“Advancing the Gospel,” Philippians 1:12-18 (Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, June 23, 2024)

**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.

PRAY

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Philippians, and he wrote it from prison. We don’t know precisely the reason for Paul’s imprisonment, nor do we know for sure which imprisonment this one is (for Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 11 that he was jailed many times over the course of his ministry career), but we do know the conditions were harsh.

We know it because this detention was one by Roman authorities, and we know how Romans jailed their prisoners. They didn’t lock them up in a cell. Instead, they chained their prisoners to one of their praetorian, or imperial, guards. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, Roman prisoners were in chains (the ESV uses the word “imprisonment” three times in our passage, but literally Paul says, “my chains”), and one of those chains was always connected to a Roman soldier. The Romans adopted this practice to guarantee that their prisoners couldn’t escape and forestall any other potential problems.

Now you have to believe that the guards hated being assigned to this unit. It had to be that to get in the praetorian guard you were someone who lost a bet or drew the short straw. Maybe it was a demotion you received when you were caught drunk on duty or something.

But at least the soldiers worked in shifts. At least they got out of the chains every four or eight hours or however long their shifts were. The prisoners, however, never got out. For as long as they were in a Roman jail, they were not just chained up, but chained to someone else. No privacy, not to eat, or read, or sleep, or relieve yourself.

When I go on out of town for a conference with other pastors, I don’t even want to share a hotel room! I cannot being chained to another man for months, let alone years. That’s the context from which Paul writes Philippians, yet Paul can say in verse 18, “I rejoice.” He uses some form of the word “rejoice” or “joy” sixteen times in this book, so much so that Philippians is often referred to as “the book of joy.” This isn’t some kind of phony-baloney thing, where Paul “puts on a happy face” or “grins and bears it.” No, he’s genuinely happy in his chains. How is that possible?

That’s what we’ll look at this morning, under two headings: *first, the secret of Paul’s joy.* *Second, the consequences of Paul’s joy.*

First, the secret of Paul’s joy. He tells us clearly in verse 12: “I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has ***really served to advance the gospel*** …”. Paul sees how because of his chains, his imprisonment, people are hearing the gospel that have never heard it before, and that brings him joy.

Maybe it went like this: on their first few shifts with Paul these Roman guards refused to engage with Paul. But Paul didn’t let it bother him. Perhaps he sang hymns to pass the time. We know Paul did that when he was locked up. We read in the book of Acts that Paul and Silas sang hymns one night in a jail in Philippi.

So, Paul sings his hymns, and when the guards tell him to be quiet he hums them. But Paul looks for any opening. And maybe by the third or fourth week of shifts Paul notices the guards start listening to the words. Then Paul stops singing and says, “What’s your name? Tell me about yourself.” The guard starts talking about himself, and Paul just listens like he’s got nowhere else to go (because he doesn’t!).

But eventually ***these guards start figuring out that the way Paul sees it, he isn’t the prisoner; they are!*** Because Paul, the best evangelist the world has ever seen, spots an opening. Maybe the guard expresses guilt over what he’s done, or fear for the future. Maybe the guard asks a question, “How in the world can you seem so content in this hole?” And then Paul’s got him.

Paul says, “Oh, let me tell you. I serve the most High God, and even though you and I and all the world has rebelled against him, he is reconciling all things to himself. He loves this world and is determined to heal it. And in the person of this man named Jesus Christ, God forgives all sins against him. He’s forgiven me, and he’ll even your sins, Titus. Even your sins, Cornelius. Even your sins, Atticus. If you will only acknowledge your sins and pray to this God though Jesus Christ, you’ll be forgiven, and God will be your protector and provider forever. He’ll watch over you through the rest of your life on earth and then, when you die, he will welcome you with open arms to your eternal reward.”

And one by one these washout Roman guards, who outside of this jail wouldn’t give Paul the time of day but inside they have no choice because they are chained to him four hours at a time, start getting converted, and then they go all over the prison sharing the gospel with everyone else, and Paul is full of joy. Even though he’s in chains, even though he’s lost all freedom and comfort and privacy, even though he’s lonely and dirty and hungry and cold, Paul is full of joy.

