

# Nothing Can Stop the Gospel

## Philippians 1:12-20

### Introduction

Good morning and happy Palm Sunday to you! I'm excited to have my first at-bat in our new sermon series on the Paul's letter to the Philippians, which we have subtitled, "Sharing in the Joys and Sorrows of the Gospel". I'm also really thankful for Pastor Trey kicking off this series so well last Sunday. I strategically asked him to do that because of how gifted he is in understanding the overall message of large passages, especially New Testament epistles.

Today we will picking up where he left off in Philippians 1:12-20 with a message titled, "Nothing Can Stop the Gospel". Here's my main thought for this sermon: When the gospel's advance is our greatest desire, nothing can stop its work in us and through us. We'll unpack that in three ways: The gospel transcends our circumstances, the gospel transforms our perspective, and the gospel trumps our despair. With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word. If you're using one of the Bibles in the chairs, you can find today's passage on page 980. Again, today's passage is Philippians 1:12-20. Hear the word of the Lord:

*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. 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. Philippians 1:12-20*

- May the Word preached here today echo among the nations. And all God's people said, *Amen*. You may be seated.

## Exposition

Have you ever been vomited on? I don't mean literally, although I'm sure many moms and dads in the room could answer yes to that. I mean the kind of "vomited on" that happens when you ask someone how they're doing and they unexpectedly unload everything bad that's going on in their life. Of course, we've all probably experienced this. And even though Christians have been given the spiritual ability to genuinely care when we ask, "How are you?" it's still difficult to sit and listen with compassion, especially if you didn't see it coming.

But sometimes we ask for it, right? We know a person is in a hard season and we go there, with a box of tissues at the ready. This is probably what the church at Philippi had done. Knowing that Paul was in prison and facing who knows what, they likely had sent a letter or a message to him through a man named Epaphroditus, asking for news.<sup>1</sup> And really, what they were doing was *just asking for it*, asking to get vomited on. Paul had seemingly every reason to lament and complain a little:

- He had been in prison for who knows how long
- He had no end in sight to his imprisonment
- He had haters who were trying to steal his ministry
- He had very little support (if any) from other churches<sup>2</sup>

But that's not what the Philippians got from Paul. Not even close! What they got was easily the most encouraging, joy-filled letter included in the New Testament. How in the world did this happen? Is Paul just putting on his "Christian face"? You know the one I'm talking about, acting like everything is great when it's not.

We know when someone is being fake. That's why we don't trust traditional marketing; instead, we look at the reviews and likes--because we want to know what *real people* are saying.<sup>3</sup> So here in this letter, either Paul is being fake, or something has *changed* this man. And if we know anything about him, it's that he was legitimately changed by one thing: the gospel.<sup>4</sup> In his letter to the church in Rome we read,

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 75

<sup>2</sup> Philippians 4:15

<sup>3</sup> David Nour, "5 Essential Facts for Marketing to Millennials," [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-nour/5-essential-facts-for-mar\\_b\\_9677220.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-nour/5-essential-facts-for-mar_b_9677220.html)

<sup>4</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon: The Fellowship of the Gospel and the Supremacy of Christ*, Loc 714-715

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. Romans 1:16*

The gospel's power to change a person, to really change them, was on serious display in Paul's life. And it was more than "the power of God for salvation" that we typically think of today--the special moment in which you become a Christian, the moment that, if it's real, is assumed will make you a completely different person overnight. No, the gospel wasn't just Paul's conversion, it was the beholding of Jesus Christ, not just one day on a road, but day after day on a journey through life. When something like scales fell from Paul's eyes after he first encountered Jesus, he started seeing all of life through the lens of the gospel.

What exactly is the gospel (especially since we're referring to it so much in this sermon)? For our purposes today I'll define it as the reality that Jesus Christ came, lived, died, rose, commissioned, ascended, poured out his Spirit with all authority, and only lingers now for a short while before returning so that this gospel will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations.<sup>5</sup> As Trey said last week, the gospel is a conquering king's message of victory.<sup>6</sup> If nothing can stop Jesus Christ from being dead, then nothing can stop the gospel from advancing! Not a prison, not haters, and not being forgotten by others. This was true for Paul. And it's still true for us.

