
GRIPPED BY THE GOSPEL: JOY IN AFFLICTION

INTRODUCTION – PERSPECTIVE

Soon after Winston Churchill heard the infamous news of the attack on Pearl Harbor, he phoned President Roosevelt. Once on the phone, he asked him if the news he heard was true. FDR confirmed it and they were all in the same boat now. To Churchill, this meant one thing above all: victory. Britain was no longer alone. Finally, the US would enter the war. He would go on to write in his own history of World War II the following words in response to the news of Pearl Harbor, “Being saturated and satiated with emotion and sensation, I went to bed and slept the sleep of the saved and thankful.”¹ And although he was not celebrating the incredible devastation of that day, he had a different perspective on its meaning moving forward. The United States was now in the war and that meant victory.

How we see our lives deeply impacts how we respond to the situations and circumstances we face. When we view life through the eyes of the flesh, we can become discouraged. This discouragement can affect us on two completely different fronts. On the one hand, we get discouraged when we see evil triumphing over good. Those of us who “know” God and His character, wonder where is He?

But discouragement can even attack when things are good and comfortable. You can become fearful, waiting for the other shoe to drop. You live with fear and doubt. You start preparing yourself for something bad to happen. These thoughts steal our joy too.

In either situation, doubt can manifest itself in our hearts. Doubt in the goodness of God, Jesus, and His Word. What causes you to doubt God and His Word? Is it your struggle with sin? Is it the challenging circumstances you are currently facing?

Or, are you in a time of contentment, and everything is moving along as you think it should? Our need for Christ slowly dissipates and we begin to doubt God. Again, in either case, we can lose our perspective on life.

Wouldn't it be great if we could all see life through the eyes of God? To see life as He sees it? Don't you think that would help us? To have His perspective?

Thankfully, Jesus did not leave us alone to our own devices. He has given us His Word and He has given us people. People who have faced incredible challenges, sufferings, and life-threatening situations. And have learned how to view life from God's perspective.

And in so doing, He has recorded their thoughts and experiences for us to glean from and lean on. This is what we find in this text this morning, living life with a gospel perspective in all life's situations. Let pray.

¹ <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/Decoder/2015/1207/Pearl-Harbor-attack-How-did-Winston-Churchill-react>

PROCLAMATION IN IMPRISONMENT (12-14)

Paul opened this letter expressing his love for the Philippians. Their fellowship through their past participation and present partnership, touched his heart. And his response was prayer; a prayer for their future fulfillment. This is where we pick up this morning. Remember things look bleak for him. He is chained to a Roman guard 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. His execution is a very real possibility. Death is at his doorstep. From the Philippians perspective, some serious questions about Paul and their future may be surfacing. They may be asking themselves, “What will happen if Paul is executed? If Paul goes, will the gospel go with him?” And what about their local church? Paul was their father in the faith. If they needed answers or counsel, he was the one to go to. If He isn’t around, then who are they going to ask when they need answers or help with their internal struggles? Yes, there was Timothy and others. But there were also plenty of counterfeit teachers to deter them from the gospel.

Finally, it would lead to questions about their own personal protection. If they execute Paul, will they execute us? Remember, the city of Philippi was the “Little Rome” of their time. If they were willing to execute Paul, who was also a Roman citizen, then they wouldn’t hesitate to do the same to them. What were they to do? What were they to think? Paul needed to assure them. Paul needed to give them a fresh perspective, a gospel perspective, in light of their present circumstances and situation. Read along with me picking up in verse 12 through 14.

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

ADVANCEMENT THROUGH CONFINEMENT (v.12-13)

He says, “I want you to know, brothers.” This is important. You need to know this. You need to know that what has happened to me, my chains and my suffering, has really served to advance the gospel. What was supposed to withhold, restrain, and destroy the gospel only advanced it. It had the opposite effect. The irony! The gospel continues to go and grow despite his chains. Paul is unable to leave his home, yet the gospel continues to go out the world. He then goes to explain how God is advancing the gospel despite his chains.

First, it is spreading throughout the whole imperial guard. Scholars believe the Roman guards were chained to Paul in four-hour shifts.² Every four hours, a new guard or two if he chained on both arms, met Paul. They heard the gospel in his conversations with Timothy and others. They heard the gospel in his prayers, and they heard the gospel in the dictation of his letters. The imperial guards couldn’t escape it. Even if they had no desire to hear it! They were stuck. And as the shift change comes, another new guard. Another new opportunity and another new witness. Not only did they hear the gospel through conversations, prayers, and dictation, but they saw firsthand its effects on this man. This is what they

² Fee, Gordon. *NICNT: Paul’s Letter to the Philippians.*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995

saw. A man hated by many, imprisoned, and awaiting possible execution. Yet his response was not despair, hopelessness, and hate. But rather they saw peace, courage, selfless love, and joy.

But the gospel advancement didn't stop there. It says not only was the gospel moving through the imperial guard, it was also moving "to all the rest." That means anyone who had any contact with Paul or any imperial dealings had heard about him and the gospel.³

ADVANCEMENT THROUGH CONFIDENCE (V.14)

Furthermore, when every outward appearance should have caused every other believer discouragement and defeat, it once again had the opposite effect. Affliction caused confidence. His imprisonment was giving confidence to other believers.