Through this letter Paul challenges us, “If I can find joy in a Roman prison, then I promise you can find joy no matter what suffering you go through.”

What do you think of that? How does that strike you? Do you say, “You’re right, J.D. If Paul could find joy from the Lord in a Roman dungeon, I can find joy in my life”? Or, do you say, “J.D., I know I should find joy in my ‘prison’, in my suffering, but I don’t. I wish I could, but I can’t. Maybe Paul’s just a better person than me.”

Don’t think that. It’s the last thing Paul would want you to think. Paul was a great man, an apostle, he’s one of the top five philosophers of all time, ***but he wasn’t always the nicest guy.***

In Acts 16, on Paul’s first trip to Philippi, we read that a demon-possessed slave girl followed him and Silas around, screaming at them, for “many days.” Finally, only because Paul got so fed up with her, only because the Bible says he was “irked,” he turned and cast the demon out of her and healed her. He could have healed her the first time he met her, but for whatever reason he waited a couple of weeks.

Yes, when Paul finds himself in a Roman prison and he’s looking for ways to talk to the guards about Jesus. If you found yourself in prison you might curl up in the fetal position on the floor. Talking to the guards about Jesus might be the last thing on your mind. But that’s how Paul was wired. He loved talking religion before he became a Christian, and he loved talking about it after he became a Christian. But I bet there’s a good chance that, had you’d been in Philippi you saw this slave girl out of her mind, you’d have had compassion on her more quickly than Paul did.

Paul’s a great man, but that doesn’t mean he’s the godliest man who ever lived. ***He’s Paul, not Jesus***. **But Paul did have a solid grasp on a truth that you and I often don’t.** He believed to the bottom of his soul a truth that shows up in Philippians 1:21: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” Or, as Paul puts it in Colossians 3:2-3: “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. **3**For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”

The reason Paul can find joy even in the pain is not because he’s so perfect, ***but because he considers himself dead***. What does that mean?

When we think of death, we immediately associate it with something bad. And understandably so, because physical death is an evil thing. It certainly wasn’t a part of God’s original design. We give sympathy to those who have lost loved ones. We don’t go to the visitation line at the funeral home and say to the family, “Congratulations! I always wanted this to happen to him!”

But there are some good things that come with death. When you die, obviously you lose your physical life. But what else do you lose? ***You lose your responsibilities.*** No one expects a corpse to do anything anymore. ***You lose your worries.*** What’s there to worry about? You’re already dead. ***Your need to impress others and the desire to win the approval of other people is gone. Your need to provide for your family or run a business or manage people is gone.*** And perhaps best of all, when you die ***your sins have no power over you anymore***. They can’t tempt you anymore, and you can’t hurt people anymore.

Paul says there’s another kind of death, a legal death, a death that’s happens before physical death when you start following Jesus. He writes about it in Romans 6:3-4, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”

When you become a Christian, you die this legal death, and in return Jesus hands you ***his life***. That means Jesus owns you. You are his slave. You do whatever he says.

That sounds bad at first . . . until you get to know Jesus, and you see he is way better at running your life than you ever could be. You believe him when he says, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

If you’re dead, and the only life you can live now is Christ’s, that means all you have to worry about is following Jesus. ***How your life turns out is totally up to him.***

Friends, the more you focus on the fact that in Christ you’re dead, the less you’ll worry about responsibilities, the less you’ll worry about success and what other people think of you, the less you’ll worry about your appearance and comfort, the less power sin has over you, and the more closely you’ll follow Jesus, because there’s nothing else left to do. ***And that’s the secret of Paul’s joy.*** Paul said, “Jesus wants me in prison. That’s ok. It’s his life after all. I’m dead, I just follow Jesus now, and I trust that he’ll provide for me and figure out what do with me.”

