

It was a rather dramatic, destructive, and painful week for many churches across the world. 10 separate tornadoes hit our metroplex. Thankfully no lives were lost, but there were billions in damage, and that included the decimation of several church buildings along Walnut Hill. Halfway across the world, a storm of a different kind wreaked havoc. As missiles rained down at the border between Turkey and Syria, several churches were destroyed, lives were lost, and a humanitarian crisis developed. As members of those churches dealt with their difficult and painful circumstances, they are left to ask if and how they continue the work of advancing the gospel. Do they stop until they can rebuild? Do they run to a safer part of the country? Do they focus on self-preservation, or do they keep going? Is there any hope?

These same questions were being asked and answered 2,000 years ago by a prisoner in Rome and a church in a major Roman city called Philippi. They too were facing a storm, though this was the storm of persecution and, under those circumstances, they may have tempted to shrink back and stop the work of the gospel. How would they view those circumstances and what would they do in light of that? Was there any hope?

As we continue our study this morning in the book of Philippians called *The Joyful Journey*, we get to ask and answer those same questions. Will we look at the circumstances in our lives as reason to stop the work of the gospel or as an opportunity to advance it? Paul will show us it all depends on where our focus lies. If we focus on our circumstances, the advance of the gospel will be compromised. But if we focus on Christ, the gospel becomes unstoppable, and every circumstance becomes an opportunity for it to advance. And as it advances, joy is sure to follow.

[Philippians 1:12-18a] 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. ¹⁵Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. ¹⁶The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. ¹⁸What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

Paul begins with the phrase “what has happened to me.” It’s a reflection on his current circumstances. I would encourage you to read Acts 23-28 to get the full context. After three missionary journeys, Paul returned to Jerusalem and is taken by the Jews who intend to kill him because he is preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because Paul is a Roman citizen, Roman officials intervene, take him to Caesarea, and intend to try him there. Felix and Festus, Roman governors, were intent to set him free, but the Jews objected, and Paul was compelled to appeal to Caesar, as was his right. That meant he would be taken to Rome where Caesar would make final judgment on his innocence or guilt. It is there, while under house arrest, where Paul writes this letter to the Philippian church. What appears dire and hopeless is anything but.

Paul encourages the Philippians by telling them three ways these circumstances are actually being used to advance the Gospel. First, we know Paul was a prisoner in Rome for at least two years. And if you were a prisoner in Rome, you were always shackled to a guard. That means

Paul always had an audience. God puts you in the presence of those he wants you to impact. They might have thought Paul was chained to them, but for a guy whose entire life was devoted to the gospel, they actually were chained to him. Every four hours, as a new shift came around, some new “gospel prospect” shackled himself to Paul for a lengthy sermon about Jesus! What we see as barriers God often sees as opportunity.

This would have been particularly encouraging to the Philippians. At this time in the history of Rome, the emperor was considered deity, and the two titles subjects addressed Nero by were lord and savior. But the Christians in Philippi had a new Lord and Savior and were beginning to pay the price for it. So for them to hear that those closest to the emperor were now being exposed to the gospel (and at the end of the letter Paul will say the gospel has even reached those in Caesar’s household), they would have been thrilled.

Second, Christians in Rome were emboldened by Paul’s courage and began to share the gospel more themselves. They did so out of love for Paul and were confident because he pressed on even under his current circumstances. **Our courage becomes encouragement to others.** It’s always easier to do something frightening when you see someone else do it first: walk into a dark room, have a difficult conversation, live out our faith. That’s why we want to tell these stories of courageous next steps. They magnify God, and they also encourage others to take that first step.

And third, some were preaching the gospel spitefully. It appears some Christian leaders were threatened by Paul’s arrival in Rome, the big-dog Apostle, possibly lost some attention, and made the interesting decision to preach the gospel out of envy and rivalry. Paul’s response? “Whatever!” He says whether the gospel is being preached because someone loves me or because someone is envious of me, the gospel is being preached. And in the midst of all these challenging circumstances, the gospel was on the move, and Paul rejoiced.

I want to show you a couple examples of the gospel advancing in spite of difficult circumstances. We have had a team in India for the last week or so and, just recently, pastors in that area had to sign a legal document that said they would not attempt to convert others to Christianity. But in spite of this pressure, our strategic partner, Devan, pastors Bethel Fellowship Church, and the gospel is thriving. This is a picture of last Sunday’s underground service. Those on the back right are fifteen visitors/seekers attending the service, and several came forward for prayer after the service. Additionally, we gathered a bunch of pastors and church leaders to go through Repurposed, and Pastor Hodges (second from right) attended. He planted five churches in and near his village and one Sunday, during a church service, the village leaders and others came out, surrounded their church, and threatened to beat him if he didn’t stop sharing the gospel. He didn’t. Since then, he has planted two more churches in another village, and 600 people now attend these churches. The gospel is advancing in India.

How are current circumstances impacting your hope in the gospel?

We may not suffer under the persecution in Paul’s day or the persecution in India, but there are difficult circumstances that can stop us in our tracks, cause us to question God, seek our worth and fulfillment elsewhere, or make us fearful to live out our faith. It’s important to remember there are no accidents with God. God uses roadblocks as if they are smooth paved roads. That’s the story of the gospel. The roadblocks of the cross and tomb were overcome by an empty grave.

What was meant for evil became the means of our salvation. And the God who used the cross and grave for our eternity can use whatever circumstances are going on in your life for the same purpose. That means we all can tell a story that begins with “I want you to know what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.” But if you are struggling, let’s keep reading. Paul is going to show us the attitude we need to press on.

