What's Really Happening

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Scripture: Philippians 1:12-14

Philippians 1:12–14 (ESV)

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.

Introduction

I wonder how many of you are here this morning and you are tired. I don't mean sleepy, but I mean weary, worn out. I wonder if any of you are here today and you feel like you're this close to giving up. You feel overwhelmed.

You feel burdened and burned out. And some of us are here today and we feel that way perhaps because of physical limitations, secret chronic pain that we have dealt with for years without any resolution. Well, there are some in our body who aren't even able to be here today. They would love to be here and yet they can't because of the physical distresses that they go through. Perhaps you're worn down and you're worn out not by something that's physical, but by something that's emotional. Do you feel like you're trapped in a loveless marriage? Or maybe you're stuck in a dysfunctional family.

Do you grieve over broken relationships that seem to get only more and more estranged with no hope of restoration? Or maybe today you're here and your mind is distracted because you're fretting over the job you have to go to tomorrow and then on Tuesday and Wednesday and over and over again. Do you ever feel like you are about to drown in your distress?

If you don't feel that way right now, I imagine at some point in your life you have felt that way. And sorry to say, at some point in your life, you will likely feel this way. And today, I want us to see from holy scripture that rather than being overcome by our suffering, we actually can overcome our suffering. These verses here in Philippians are here to help and to show us that that's a real possibility. They show us here the secret of the apostle Paul, which is truly the secret of every Christian, for we have been given through a knowledge of the good and loving sovereignty of God, we have been given the key that unlocks persevering power even in the midst of profound pain and suffering.

Don't you want that today? That ability to not be overcome, but to overcome. Well, let's dig into these verses and discover how the Apostle Paul is able to do that and how we likewise are able to do that.

I A Theocentric Perspective | Philippians 1:12

And the very first thing we need to see is the different perspective that Paul has. This is the first thing, a different perspective. That's what we encounter in verse 12.

It's the most important thing. We'll spend most of our time here. And you'll note as you look at verse 12 and as we explore it a little further, it's not just a different perspective, it's an unnatural one because Paul's talking about his suffering, but he's doing so in a very unnatural way. What's the natural way we think of or talk of suffering? It's very me centered, isn't it? It's very self-centered. We we say things like this. Why is this happening to me or I'm fed up or it's not fair, I can't handle this.

But a heart that has been infused with supernatural grace and that has been transformed by and is indwelt by the Holy Spirit is able to actually view suffering from a different perspective, to see something not in the natural way but in a supernatural way and that is not to put oneself in the center but to put God in the center. We can interpret things differently. the perspective is no longer man-centered but God-centered. We could call it theocentric - God in the center. And that's an instinct we need to develop and pursue after as Christians and that is to say that we want our very first thought about the things that happen to us not to be about us at all, but actually for our first thought to be about God and what he's doing. And that's what Paul does here. And so look at verse 12. Notice that he refers to those things that have happened to him. What has happened to him? What's he talking about there? Well, if you look up to verse 7, we are given the first hint that Philippians is written while Paul is in prison. He refers to his imprisonment and the defense of the gospel there. Though we cannot be 100% certain, it's likely that Paul is writing from prison in Rome where he is awaiting trial before Caesar, the story that we encounter at the conclusion of Acts. Do you remember how Paul came to the place where he finds himself chained to a Roman guard awaiting that appeal to Caesar? It begins in Acts 21. He arrives in Jerusalem and he's greeted by James and the other leaders of the church. He gets this warm welcome, but from the Jews, not so much. He goes and he preaches in the temple, and they make this false accusation against him - that he's defiled the holy place of God, that he's defiled the temple. And they get everybody so worked up that almost in this madness of a mob mentality, they almost murder him.

