

We are in the fourth week this morning of a sermon series through the New Testament book known as Philippians, which I am calling “To live is Christ and to die is gain,” a line which Paul writes in chapter 1, verse 21 of this letter. Philippians is a letter written by the Apostle Paul sometime between 60-64 AD to a church in Philippi that he had a deep affection for, which he had started about 10-15 years earlier. This morning we will be in verses 12-19 of chapter 1, but to set the context, let me start at the beginning, reminding you of what we’ve read and looked at the past three weeks:

Philippians 1:1-19 - Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: ² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³ I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶ being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. ⁷ It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. ⁸ God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰ so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ-- to the glory and praise of God. ¹² Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴ Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. ¹⁵ It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶ The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸ But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.

Paul begins this section in verse 12 by talking about “**what has happened to me.**” He wants to encourage them that good things are happening as a result of what has happened to him, that the gospel is advancing. **So, what is it that has happened to Paul?** In the next couple of verses, we find out: Paul is in prison. He is writing this

letter from jail, most likely from Rome as he awaits a trial for the false accusation of inciting an insurrection or uprising. If he is indeed writing from Rome, church history tells us that he is never going to be a free man again, that he will be executed.

So, Paul is in prison, being unjustly persecuted. And not only do we learn that he is in prison, but also that there are lots of Christians out there using this opportunity to stir up trouble for him, to slander him, to tell others that Paul's imprisonment is evidence that he is not the man or apostle of God people think he is. **How might you feel if you were in his shoes?** I think it would be natural to feel frustrated or angry or bitter or even depressed – God, I want to be out there sharing the gospel, and yet I'm in chains! It would also be natural to feel vengeful – God, these so-called “Christians” are slandering my name. Do not bless them! Visit your judgment and wrath on them! Paul is in prison, being unjustly persecuted, his name is being slandered, and you would forgive him if in this letter he expressed anger, depression, bitterness, or vengeance.

But the remarkable thing is that as you read this passage, you see none of that. Pay attention as we read the passage again to Paul's emotions and convictions:

¹² Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴ Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. ¹⁵ It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶ The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸ But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.

What emotions and convictions do you see? You see Paul **encouraging** them that what has happened to him has been a good thing: the gospel is being advanced, the guards are hearing the gospel, his fellow Christians have been encouraged to be bolder, and even those who preach from false motives and slander him in the process are still preaching Christ. And so, what is his response to all this? Verse 18: **“Because of this, I rejoice.”** And he has hope that he will be delivered. Paul is not rejoicing because he is in jail, but he is rejoicing because God is using his imprisonment to

advance the gospel. I think we can all agree that it would be natural for anyone in Paul's situation to feel anger, bitterness, depression, and vengeance. **But instead, we see him communicating courage, joy, and hope.**

Most of you, I am guessing, have never or will never find yourself unjustly put in prison. **But we will all go through times of unexpected and unexplainable suffering, where we don't understand what God is up to, where others may look down on us like they did to Paul.** Some of you are dealing with health challenges, some with relational challenges, some with personal challenges, and some with financial or job challenges, and you are **struggling to make sense of it all.** Maybe you relate to the sheep in a story told by Elisabeth Elliot, who was a prominent Christian writer and speaker in the 20th century whose missionary husband was murdered as a 28-year-old along with four other missionaries. She tells of visiting friends of hers in northern Wales who owned a sheep farm, and she shared about how the sheep are vulnerable to being eaten to death by insects and parasites, and so once every year, the shepherd has to take his sheep to a huge vat of antiseptic and completely submerge his sheep. The farmer, in order to save his sheep from death, has to actually hold his sheep underwater in the antiseptic until they have been disinfected. As Elliot put it:

One by one John seized the animals. They would struggle to climb out the side and Mack the sheep dog would snarl and snap at their faces to force them back under. When they tried to climb up the ramp in a panicky way at the far end, John the farmer would catch them, spin them around, force them under again, holding them ears, eyes and nose submerged for a few seconds.

And as their lord and master was pushing their head under, drowning them at least as far as they could tell, their panicky little eyes would look up over the edge of the vat, and it was easy to see what they were thinking. What is god doing?

Reflecting on that experience, Elliot continued:

I've had some experiences in my life which have made me feel very sympathetic to those poor sheep. There are times I couldn't figure out any reason for the treatment I was getting from my great shepherd whom I trusted. And like these sheep I didn't have a hint of an explanation.

I think it is critical for us to understand just what it is about Paul that allows him to face prison and slander with such courage, joy, and hope. What can we learn from

this passage so that we can face suffering in our own life with similar courage, joy, and hope?

