of people's preaching, that is something we are liberty to comment on. If the content of someone's message is false, we have a duty to correct it, so that people aren't misled by it. The truth of people's preaching matters greatly, if people are to be saved and if God's name is to be honoured. It's something Paul emphasises when he writes to the Galatians (1.6-9).

*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel, which is really no gospel at all, he writes. Evidently, some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we've already said, so I say again now: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! Truth matters! Accuracy in preaching is essential. This is why we sometimes can't join hands with those who *profess* to be Christians, but who don't stick to the Biblical Gospel. We have to give them a wide berth.*

But so long as the message is sound, it doesn't really matter who is preaching it – or even what their motives are, Paul says here. So long as Jesus is being preached for who he truly is, and for what he has truly done for us, so that people can turn to him in repentance and faith and receive salvation from him – it doesn't matter whether the messenger is Baptist, Methodist, Anglican or House Church. If Christ is being proclaimed, hallelujah, Paul says.

Let me finish with a few more words of wisdom from Alex Motyer. *Two friends were talking together, one older and wise, the other younger and passing through a time of testing. The older friend, with loving wisdom said, **No moment will ever again be like this. Let there be something in it for Jesus.** There can't be, if we dwell on miseries; nor if we let opportunities pass without saying a word about our saviour; nor if we think that any hand other than his brought us to place we find ourselves in. But there will always be 'something for Jesus' when we think and speak about him, and his glory. There will always be something for him when we acknowledge his sovereign will, and trust his loving purposes. As Paul looks forward to the future in verse 20, he expresses his abiding attitude, that **now, as always Christ will be exalted.** How that little word 'now' needs to eat its way into our minds and hearts and wills! It is now that we must show how great Christ is. Never again will we have the chance to live this moment for him, to please him in this situation, to gladden him by trusting him in these circumstances. It's now that counts, not just yesterday or tomorrow.*