And they tried to murder him, but the Roman police, they step in and instead they arrested Paul for causing a civil disturbance. And even while he's awaiting trial, he receives no real justice. The only way he escapes flogging is because he appeals to his Roman citizenship, which up to that point they had ignored. And running parallel to what the Roman government is doing to him, we have the Jewish leaders who are plotting an assassination attempt. Next time Paul's out in public, we're going to kill him. Now, he escapes those attempts, but things aren't going well for him in prison either. We're even told that the governors keep Paul in prison, they delay his trial because they recognize that having him in prison increases their popularity among their Jewish constituents. And so there's no real justice. And finally, he appeals to Caesar to be tried by the Supreme Court as it were.

Then even that is fraught with trouble because that's when he encounters the storm at sea that almost takes his life. We're told in 2 Corinthians that actually that's not the first time Paul endured a shipwreck. I wonder if you recall the summary that Paul gives his ministry in 2 Corinthians 11. This is what he says. He says, "Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the 40 lashes less one. Three times beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. A night and a day I was a drift at sea. On frequent journeys in danger from rivers, robbers, my own people, the Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the woods, danger at sea, danger from false brothers, in toil,

in hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure."

And this is what has led up to Paul now writing a letter to the Philippians from jail. These are the sorts of things that have happened, that he refers to in verse 12 - betrayal, accusation, misrepresentation, deceit, the miscarriage of justice, the nearness of death, the suppression of truth, to say nothing of the pain and the bruising and the blisters and the hunger and the loneliness. Paul says, "This is what has happened."

Or is it? He actually invites us to take along with him a different perspective on his sufferings, doesn't he? Yes, all of those things and much more have happened to him. But there's something more meaningful at play. Look at verse 12 and this word "really". A beautiful little word. It could be translated "rather" or "in actuality". As I was thinking on these verses, what kept coming to mind is the little red decoder lenses, the kind that my son loves to play with in his junior spy kit. Maybe you have seen, there's like a magnifying glass or sometimes they're like glasses and you put them on and you can look at something and it will reveal a hidden message, right? And you look at a picture, the picture doesn't change at all, but when you have this red lens that you're looking through, you see something that previously was hidden.

And so that's what Paul's doing with his suffering, isn't he? He's using that sort of decoder lens as he thinks back on what has happened to him. The suffering doesn't change. It's still there, but now something else materializes that otherwise had been hidden. Something else emerges. Yes, the suffering really, truly, actually, had a greater purpose. And Paul calls that the advance of the gospel.

And we'll see in a moment exactly how that played out for Paul in this specific situation. But you need to know that there is a principle underlying what Paul is saying that is applicable for every single one of us. Brothers and sisters, I want you to know it is a principle without which you cannot live joyfully the Christian life. It's a principle, I dare say, without which you can't even get out of bed in the morning. And the principle is this:

That there is always, always, a good purpose behind our pain. That our suffering is never pointless. That suffering always has a purpose, a good purpose beyond itself. Do you believe that today? Can you say that you have trust that whatever your suffering is, that it's actually serving your good? That it might be serving your neighbor's good. That God is using it to make His name known and to advance the purposes of His church in this world, to move His people forward. Can you see it? Maybe you need to squint your eyes, cck your head to the side a little bit because you can't see it quite at first. You need that decoder lens, but it's there.

There's something that's happening behind the pain. There's a purpose. And here's what we need to understand, friends. That purpose is more real than the pain. I'm not trying to minimize your suffering. Of course not.

Is Paul's suffering real? Absolutely. But God today in His word is telling you that there's something that's more real. Is your suffering real? Absolutely. But God today in His word is telling you there's something that's more real.

Take by way of illustration the surgeon and his knife. There's a patient on the table and if they're not going to operate the tumor inside that patient is going to kill them. And so what does the surgeon do? He takes his knife and he makes an incision and he gets to work. What has he done when he's made the incision? Would it be wrong to say he's wounded the patient? No. That that would be actually accurate. That's a true thing to say he's wounded the patient. But isn't there a truer truth? A truth without which the incision makes no sense and seems only sadistic. Right? What's really happening? What's actually happening is he's saving a life. And that's the truth. That's

the truer truth that Paul wants us to cling to in our suffering. The more real, the more solid truth is that God is doing a work in our suffering. That through our suffering, the gospel actually advances, that God's purposes for his church and his people move forward.