Now, note first, it says most of the brothers had confidence, so not all did. That means, some were gripped with fear instead of faith. Some were afraid of being treated like Paul. Prison is meant to punish the wrongdoer. But it is also meant to deter others from such behaviors. And, for some believers, it was having such an effect. They were fearful. They feared what man could do to them. They weren't thinking biblically. Jesus addresses this issue in Matthew where he says, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matt. 10:28).

When man becomes the god we fear then their opinion becomes our measuring rod. Rejection and ridicule become the demons which close our mouths. They hinder us from speaking the gospel. Fear overtakes us. When we are living in this mindset, we are living in the flesh and not by faith. We have lost sight of the gospel and its power. Are you gripped by fear or faith? This is a good question for all of us to ask ourselves. If it's fear, then what are you afraid of and why? Look, I understand there are situations where fear does grip us and we fail to speak about Christ. You may face this during the blitz next weekend. May I suggest, you wake up early, and pray. Prepare yourself to walk by faith, pray to have a gospel perspective for that day. And more importantly, for your life.

Whatever the world does to create fear in believers will be overcome. Remember, Jesus said, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." As God grants grace through faith to believers by the power of the Holy Spirit, we then become overcomers. The more we become gripped by the gospel, the more we develop an increasing trust in God. We begin to develop an eternal perspective that raises us above the fears that this world attempts to impose. We see this pattern all through the book of Acts (Acts 6:7, 12:24, 19:20). The gospel marches forward through confinement and through confidence in Christ.

PROCLAMATION THROUGH PREACHING (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

³ Ibid., pg. 114.

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.

Paul continues with theme of gospel progress through proclamation. But he tells us something interesting. There are two counter motivations for preaching the gospel. Some can preach Christ from envy and rivalry while others out of goodwill. In other words, some preach in selflessness while others preach in selfishness.

IN SELFLESSNESS (15A, 17)

Those who preach out of goodwill or selflessness, do so out of love for Christ. Why? Because they know why Paul is imprisoned. It's for the defense of the gospel. Paul uses military language. This would have struck a chord in the Philippian congregation. Remember, they are a military town. His message is that he, Paul, was commissioned by God. Thus, there was no divine disfavor by his commanding officer, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is quite the reverse.⁴ These proclaimers are grounded in the truth. They understand the personal risk associated with preaching Christ. But they also knew the souls of men were at stake and thus, the risk far outweighed the reward. From a distance, they knew Paul and how he was handling his imprisonment. Because of his gospel perspective, he was able to respond with joy. And in that, many were inspired to continue to proclaim Christ. Their only focus was Jesus Christ and the gospel.

IN SELFISHNESS (15B, 16)

Then there are others who preach Christ with impure motives, or in selfishness. It is difficult to think one could preach Christ albeit out of selfishness. Paul denounces such fleshly behaviors throughout his letters. Yet, this was exactly what they were doing. Maybe they pointed to an imprisoned Paul to justify their actions. They sought opportunity to gain their own following. Preaching and teaching elevates the preacher and teacher. They saw Paul as a competitor. And even though they were preaching Christ, their motivation was to inflict pain on Paul.

But I don't believe it was physical pain they were seeking to inflict. But rather pain within Paul himself. This may sound a little absurd but remember, they weren't thinking right to begin with. They saw Paul as competition and not as a companion or brother in Christ. They may have thought to frustrate Paul because if he was chained, he could not do the work as his competitors could. In either case, look at Paul's perspective with verse 18a.

IN EITHER CASE, REJOICE! (18A)

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

It sounds unreasonable that competition between preachers was a good thing. It is counterintuitive. Each one trying to spread the gospel further than the other. Regardless, whether in selflessness or in selfishness, Paul rejoices. It does not matter what the motives are, as long as the gospel is being

⁴ O'Brien, Peter. *NIGTC: The Epistle to the Philippians*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991 pg. 101

proclaimed. That is the heart of Paul and that should be our hearts! Jesus is proclaimed and that's all that matters. This is a perspective that is gripped by the gospel. Let's continue.

PROCLAMATION IN LIFE OR DEATH (18B-26)

Let's review the progression here. First, Jesus is proclaimed through unbelievers while he is in chains. Secondly, He is proclaimed through believers, whether in selflessness or selfishness. Finally, He is proclaimed whether in life or in death! Follow along with me as I pick up in verse 18b.

Yes, and I will rejoice,¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance,²⁰ as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.

CONFIDENCE IN DELIVERANCE (18B-20)

Paul says not only will I rejoice now, but I will also continue to rejoice despite my uncertain future. As in the past, Christ and the prayers of believers have carried Paul through shipwrecks, beatings, and imprisonments. All to the glory of Christ. He knows it is both, the prayers of the people of God and the power of the Spirit of God, that we are all delivered. Whether it is in life or by death. This is why our prayers for each other are vital to garnering a gospel perspective. No one can have an eternal perspective on life without being empowered by Christ through the spirit. Our prayers need to drive our desires so that we love Christ above all. And this is what we see in Paul. He is a man that has courage in Christ. His only boast is Christ. His only mission is magnifying Christ. He is not thinking self-preservation and safety. No, he is more concerned for the Philippian people than himself. We'll see this more pointedly as we move on.