- 1) His meaning, purpose, and identity are found in God and the gospel of Jesus Christ, not in anything in this world

I think the thing that strikes me the most about this passage is Paul's complete lack of concern for his own comfort or his own ego. Think about it. He is basically communicating: "I am in prison. But because of my chains, the gospel is going forth with even greater speed and power! I've been able to share the gospel with the palace guard, reaching Rome from the inside. And as my fellow Christians have seen the spread of the gospel, they have been encouraged to share more boldly, because they are seeing that nothing can stop the power of God!" In other words, Paul is saying, "I will gladly give up my comfort and my freedom if it means greater glory and fame for Jesus and more people coming to faith in Him."

And he goes on to communicate, "I know there are some people who, as they preach, are taking this opportunity to slander my name and tell people that I am not a real apostle or man of God. But they are still preaching Jesus! And the gospel is spreading, and people are being saved! So, if my reputation has to be trashed in the process, I am okay with that, as long as Jesus is glorified. I will gladly give up my comfort, my freedom, and my reputation if it means greater glory and fame for Jesus and more people coming to faith in Him."

I am amazed by Paul's complete lack of concern for his own comfort or ego, and I have to admit that I have a hard time relating to either. I love my comfort and my freedom. I think of what it takes for me to go share the love of God in a nursing home, or sit with someone who is difficult to listen to, or share the gospel with someone who might reject me. I am nothing like Paul. I am continually choosing my own comfort over God's glory and the salvation of others.

And don't even get me started on my ego. Four years ago, a new church was planted in Wethersfield, Generation Church. There's another church, Vox Church, where just about every 20-something has left our church and other churches to attend. You don't think I had to battle my ego every day to pray for and encourage them and not speak ill of them, to not hope that they fail and I succeed? In this passage, Paul calls out these other preachers for their selfish ambition, and I am fully aware that that same, disgusting, ungodly selfish ambition is in me. My ego gets in the way of God's kingdom every day. What a difference there is between me, secretly hoping that we

succeed and others fail so that my ego can be fed, and Paul, who is willing to be slandered as long as Christ is preached and lives are saved.

So why is Paul able to face prison and slander with such courage, joy, and hope? Paul is able to handle prison with such courage, joy, and hope because his meaning, purpose, and identity are found in God and the gospel of Jesus Christ, not in anything in this world. **His identity is secure in who God says he is**, so if others slander him, it will not shake him. **And his goal in life is God's glory**, not his own comfort or freedom. And so not even prison can shake him.

It is simply incredible how kingdom-centered Paul is. He just wants to see the gospel advance, lives saved, and Jesus glorified. And even if it takes prison or his reputation to be trashed for that to happen, then so be it.

I think the reason that most of us handle suffering so badly is because our meaning and purpose and identity in life is found not in God but in the things and people of this world. And so, when suffering happens, it causes us to become frustrated, angry, bitter, depressed, or vengeful, because it feels like an unwanted and undeserved attack on those things we are looking to for our comfort, joy, and hope.

As Tim Keller put it: *“If your ultimate love and joy is found in the treasures of this world, then suffering will rob you of your joy and make you sadder and madder. But if your ultimate love and joy is found in God, then suffering will drive you deeper into the source of that joy.”*

If your **family** is your life, then you will be devastated if something bad happens to a family member, or if there is discord and strife. And you will live with great anxiety trying to protect your family, since it is the most important thing in your life. If your **job** is where you find your joy or your security, then you will give yourself to that as much as you can, and if your job is threatened, or if you lose your job, then it's not just a job that you have lost – it's an existential crisis. **I still remember the moment I realized this distinction.** I became a Christian at the beginning of my freshman year at UConn. In the fall of my sophomore year, a girl I had been dating for two years broke up with me. In the past, any romantic breakup or rejection would have utterly crushed me, leaving me depressed in bed, probably listening to the Cure. But this time around, I realized that while I was sad, I was not crushed. I realized that my life, my meaning, my purpose, and my identity were no longer tied up in romantic relationships, but in Jesus. And so although I was sad, I was okay.

Where are you locating your hope, your identity, your meaning, your purpose? Whatever it might be: a sport, your looks, your possessions, your spouse, your kids, your job – if your ultimate love and joy and identity is found in them, then you will not be able to handle suffering or loss with the same courage, joy, and hope that Paul displays. **Paul loved being an apostle – but not as much as he loved God and seeing Jesus glorified. Paul loved being with the people he loved – but not as much as he loved God and seeing Jesus glorified.**

Think about it: what if God called you to a life of faithfulness to Him that included singleness, or no children, while you're surrounded by married people and children? What if He called you to a life where you only make enough money to survive, while every day people drive by you in their fancy cars on their way to a high-paying job? What if you have to live with depression, or anxiety, or an injury or illness that keeps you from becoming the person you wish you could be? **Would He be enough for you?** Would knowing Him and living faithfully for Him be enough? What if God called me to pray and serve faithfully, and every other church experienced revival while ours stayed small? Would He be enough for me? The more you place your joy and your hope in the things and people of this world, the harder suffering will hit you when those things are threatened or lost.