And now you would be forgiven, especially if you have suffered much, for thinking something like this. Well, good for Paul. I'm happy that his suffering had a purpose, but mine just seems meaningless. Or maybe somewhat cynically, you think, well, Paul's just an optimistic guy, you know? He's just sort of a a glass half full kind of dude, and I'm not that way. So it's easy for him to say.

But friends, there's no naive optimism here. The reason Paul says this, where does he get this? Where does he come up with this idea that he can look at his suffering and say, "Actually, there's something else that's really happening." Paul gets this from a life lived in the scriptures. This principle is played out all over the Bible. We read of it earlier in Genesis 50, didn't we? Where the story of Joseph, where he's left for dead by his brothers, but what happened really served to actually save their lives and to keep the people of God alive. That's what really happened.

We think of the story in Exodus where Pharaoh's decree to murder all the Hebrew baby boys actually began this chain of events in which Moses is put into the river and then ends up amazingly being raised in Pharaoh's household. The very house that decreed Israel's destruction actually raises up Israel's deliverer. That's what really happened.

We think of Naomi who considered the famine that her family endured and the death of her husband and the death of her sons as nothing more than bitterness. And she says, "Just call me Mara. My life's bitter." But if it wasn't for that bitterness, right? If it wasn't for that bitterness, she would not have been brought into the lineage of King David and King Jesus. Jesus, who is the joy of all the earth. That's what really happened. God was bringing joy into her life, into all of our lives. And that's to say nothing of Jonah and of Elijah and David and Jeremiah. We see it over and over and over again in the scriptures.

You look at Philippians 1:12, and I tell you today, this is not a Paul thing. This is a God thing. This is how He works. This is what He does. And so, friend, whatever your suffering is, I invite you with Paul to take a deeper look at it. To take a harder look at it.

Maybe a better way to say it is, take a higher look at it. Get get hold of that theocentric vision that Paul has and that Bible everywhere has. The only way for you to see what's really happening in your suffering is if you see God in it. And if we believe that God is good and loving and kind and gracious and wise and powerful, then we must conclude that all his purposes for suffering are also good and loving and kind and gracious and wise and powerful. It's the only conclusion.

It's the truth that the Bible everywhere testifies to. Perhaps it's trumpeted most clearly in Romans 8:28. Paul says, "And we are sure of this. We know this, that for those who love God, all things work together for good." All things. All things includes the worst of things. It included Paul's imprisonment. It includes your present suffering. Oh friend, what is keeping you down today? What's making your heart heavy?

Is it the loneliness you face? Perhaps worry over your children who have wandered from the faith? The loss of a loved one, perhaps the relentless demands of a joyless job? The Christian who has this perspective that we're talking about here is able to overcome their suffering and not be overcome by it.

And when you are struggling to get that perspective, you need the decoder lens. And friends, it is the cross. You look to the cross today and you see there that God took the worst thing possible and made it the greatest thing imaginable.

Death becomes life for you, for you, for you and for me. This is how God works. This is what's really happening in our suffering. Let that challenge how you interpret the troubles in your life and let it give you a different perspective. As William Cooper so perfectly penned, "Judge not the Lord by your feeble sense, but trust him for his grace. Behind a frowning providence, he's hiding a smiling face." And Paul has found the smiling face of God as he sits in a Roman prison. Now that required a different perspective.

II Suffering as a Witness | Philippians 1:13

But once he has that perspective, notice secondly, that he realizes his suffering has made him an unexpected witness. The different perspective shows him secondly, he's an unexpected witness. We we see that in verse 13. He shares the way in which he has seen the gospel advance.