This brings us to our first point to unpack, the gospel transcends our circumstances.<sup>7</sup>

## **I. The Gospel Transcends Our Circumstances - vv. 12-14**

We read beginning in verse 12:

*12 I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, Philippians 1:12*

Paul began, "I want you to know, brothers..." not just because he was probably responding to their inquiry about him, but because he wanted to set the record straight. Think about this from the Philippians' perspective--the guy who planted their church (not to mention the premier leader of the gospel's advance throughout the world) was in prison. And he was in prison for what many Christians likely thought was a foolish reason.<sup>8</sup> 'Things are going great for our revolutionary little movement called Christianity,'

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 24:14

<sup>6</sup> Trey Moss, "Characteristics of Gospel Fellowship, Philippians 1:1-11," 2

<sup>7</sup> Matt Chandler, *To Live is Christ, To Die is Gain*, 31

<sup>8</sup> Acts 21:12

they thought, ‘so why would Paul show his face in Jerusalem and then appeal his case all the way to Caesar in Rome?’<sup>9</sup> He is bringing unnecessary attention to us (bad press) when he needs to be out preaching!’<sup>10</sup> Not only was this kind of grumbling probably discouraging and tempting to the Philippians, but imagine how easy it would have been to assume that since his ministry had gone from being all over the world to confined to a jail cell, then surely that meant God’s hand was no longer on him.

And we do this too, right? Sickness comes into our lives, or a season that’s less successful or enjoyable, and we automatically assume God is displeased and has moved on. The Philippians were probably there. So Paul set the record straight with amazing news: “what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel”. It was most likely the opposite of what the Philippians were expecting.

But what did Paul mean by “the advance of the gospel”? There were multiple ways in which Paul was seeing the gospel advance despite his imprisonment. He gave the first in verse 13,

*13 so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. Philippians 1:13*

The elite soldiers who were assigned to guard prisoners of the Roman empire like Paul had come to see that he was no mere political prisoner--he was on trial because of his allegiance to the true King, Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup> This probably took place as several among the 9,000 imperial soldiers were on a rotation of literally being chained to Paul to keep watch over him. Talk about a captive audience for the gospel!<sup>12</sup>

And even when the guards weren’t being directly addressed by Paul, they overheard his conversations about the gospel with all the rest who interacted with him.<sup>13</sup> The message of the gospel (and that Paul was suffering for it) then permeated throughout the whole guard--and keep in mind, these weren’t a bunch of boneheaded privates. These were influential men in the most influential empire in the world. *Nothing can stop the gospel.*

Several times in the past few years I have been asked to teach an overview of missions history in about an hour. I basically boil two thousand years down to this: the nations rage, the church suffers, the gospel advances.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Acts 25:11