[Philippians 1:18b-24] 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.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.

Paul’s attitude is directed by his hope in the Lord and the expectation of joy. **I wonder how much more joyful our lives would be if we lived with the expectation of experiencing it regularly, particularly in difficult circumstances.** Paul is hopeful and joyful because he is certain of his deliverance. That word normally gets translated “salvation”. Paul’s not sure what is going to happen as a result of his trial, but he is certain his eternity is secure. **If we know how it ends, we can live courageously now.** That’s why Paul can say in Romans that these present sufferings are not worth comparing to the future glory that awaits. He knows he will spend eternity face-to-face with Jesus, and that gives him focus and courage in this moment.

His focus is not primarily on his present circumstances but is instead on honoring Christ, whether he lives or dies. He’s there on explicit instructions from above and does not want to experience the shame of not fulfilling them. Just before he got sent to the governor in Caesarea, he received a word from the Lord:

[Acts 23:11] ¹¹ The following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.”

As he stands before Caesar, will he have the courage to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, proclaim him as Lord and Savior to the one who likely prefers those titles be reserved for himself, knowing it could end with a guilty verdict and execution? He believes that, through the prayers of the Philippians and the power of the Spirit, he will. The gospel will be proclaimed, Jesus will be honored, and Paul will rejoice, whether it ends with his release or his execution.

So how can Paul do this? The answer can be found in v21. It is the declaration of a life fully devoted to God that rests in the eternity he promises. **To him to live is Christ and to die is gain.** It is a victory speech that proclaims, “I win either way.” If he lives, he gets to continue a life devoted to the gospel and the building of God’s Kingdom. If he dies, that means eternity has begun and he will be with Jesus for all of it. He’s not sure which he’d choose. His presence will help the Philippians, but it’s clear he’s eager to go home to be with Jesus. Regardless, he knows he gets Jesus either way and, because of that, he will advance the gospel.

Are you able to say the same thing? A great way to check is to fill in the blank: **For to me to live is _____**. What is it for you? You see, whatever you put in that blank causes everything else in your life to align with it. Think of the athlete solely focused on winning, the student committed on straight A's, the baby who's hungry. They are unwavering. So it is with us and whatever we put in that blank.

If it's not Christ – work, family, fame, leisure, ministry – we put our focus on things with uncertain outcomes. As the stability of our life wavers so, too, can our devotion to advancing the gospel. If Paul's devotion was to staying alive, he could have compromised when in front of Caesar and failed to live out what he was sent to do.

But if it's Christ, everything else not only becomes secondary but becomes the means to honor him, even difficult circumstances; illness, persecution, relational struggles, loss, financial issues. It doesn't make them easy, but it allows God to redeem them for his purposes. And because our relationship with Christ is permanent and our promised eternity with him is secure, the hope of our deliverance can give us the courage to keep going, even if our devotion to Christ comes at a cost. When we live like that, the gospel will be advanced and we will experience joy.

The book of Acts doesn't tell us if Paul was released, though the pastoral epistles and church history indicate he was. He likely made his way back to Philippi, as well as some other places, before being arrested again and executed a few years later. That means he was given the opportunity to live out what he wrote next in his letter.

[Philippians 1:25-26] 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.

Paul is convinced he will live and continue in his gospel work. That's good news for the Philippians. The word translated "progress" here is the same word translated "advance" earlier. It's used only one other time in the New Testament when he tells Timothy to let others see his spiritual progress. He's showing us that when we progress in the gospel, we help others do the same. As we help someone progress in their faith, as the gospel advances in their life, their relationship with God is expanded and joy follows.

Through whom are you advancing the gospel?

Like Paul, if you are a follower of Jesus and alive, that means fruitful labor awaits you. There is gospel work to be done. God has changed your life through the gospel to use you to change others'. You are the carrier of the good news of Jesus Christ. It's time to get moving.

But for us to advance the gospel in someone else's life it must first be advancing in our own. If we are going to help others progress in their faith, we must be progressing in ours. Perhaps this week you would evaluate that. A good way to tell is to consider how much joy you are experiencing. If you find it lacking, go back to the attitude Paul modeled for us and ask God to help you sincerely proclaim, "to me to live is Christ". Then move forward with the expectation that God has someone for you to pour the gospel in to. And if difficult circumstances arise, trust God is in them and his gospel can be a shining light in that darkness, for you, and for others.

The churches I mentioned at the beginning had to decide this week how difficult circumstances would impact their work of the gospel. Francisco Flores of Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana was in his church when the tornado hit it. He escaped with minor injuries and then said this: "If I would have died, that would have been God's plan. My faith is even stronger now. This is the second opportunity at life that God has given me." That sounds like a man secure in his eternity and convinced that, if he lived, God had more for him to do. Their church spent the week helping neighbors impacted by the tornadoes, and they gathered today under a tent.

And for the churches on the Turkey/Syria border, they have chosen to stay in the midst of the fighting. One aid worker observed "These extremely brave people want to be salt and light in their communities. They want to maintain the presence of Jesus and reach out." For them, to live is Christ and, if they die, they know what they will gain...eternity with Jesus.

You can be in the business of advancing the gospel no matter what your circumstances, and oftentimes because of them. If you are follower of Jesus, your eternity is secure. And that means this life can be all about Christ, to make him known, and leave a wake of joy as the gospel advances through you.