He says what really what has happened to me really has served to advance the gospel so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard or the Praetorian guard. This is the official Roman police who were charged with protecting the emperor and handpicked by the emperor. It's become known through the whole imperial guard and to all the rest (and to others) that my imprisonment is for Christ. So, picture the scene. Paul is chained, literally chained to a guard. He's in prison and he has a guard by his side 24/7 and he would take several shifts throughout the day. And yet, yes, he has some freedom to welcome guests. We read of at the end of Acts. But he's never far from one of these handpicked guards that the emperor has handpicked.

And if you permit yourself to be a little creative, ask yourself, if someone was chained to you for an entire day, what would they see? How would they see you behave? What would they hear you talk about? What kinds of people would they discover you invite into your home? What sort of conversations would they get to eaves drop in on?

For Paul and these guards who are chained to him, they see Christ. That's what they hear in Paul. That's what they see in Paul. They don't just hear about Christ. This is important to see in the text, but they actually see Christ. If you look at the text in the ESV, it doesn't come out as clearly as it ought. I think the King James Version, if I'm not mistaken, has it better. The preposition “for”, when he says it's become evident or known to all the rest that my imprisonment is “for” Christ. The preposition there is actually better translated “in” Christ.

In Christ, “in” is the great gospel preposition, right? Because the gospel is all about how that when we are converted, when we repent and believe, God places us in His Son. So that so that all His righteousness becomes mine and indeed even all my sin becomes His on the cross, that everything I have is in Jesus. All that is Christ is ours. It that's the doctrine of the gospel. We are “in Him.”

But if everything that is Christ becomes ours, that also means His suffering becomes ours, because He's the suffering Son of God. He's the suffering servant. If He suffers, we suffer. Peter writes, "Rejoice in so far as you share in Christ's suffering so that you can also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed." In other words, we will suffer now with Him. But that's a sign we will be made glorious with Him as well, because everything that is Christ is ours. So, His suffering, but yes, also His glory. Or Paul says the same thing. If you flip over a page in your Bibles, Philippians 3:10, look how Paul puts it.

He says that his desire is that he would know Christ. Verse 10, and the power of his resurrection and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. If I share in His suffering and in His death, I know I will share in His resurrection and His life and His glory because he's in Christ. They're bound together. They're forever united.

For Christ, the pattern was cross and then a crown. If you are in Christ, friend, then that means the pattern is the same. Cross then a crown. But this means that, chained in a Roman prison, Paul is coming to a deeper communion and a deeper fellowship with his Savior. What's really happening in our suffering? You're coming to know your Savior better who suffered for you.

And not only that, when others look at you, they come to know Him as well. That's the idea here in verse 13. It had become known that I'm imprisoned in Christ. That what I'm doing is in Him. So people aren't just hearing about Jesus. They're actually hearing and seeing Jesus through Paul. What an unexpected witness - that through suffering the Savior is better known.

Friends, for us as Christians, our suffering is a way in which we know and love and adore our Savior better, and to know Jesus better, in whom is all life and joy and fullness - to know Him better is worth all the suffering of this world. There is no cost that we would not readily pay if we truly understood and believed how dear a thing it is to know Jesus more fully and to love Him more dearly.

We would take any suffering if we knew really what we were getting out of it. And so Paul in prison is coming to know the Christ that he's united to better. And then this amazing thing he says, "And the guards are coming to know Him too." When we suffer patiently, when we endure it with hope and trust, when we do what we cannot do in ourselves, then people aren't seeing us in our suffering.

They're actually seeing Jesus. What a witness our suffering can be. Not to how great we are, but to how good God is. To how good Jesus is. Isn't that an amazing thing? When people see you go through something, they think, "Well, if that was me, I could never do it." They don't say, "Wow, you're such a great guy." They say, "Wow, what a great Savior to never let him go. To never let her go. What a stalwart and strong and steady Savior, always able to uphold those who trust in Him.

Our suffering can be a witness. It can be a witness. It can also be an encouragement to fellow Christians.