The story goes that a logger went out to the forest to cut down some trees and noticed a bird that had made a nest for her family in one of the trees. The logger continued to strike that tree repeatedly until the bird flew away to another tree to build a nest. The logger then continued to strike that tree repeatedly, until the bird flew away to another tree. The logger continued this process until finally the bird landed on a high rock and built her nest there. **Everything in this world is coming down eventually.** If you want to be able to handle suffering and the challenges of this world with the same courage, joy, and hope as Paul, then find your meaning, your purpose, and your identity in God and the gospel of Jesus Christ, not in anything in this world.

2) He knows that God works all things for good for those who love Him

Paul has been unjustly arrested and imprisoned in a Roman jail. Most people in that situation would end up depressed, angry, or at the very least confused at what God is up to. But instead of despairing and shutting down, Paul is available and vigilant for what God might want to do with him in prison. And so, he can encourage the Philippians by testifying to the good that God is doing through his imprisonment. I can see three good things in particular:

First of all, Paul realizes that he has a captive audience in prison. He may be the prisoner, but the guards are either literally or metaphorically chained to Paul and have no choice but to hear about Jesus! And as a result, the gospel spreads throughout the whole palace guard. God is using Paul's imprisonment to reach Rome from the inside out. And Paul sees this as good.

Secondly, Paul tells them that the other believers are encouraged by what is happening. Rather than become afraid and go into hiding out of fear of imprisonment, they are encouraged and emboldened, realizing that nothing can stop the power of God and the spread of the gospel, not even prison or possible death.

And there is **one more good** that God is up to, that not even Paul realizes. Think about it: here is Paul, in prison. Maybe the guards have told him to give his mouth a rest. And so, Paul says, well, there's not much else to do, I guess I'll write some letters. I'll write one to the Ephesians, one to the Philippians, one to the Colossians, one to my friend Philemon. And here we are, 2000 years later, reading one of those letters, one of four that Paul wrote from the Roman prison. Incredible! Again, Paul could have spent his time complaining, "But God, I could be out there sharing your gospel with hundreds of people!" But all the while, God had him in prison, where he wrote letters that have been read by and have encouraged millions of people over the last 2000 years.

In verse 19, Paul tells the Philippians that he believes that he will be delivered. Maybe that means that he believes he will go free. But in the next few verses, we will find that Paul knows that even if he never goes free and they sentence him to die, God has acquitted him in Christ Jesus, declared him not guilty because of Jesus' death for his sins, and he will be free from this world and be with God forever, which will be far better than any freedom in this world could ever be.

God is always working for good. And for those who believe it and are willing to open their eyes and ears, God is capable of doing more than you could ever ask or imagine. That doesn't mean that God is the author of suffering and evil. The Bible tells us that there is an enemy, Satan. As Jesus put it:

John 10:10 - *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

But although Satan may bring all kinds of suffering into our life, the fact remains that God only gives Satan enough rope to hang himself. God takes what Satan intends for evil and works all things together for good. As Paul wrote in Romans:

Romans 8:28-29 - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

What is the good that God is working for, according to this passage? It's not that we might have all the things of this world – good health and lots of money and job promotions and all the worldly stuff our hearts desire. That would be a false theology that leads us right back on to the shaky ground of putting our hope in the things of this world. And most of you are probably well-aware that there are plenty of Christian preachers and writers teaching this kind of theology, that God's desire for His people is that we would be healthy, wealthy, and victorious in every way. Consider this quote from Joseph Prince:

“You are destined to reign in life. You are called by God to be a success, to enjoy wealth, to enjoy health, to enjoy a life of victory. When you reign in life, you reign over sin, over poverty, over every curse and over every sickness and every disease. The Christian should never be sick, or if you do get sick, physical healing is guaranteed, as long as you have enough faith.”

Can you imagine preaching that to Paul in that Roman prison. What might he say in response? Beloved, stop putting your hope and joy in the things of this world, in worldly success and wealth and health and victory. Put your hope in Christ and find your purpose in the gospel!

God is always working for our good. **But that good is not worldly health and wealth and promotion and victory. That is a false gospel that will only cause you put your hope and meaning in the things of this world.** The good, according to verse 29, is that we might be conformed to God's Son. The good is that we might be more like Jesus. That we might be filled with the fruit of righteousness, as Paul wrote earlier. That we might become people of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

One of the most important ways to handle suffering with courage, joy, and hope is to know that God is always working things together for good. And one of the main ways God brings good out of suffering is to use it to refine us and make us more like Jesus.