This is something he is assured of. He uses words like "for I know" often. Then continues with it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be ashamed. This hope is not like, "I hope I get that promotion" type of hope. It is a confident expectation. He is that sure of his deliverance. And the word for deliverance here is the same root word where we get the word salvation. In fact, some translations use the word salvation instead of deliverance. So, how can he be that certain of his deliverance? Because his deliverance is his salvation, either in life or death. It doesn't matter what happens to him. He knows he will be delivered. If he dies, he is delivered from this world and delivered to Christ. If he lives, he will be delivered to the Philippians for their progress and joy. All that matters to Paul is Christ. This is a life lived in proclaiming the gospel. And how can he say these things? Read with me picking up in verse 21.

CONFIDENCE IN CHRIST (21-26)

²¹ For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. ²³ I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. ²⁴ But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

This is the mentality of a life gripped by the gospel. Paul has already died! Remember? He has already died because he was crucified with Christ and he no longer lives but Christ lives in him. For Paul, living is continuing to proclaim Christ and run the race of faith. But, if he dies, he receives the prize – Christ. He can't lose! For a man who is overly competitive such as me, there is no better situation to be in. It's a win-win situation. You win regardless of the outcome!

Note also that Paul says, "If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me." How does he know his life will bear fruit? Because he abides in the vine; he abides in Christ. Paul does not live for himself nor apart from Christ. He is running this race with his eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and finisher of his faith. He knows that it's Christ who works in him, as he works. Therefore, there will be fruit. For Christ produces the fruit not us. And therefore, because it is Christ's work, it will be done.

Then he shares with his church his heart's indecision about which he would choose. Paul is honest with them that this is a very hard decision for him.

Can you imagine being so gripped by the gospel, that deciding, as if he had the power to do so, whether to live or die is best? This is his actual struggle. For him, it's his desire to be with the Lord, seeing Jesus face to face. Death to him is the doorway to Christ. It is the only pathway to seeing Him for us, unless He returns before that.

We all have to die to see Jesus. There is no way around it. We have to remind ourselves daily, the sting of death is gone. And what awaits us is far greater than our earthly comforts. And being with Christ is much better than being with family and friends.

After recording his internal struggle, he concludes, it is more necessary for him to remain. But not for his joy and pleasure but rather for theirs! This once again shows the selflessness of Paul. He does not want his own desires, even godly desires, to hinder the gospel growth of others in the church. He sees staying here, in the flesh, in this world, as a sacrifice for them. To him, living instead of dying is a sacrifice for the people in Philippi.

And because Paul is convinced it is better for the church if he remains in the flesh, he is sure he will live, at least at this point in the letter. But his remaining is not to make a name for himself, or that he will be freed to settle down to a quiet retirement. No, Paul is going to live for others. He is going to remain so that he can continue to pour himself out for the Philippians. It will be for their progress and joy in the faith.

Ultimately, when Paul comes to them again, he wants Christ to receive all the glory. Christ is the One who sends preachers and teachers and evangelists. Christ is the One who grows His church both in numbers and in maturity. He does this in the midst of affliction and he does it in the midst of community. He gets the glory! He gets the praise! His name will be the name that is proclaimed. Let's wrap up.

REFLECT AND RESPOND

First, realize while Paul was chained to the guards, the guards were also chained to Paul. This begs a question, who are you “chained” to? Is it co-workers? Those whom you see day in and day out? Maybe they already know where you stand and what you believe.

It doesn't mean the opportunity is still not there. Keep speaking truth, displaying love in word and deed. Who knows what the Lord will use.

Or is it your family and/or your children or grandchildren? Keep living and loving and teaching them the word of God. You are training them through the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Youth and children, what about you? Are you chained to friends, whether believing or unbelieving? Or other students?

And who is chained to you? Who has God put over you to show and share the gospel with?

Secondly, do you have confidence in Christ? Or are you driven by fear of man rather than God? Work to live by faith and not fear. Grow in your understanding in the gospel so that it so grips you to the point, that you comprehend that all you have is Christ. Faith will then prevail over fear.

Thirdly, check your motives. Do you battle selfish ambition and envy of others here? Remember, once again, we are all on the same team pursuing the same Jesus. We may not all be at the same place in our understanding of the gospel, but we can work and pray to love one another.

Fourth, how are you proclaiming Christ? It doesn't have to be suffering in prison for preaching Christ. Our American society has protected some our preaching rights, even though we may fear that will change in the future, as of now, we are relatively safe. In the meantime, proclaim Christ in your attitude, in your love for one another, in your obedience to those over you, in word and deed.

Finally, are you rejoicing in the Lord as if the victory is already won? Do you have overflowing joy despite your circumstances? What a measuring rod for us all. From this text, we should be the most joyful people in the fallen world.