III Encouragement for Believers | Philippians 1:14

That's the final thing this morning. If we are able to get this different perspective on what's really happening in our suffering, not only will we discover discover in it an unexpected witness to unbelievers, but we will become a surprising encouragement to our fellow Christians. A surprising encouragement.

Look at this bizarre statement that Paul makes in verse 14. Most of the brothers (that's a phrase there for Christians), and most of the brothers having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment are much more bold to speak the word without fear. So Paul's continuing to explain how his imprisonment is advancing the gospel. On the one hand, the Roman guards are coming to know Christ, but on the other hand, those who have heard that Paul is in prison are encouraged to to believe on Christ and to share about Christ without fear.

How counterintuitive is that, right? You keep looking over this verse and at least for me, I keep expecting it, no matter how many times I've read it, for it to say something else, that they become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment. We would think the exact opposite should be true. I

mean, think about it. Why does the government put people in prison in the first place, right? To deter others from like offenses. And yet here, Christians are seeing Paul in prison and they're saying, "Sign me up." What?

How is that possible? It's that the grace of Christ is so evident in the heart of Paul that these other Christians say they are willing to wear the same chains if they can come to know the same Savior to that same degree. That's how deeply they want to know Jesus. I'll suffer too. I'll be in prison, too. Clearly, there's this supernatural work taking place. Not only are they willing to suffer for Christ, it says they're eager to do it. You look at the the phrases that are being heaped up here by Paul to stress just how they're jumping at it. They become confident in the Lord. They're much more bold. They have no fear. Clearly, something supernatural is taking place.

And you need to be reminded of that today. I need to be reminded of that today. That there is something supernatural taking place in our suffering. God uses those things which seem to weigh us down to propel other people forward. Have you not experienced that in your your life, dear Christian? I've been here all of two weeks and the number of times I've had conversations with you, dear friends, where you have encouraged me by your trust in the Lord amidst your trials.

It's astounding, right? Something that would weigh you down is actually lifting me up. You've had that experience, too, I'm sure, right? To see how the Lord is carrying other people through lifts you up as well. It fills my heart with such love for the Lord and affection for you to know just a little something of what some of you are going through, but to still see you here on Sunday, saying the creed, singing the hymns, praying the prayers, trusting the Lord.

That's what's really happening when we suffer in this God-centered way. We become an instrument of strange encouragement to our brothers and sisters. That can be tough to remember though at times, right? When we're feeling particularly low, we can start to believe the lie that we are useless, that we are good for nothing. You know, you might be sidelined by a very serious medical condition or you're brought low by a spiritual or mental depression and you just think you're helpless.

But if you cling to the cross in those low points, if you still praise Christ through the pain, you end up doing your brothers and your sisters in Christ one of the greatest services imaginable. You make their Savior real to them. You strengthen their confidence in God and in His word. you become a catalyst for spiritual growth and transformation in the lives of others.

Conclusion

And so, if God is doing all of this in our suffering, doesn't that change the way we face it? Does that mean you need to like your suffering? No. Does it mean you need to pretend it's not real? No. But you need to know there is something more real than your suffering.

And so, I exhort you today, even as I exhort myself, believe with me in the something more of suffering. God only ever lays you on your back so that you get a better view of heaven. He never thoughtlessly sends pain into your life. Never. Never once. He loves his children too much to cause them a needless tear.

Believe in the God who can, in the words of Thomas Watson, by a divine chemistry extract gold out of dross. The God whose providence never lacks either a mercy or a wonder. And when you're struggling to see it, you look to that cross of Calvary, you look through the decoder lens, which shows you life as it really is.

It shows you what God's actually up to. What was really happening on Good Friday. The worst thing that ever happened was the greatest thing God ever did. He went to death itself in the person

of His Son in order to keep His promise to be your God and to have you live with Him forever. And so friends, suffering is only ever ordained for our good. How could it be otherwise with a God like our God?

Unlock that power to persevere by finding your good God at the center of your suffering. I promise you this, if you see Him in it, He will see you through it.