I’ve heard Elisabeth Elliot tell the story of a friend of hers who was traveling through Eastern Europe right after the Iron Curtain fell. She was getting on a train when two well-dressed, attractive young men came up to her on the platform and offered to help her load her bags onto the train. She said, “Yes, thank you,” so they hauled her bags on board.

She went to her seat and sat down, and the men jumped off the train, but when she went to look in her shoulder she found that, of course, those two well-dressed, attractive young men turned out to be thieves. They stole her cash, her tickets, her passport, her American Express travelers’ checks. Now, what did that woman do in response? She was a Christian, so she prayed. She prayed to God and said, “Well God, I don’t what you’re going to do about this, but I’m going to trust you. It’s your life, after all. I’m going to thank you in advance for whatever it is you’re going to do with this.” And as it turned out she got everything back except $60 in cash.

That does not mean that if you’re a Christian when thieves steal your stuff you’ll get it all back. But it does mean this: when hardships come your way you can say, “Well God, I don’t know what you’re going to about this, but I’m going to trust you. I’ll rest in the knowledge that ***it’s not my job to get me through this.*** This is your life, God, so I’m not going to let my chains (or my rebellious child or bad marriage or bankruptcy or medical diagnosis) terrify me. ***You’re going to provide and I’m going to praise.***  I’m going to thank you, Father, in advance for whatever it is you’re going to do with this.” That’s Paul’s secret, and that’s what will enable you to find joy even in the toughest situations.

Second, the consequences of joy. There are at least three positive outcomes that will result when we find joy even in suffering. *First, joy in suffering encourages others.* “And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.” Philippians 1:14. When other Christians saw how Paul didn’t wilt under suffering, but continued to trust God and found joy in it, they were encouraged and emboldened to continue to love and preach in Jesus’ name.

There is nothing like suffering well to encourage other people and show you are the “real thing.”

Tim Keller, a personal hero of mine in ministry, died last year after a long battle with pancreatic cancer. Lots of people were praying for him, not only that God would work a miracle in his life and heal him but also, by his own request, that he would finish his race on earth well.

And I think he did. A few days before he died, he went into hospice care, and he told his son to put out this message out on Twitter: “I’m thankful for all the people who’ve prayed for me over the years. I’m thankful for my family, that loves me. I’m thankful for the time God has given me, but I’m ready to see Jesus. I can’t wait to see Jesus. Send me home.” And then it was reported that just before he died, he was alone with his wife, to whom he had been married forty-eight years. She kissed him on his forehead and some of his last words were, “There is no downside to me leaving, not in the slightest.”

I’ve seen too many men in ministry not finish well. Pastors are uniquely capable of hurting their churches and their families all the way to the end. But when this man who taught me so many of us the gospel was, by God’s grace, able to endure the pain and suffering brought about by terminal pancreatic cancer with such evident joy, it greatly encouraged many people.

*Second, joy in suffering makes us generous.* And by this I don’t mean financially generous, though I’m sure that’s true as well. I mean that it makes us generous in the sense of being big-hearted, able to be happy for other people even if we don’t personally share in their joy.

Paul writes something odd in verses 15-17: “**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.”

Isn’t that an odd thing for Paul to write? “Some other Christians are hoping to make my prison term more painful by preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ?” What does that even mean?

Here’s my best explanation. Who, or more precisely what, are these proclaimers of Christ? They’re preachers, and they were jealous of Paul. They were jealous, probably, of his stature. They were jealous of how much success he’d had as a minister, starting churches all over the known world. They were jealous of how other Christians listened to Paul, not them. So, they preached the gospel not because they loved the Lord, not out of concern for their fellow man, but because they wanted to build their following, grow their cliques, and put Paul in his place.

And if you think it’s just too far-fetched that preachers would behave in such a petty way, then you haven’t been around many preachers. Pastors are sinners too, and it’s incredibly easy to be jealous of another man’s ministry. It’s easy to go to a big conference with thousands of people in the room and look at the man onstage preaching and think, “I could do better than him!”