Another way God uses suffering is to prepare us or equip us to minister to others.

2 Corinthians 1:3-7 - Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. ⁶ If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. ⁷ And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

Listen to what Paul is saying here. In this letter to the Corinthians, he goes on to tell them that life got so hard for him that he felt the sentence of death upon him. He thought he was going to die. But God helped him to put his hope and trust in Him, and now he declares that when we go through suffering, God will comfort us so that we can then in turn comfort others. When we get to the other side of the trial, or when we have enough perspective on the trial, we will be equipped to minister to others in a way that other people can not.

As Brennan Manning wrote about a play by Thornton Wilder:

There's a scene in Thornton Wilder's play "The Angel that Troubled the Waters"

The scene is a doctor comes to the pool everyday wanting to be healed of his melancholy and his gloom and his sadness. Finally the angel appears. The doctor, he's a medical doctor, goes to step into the water. The angel blocks his entrance and says, "No, step back, the healing is not for you." The doctor pleads, "But I've got to get into the water. I can't live this way." The angel says, "No, this moment is not for you." And he says, "But how can I live this way?"

The angel says to him, "Doctor, without your wounds where would your power be? It is your melancholy that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men and women. The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children of this earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In love's service, only wounded soldiers can serve."

There is a weight that comes from your suffering. There is a substance. You are not just speaking head knowledge, but from a life that has experienced it. We have a men's group called Fight Club that meets every Wednesday night at 7. When the group is at its best, we have men who have been through trials encouraging those who are presently going through similar trials.

God is always working for good, even through the worst trials. Sometimes it is conforming us to the image of His Son. Other times it is preparing and equipping us to minister to others. And sometimes, if our eyes and ears are open like Paul, we may just find that God has us exactly where we need to be for some purpose that is greater than if we had been able to choose our own path, just as Paul ended up writing letters that would encourage millions. Paul is able to have courage, joy, and hope in that prison because he knows God is always working for good.

3) He knows he is following a Lord who suffered and died unjustly for him

The last thing we need to believe in order to have true courage, joy and peace, even in suffering, is to know that we belong to a Lord who suffered and died unjustly for us. He is not asking of us something that He has not experienced Himself. As it says in the prayer “God and Myself” in The Valley of Vision:

“Whatever cross I am required to bear, let me see him carrying a heavier.”

Whatever disease or injury I may experience, whatever relational or financial or personal challenge I may have to endure, it will never compare to what Jesus did for me. I have mentioned the gospel of Jesus Christ multiple times in this passage. If you are not sure what that means, Paul defines the gospel for us in 1 Corinthians 15:

1 Corinthians 15:1-8 - Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. ³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

This gospel that Paul is so passionate about is that although we were separated from a holy God by our sin, Jesus, the eternal Son of God, took on human flesh and lived the perfect life we could not live and died a sacrificial death in our place on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins, and then he rose again from the dead, conquering sin and death, so that all who turn from their sinful self-centered way of life to trust in Jesus will have eternal life, could be restored to a right relationship with the God of the

universe. **Christ died for our sins is the heart of the gospel.** Jesus willingly gave His life to save us from eternal separation from God.

And if the eternal Son of God was willing to suffer and die for our salvation, this means that following Him means being willing to go and suffer and even to die for others. Not just equipped to endure; no, we will go, we will give, we will serve, we will sacrifice, and we will endure and persevere because our eyes are on Jesus and we are following a Lord who suffered and gave His life to save us.

***1 John 3:16-18** - This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ **laid down his life** for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother or sister in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? ¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.*

***John 13:12-15** - When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³ "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have **washed your feet**, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.*

As the Roman Emperor Julian said, "Nothing has contributed to the progress of the superstition of the Christians as their charity to strangers... the impious Galileans provide not only for their own poor, but for ours as well."

Paul suffered plenty in his life. He wrote elsewhere about being flogged, shipwrecked, being hungry, thirsty, going without sleep, dealing with the stress of his concern for the churches he cared for. But he pressed on because his eyes were on Jesus and he wanted to see people saved.

How do you handle suffering? Where are you going to find the courage, joy, and hope that Paul had in prison while his name was being slandered? How are you going to be able to survive cancer, or divorce, or abuse, or job loss, or the death of a loved one? Find your ultimate meaning and purpose in God and the gospel of Jesus Christ, not in anything in this world. Believe that God is always working all things together for good. And keep your eyes on Jesus, who suffered and died for you.