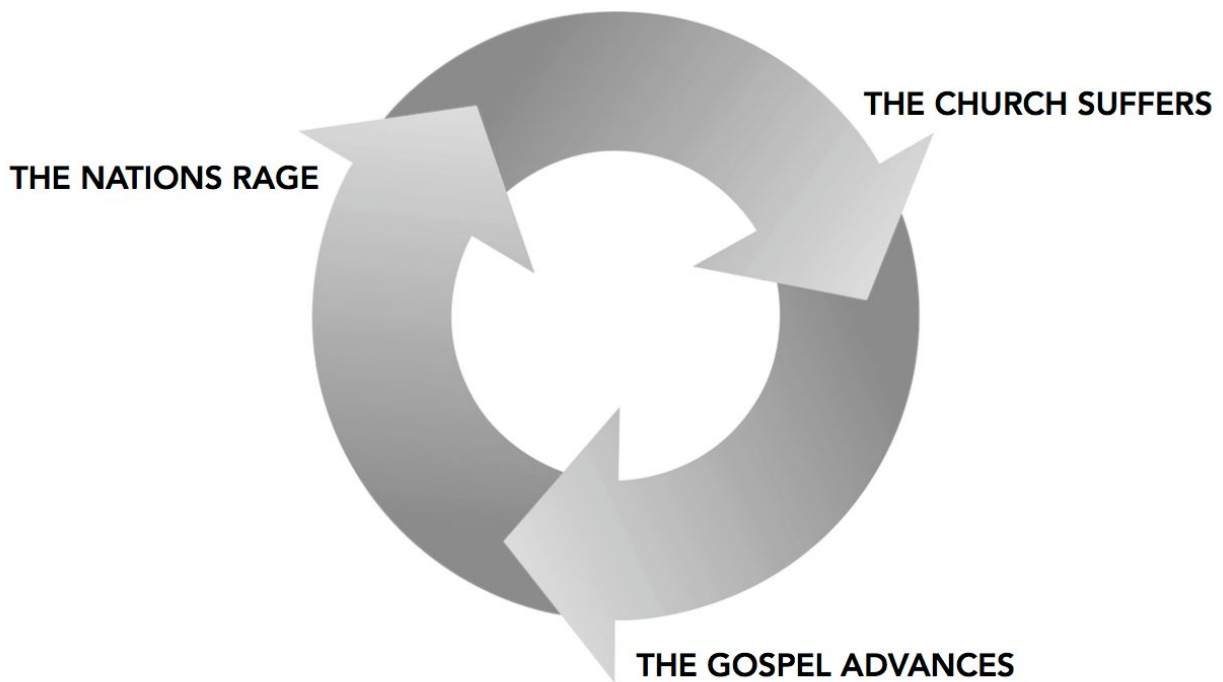
<sup>10</sup> Hughes, Loc 699-707

<sup>11</sup> Martin, 75

<sup>12</sup> Hughes, Loc 718-723

<sup>13</sup> Martin, 76

<sup>14</sup> Bradley Bell, “Missions Yesterday and Today,” 2



It's the cycle that takes place over and over, and is still happening today. But you can't chain down the gospel. In fact, the more you seek to chain it, the more it explodes. That's because it is the power of God for salvation! It's the real message of victory of the real King who has real authority.

The second way Paul was seeing the gospel advance despite his imprisonment is described in verse 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. Philipians 1:14*

Even better than the opening of Paul's lips to multiply the gospel announcement, was the opening of multiple lips to announce it. How did this happen? Did Paul develop some amazing strategy? Yeah, here it is: *he went to prison*.

And it's easy here for our takeaway to be, "Wow, Paul was awesome; and wow, I am not." But that was not Paul's purpose in his letter to the Philipians. What he was wanting them to take away was, "Wow, Jesus is awesome; and wow, nothing can stop the gospel." Here's what we're seeing in Paul: in prison, dire circumstances, limited capacity, fighting to keep his eyes on the eternal, faithful with small things. And how

does God use that? It gives courage to other Christians to speak the gospel without fear.

Consider the modern example of Jim and Elisabeth Elliot.<sup>15</sup> In the 1950s Jim was one of five missionaries killed by the same people among whom he was seeking to multiply the gospel, a remote people group in Ecuador. The wife and child he left behind not only remained in Ecuador, but went on to live among and communicate the gospel among the people group, among the very same people who killed their husband and daddy. And many of them came to know not just the stories of the men who died for them, but of the One above all who died for them. But the wonder of this story isn't just an unreached people coming to know Christ, but that God used it and continues to use to give courage to other Christians to speak the gospel without fear.

All of this is a sign that the gospel is more than able to overcome our limitations. Because Jesus *is* the gospel, he holds the power to accomplish his purposes far above and beyond whatever depressing season we find ourselves in. If you're a Christian here today, then there's probably a place in your life where you deeply desire to see the gospel advance, but you find little hope for it: perhaps in your own maturity, among your family, to a particular friend, among a certain people group. Paul's words are for you:

*8 Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, 9 for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! 2 Timothy 2:8-9*

## **II. The Gospel Transforms Our Perspective - vv. 15-18**

Hold on to a bold hope--because the gospel transcends our circumstances. But not only that; the gospel also transforms our perspective. Read with me beginning in verse 15:

*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. Philippians 1:15-17*

So Paul had a pretty sad view of things from prison. Not only was he chafed with chains, he was chafed with the reality that people were trying to use his absence for their own benefit. We certainly don't have all the details, but it's clear that some Christian leaders were jealous of Paul and his success. When word got around that

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<sup>15</sup> Hughes, Loc 731-732

Paul was in town, it was probably big news. Attention moved to Paul, and some people lost the spotlight. They were green with envy.<sup>16</sup>

Not only that, it's also likely that some of them were eager to fill the vacuum, to become the next celebrity preacher while Paul was silenced in prison. But it goes even further according to Paul. Some are doing it in such a way as to kick Paul while he's down, to rub it in. We don't know exactly what this looked like, but it's not hard to imagine, especially in a world where Christians and Christian leaders still get entangled in the same thing.