But no offense … I don’t think I’m that different from you. Maybe you are fiercely loyal to Grace Bible Church, and so it galls you when one of your friends decides to join one of the other faithful churches in town instead of ours. But even if you’re not, you know this spirit of envy and rivalry Paul writes about. You know what it’s like when someone else in your field gets an award that you feel you deserved. You know what it’s like when someone else’s kid gets a recognition you’re sure your child truly earned.

But when it happens to Paul he says, “Who cares? If they think they’re causing trouble for me by preaching the gospel and gaining more citizens for God’s kingdom, then let them cause all the trouble they can.” Or, as Paul writes 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.

*Finally, joy in suffering allows us to see God work.* Again, in verse 12, Paul says, “I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.” In other words, Paul is saying he has this wonderful opportunity for ministry, because he now has a captive audience for evangelism. Every day some member of the imperial guard, who otherwise would not hear nor would he care about the gospel, is chained to the most persuasive evangelist that has ever lived in the history of the world, and one by one by one, they’re getting converted.

But Paul says, “Do you know what? I would never have planned this. God had to put me here because obviously I would have never come, but I am so thankful he did because now I get to see him work in ways I could never have dreamed before.”

When you suffer and you have no joy, you’re so focused on your pain that you can’t imagine the possibility of God working through it. But when, like Paul, you know the secret of joy, that your life is not your own but you’re bought with a price and now it’s all up to God, then you have eyes to see God work in ways that previously you wouldn’t have believed.

Joni Eareckson Tada is a Christian speaker and writer. Her books and talks have helped thousands of people. She has also been a quadriplegic since she dove into shallow water in Chesapeake Bay on July 30, 1967, and broke her neck. Next month will be fifty-seven years of paralysis. I can’t imagine a month chained to another man. I certainly can’t imagine almost six decades in a wheelchair.

But in one of her books, she writes, “I sure hope I can bring this wheelchair to heaven. Now, I know that’s not theologically correct. But I hope to bring it and put it in a little corner of heaven, and then in my new, perfect, glorified body, standing on grateful, glorified legs, I’ll stand next to my Savior, holding his nail-pierced hands. I’ll say, ‘Thank you, Jesus,’ and he will know that I mean it, because he knows me. He’ll recognize me from the fellowship we’re now sharing in his sufferings.

“And I will say, ‘Jesus, do you see that wheelchair? You were right when you said that in this world we would have trouble, because that thing was a lot of trouble. But the weaker I was in that thing, the harder I leaned on you. And the harder I leaned on you, the stronger I discovered you to be. It never would have happened had you not given me ***the bruising of the blessing of that wheelchair.’***

“Then the real ticker-tape parade of praise will begin. And all of earth will join the party. And at that point Christ will open up our eyes to the great fountain of joy in his heart for us beyond all that we ever experienced on earth. And when we’re able to stop laughing and crying, the Lord Jesus really will wipe away our tears. I find it so poignant that finally at the point when I do have the use of my arms to wipe away my own tears, I won’t have to, because God will.”

Joni would never have planned to be in a wheelchair. This wasn’t her scheme to tell others about Jesus. More than that, she wouldn’t have wished it on her worst enemy. But because of her joy in the gospel, Joni can see how God has used that wheelchair profoundly not only in her life, but also to open the eyes of so many people around the world to the wonders of God’s grace.

Friends, I want you to think about the tender places in your life, the hardest places that cause you the most pain. Do you have them in mind? I want to ask you to pray something with me in just a moment. I’m going to ask you to go to God through Jesus Christ and say, “Father, I trust you with these things. I trust you’re working even in these things that hurt so much I wouldn’t wish them on my worst enemies. But I need something from you, Father. I need the grace to see that this is Jesus’ life, not mine. I need the grace to believe that you’re working all these things out for my good. I need to believe I’m dead and I’m not responsible anymore except to receive love from you and love others in your name. And most of all I need your joy.”

Will you pray that prayer with me? I’m convinced God loves to answer such prayers, and he would change our lives and our church if we’d do it. AMEN? Let’s pray.