Now it would make all this easier to digest if Paul just dismissed them as heretics and false teachers. But he doesn't. These preachers aren't anti-Christ, they're anti-Paul.<sup>17</sup> And here's the bad news about this: it's biblical proof that every single one of us can be Christians, even faithful, fruitful Christians, and still be rotten with envy and selfish ambition and manipulation--*and people will applaud us for it*. What dangers to your soul to be blind to (or just plain unconcerned about) such things lurking within you! In one of Paul's letters to the church in Corinth he spoke of such people:

*But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding. 2 Corinthians 10:12*

What are they--ok, let's be honest--what are we failing to understand when we always measuring ourselves and comparing ourselves to others? That according to the gospel, the measure is perfection! And ain't none of us reaching that bar. But Jesus Christ did. And he died to give it to you. So receiving the gospel means receiving the status of the One who measured up for you. There's nothing left to compare, there's nothing left to measure--unless of course you look away from the gospel and back into the world of the survival of the fittest.

Ok, so there's the bad news about Paul's haters being Christians. Here's the good news. We can be those people, we *are* sometimes those people, and God is still willing to use us. Remember, despite all the twisted motives, the gospel was still being preached. And if the gospel is preached in ways that people can understand, it is always effective.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Chandler, 33-34; Hughes, Loc 755-758

<sup>17</sup> Hughes, Loc 763-799; Martin, 78, 80

<sup>18</sup> A.T. Robertson, *Paul's Joy in Christ: Studies in Philippians*, 49-50

I'm not saying just be a jerk and God will still use you! I'm speaking to hearts here who have warmed themselves by the fire of the gospel enough for its light to reveal some of those cancerous motives and twisted ambitions in you. Don't despair, offer yourself to him as the mixed bag you are and he will still advance his gospel in you and through you! And this is precisely Paul's view when he continues in verse 18,

*What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Philippians 1:18*

Instead of being angry, instead of going down the path of comparison and self-righteousness, instead of condemning, Paul rejoices. He rejoices that the gospel is being proclaimed, no matter the motive nor the pain it might cause him. And here again, it would be easy for us to just marvel at Paul--'Wow, he loves Jesus and the gospel more than anything!' But there's something at work in Paul to enable him to not be angry--something supernatural.

As one author describes, "The issue before Paul [was] simply whether or not he is to spend his time railing at preachers [and] filling the ears of the [soldiers] with the [shortcomings] of these envious preachers. He could have done that, and angels would have wept and the ungodly would have sneered at this exhibition of so-called Christian love."<sup>19</sup> I'm sure it was a daily fight and choice to rejoice instead of smolder, but this is the power of the gospel to transform our perspective. It can literally move you more and more into treasuring Jesus and his glory above all else.

I have longed to be overseas as a missionary in this season of my life. But God has not allowed it. Yet, after years, I am finally coming around to saying that somehow my being here instead of there is somehow better in God's plan; is even somehow a greater contribution to his advance of his gospel. And finally, I even sometimes rejoice. What about you? Where does God want to transform your perspective through the power of the gospel? What about your life seems impossible to ever rejoice over?

### **III. The Gospel Trumps Our Despair - vv. 19-20**

It's a relevant question because that's where our third point lands, into our places of hopelessness. Paul is about to show us that the gospel not only transcends our circumstances and transforms our perspective, it also trumps our despair. Look with me verses 19 and 20:

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<sup>19</sup> Robertson, 49



*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 Philippians 1:18c-19*

Paul's ridiculous choice to rejoice in his desperate circumstances wasn't just because the gospel was still advancing. It was held up by a genuine hope that he would be delivered from his circumstances, set free from prison, released from watching others taking advantage of his situation from the sideline, freed from what could have easily been overwhelming despair.

How did this come about? Are we to once again chalk it up to Paul's awesomeness? I don't think so. Paul didn't want the Philippians to do that, and that's why he pulled back the curtains on how he found such hope. He mentioned two things: "[1] through your prayers and [2] the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ".<sup>20</sup>

If you're like me and you've developed a pretty hefty sense of worshiping Paul as the picture of a self-sufficient Christian, let's lay down some of that idol together. Paul knew his neediness enough to be utterly dependent on the prayers of others. He called out for them all the time throughout the New Testament, which is probably just a taste of how he relied on them in his daily life. This is not the picture of one who has arrived. This is a man who knows he hasn't--and he needs God's people!<sup>21</sup>

The second way he found hope was through the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Sounds really spiritual. But think about this. Who was it that in his moment of deepest despair--the most severely experienced despair in the history and future of the world--who probably prayed these words, but more importantly embodied these words:

*I have set the Lord always before me;  
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.  
9 Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices;  
my flesh also dwells secure.  
10 For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,  
or let your holy one see corruption. Psalm 16:8-10*

It was Jesus Christ! He went to the most desperate of places, death itself, because he had hope that his Father would not abandon him in a grave. And the very Spirit of Jesus Christ was alive in Paul, helping Paul to do the same--helping you to do the same.

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<sup>20</sup> Martin, 81

<sup>21</sup> Martin, 81-82

So what did Paul mean by deliverance from his circumstances? Verse 20 tells us:

*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. Philipians 1:20*

Deliverance for Paul wasn't just slide out of prison and get back in the mix of ministry. Paul's deliverance was a deliverance from dishonoring Christ by being ashamed and afraid. The cry wasn't just, "Change my situation!" The cry was, "Change *me!*" Get out of prison or rot and die in prison, didn't matter. In the words of Pastor Matt Chandler, "This is not the kind of Christianity any of us end up with except through a profound experiencing of Christ's cross applied to our lives."<sup>22</sup> It's a breaking, a dying to yourself, and Christ coming alive in you. And it takes a lifetime.

This cross, this gospel, fills us with an "eager expectation," literally a craning of the neck. The image that comes to mind is (obviously) that of a galapagos turtle. When I first saw this photo of them, I couldn't believe it. They can crane their neck so far! And yet if you think about a turtle, living its entire life in the protection of shell, craning your neck out that far is risky. Stick it out and it might just get lopped off, or damaged.

But just like Paul, the gospel's work in us leads us to crane our neck out with eager expectation for seeing him and being with him, regardless the inevitable dangers. The gospel gets us out of our dark shells. The gospel trumps our despair.

## **Conclusion**

There are so many applications we've already covered. But how to we make this relevant especially on Palm Sunday? We could use it to press all of us to work hard at inviting people to our Easter gathering next Sunday so they can hear the gospel. And that would be fine. But if our only application is to get people into a gathering, that's addition instead of multiplication. I want to challenge all of us to consider having an Easter lunch or dinner celebration, and invite friends and family, but also invite people who don't know Christ. And don't preach through a five-minute prayer of thanks for the food. Just celebrate the biggest day of the year for Christians and let them join in.

We can rejoice and share with others that on the night he was betrayed, when he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, broke it and gave it to his disciples and said to them, "This is my body, which is broken for you; eat this in remembrance of me." He also took

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<sup>22</sup> Chandler, 34

a cup of wine, and after blessing it, gave it to his disciples and said, "This cup is the new covenant marked by the shedding of my blood. For as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you announce the Lord's death until he returns." **We are announcing that Jesus Christ could not be kept in the grave, so his gospel cannot be stopped in us and through us.**

Our tradition here at Antioch is to come forward and break off a piece of bread and dip it in the juice. There will be stations here in the front; gluten-free bread will be available to my left, your right. If you're a baptized believer, come and remember what Jesus has done for you. If you're a believer but not yet baptized, let us know so we can help prepare you for baptism and communion. If you're not a Christian, this sacred symbol is not for you, but rather than taking communion, we encourage you to take Christ. He has made himself available to you this very moment. There will be pastors in the back and people to pray with you on the sides. Let's pray.

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