

Paul's Perspective on Suffering

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[0 : 00] from verse 12 through to verse 26. So we're in Philippians chapter 1, we're starting in verse 12 and we're reading through to verse 26.

And just as you're turning that up, just to reinforce what Connor was saying, we do have a busy week this week in the life of our churches and I do encourage you to come along to Summer Bible Week and just a little bit more detail, a Summer Bible Week in the mornings, it's in Middleton in a new venue.

It's now in the My Place community building, which is, if you know Middleton, it's right in the middle of town where the big oval roundabout is, opposite the Super Value entrance. And as you come, if you use the public car park, which is just parallel with the oval, it's the tree-lined car park, you'll see it. And if you park there and come over for 10 o'clock, it'll be lovely to see you there. And then in the evening, it's in Court Baptist.

And then just to say again, just to remind you of this, revision event. Revision, making the church your lifetime career, no matter what your job is. So the purpose of that evening is not just for people who are thinking of going into full-time ministry, but how all of us minister throughout our lives in the context of the local church, as followers of Jesus, no matter what we do. So I encourage you to consider coming along to that, anyone from 16 and up, on Friday, at Joy's.

But let's just read Philippians chapter 1 and we'll read from verse 12. Paul writes, Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.

[1 : 55] As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

It's true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel.

And the former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. 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'll continue to rejoice, 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.

I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now, as always, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

[3 : 09] For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I'm to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me.

Yet, what shall I choose? I don't know. I'm torn between the two. I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far, but it's more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again, your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.

May God bless reading of his word this morning. What I want us to think about, as you keep your Bibles open, I don't have any visual aids or anything like that on the PowerPoint, so maybe that's maybe a bit more demanding this morning if you're used to them, but just keep looking in the scriptures and we'll be fine.

That will drive us through. We're going to just look through this passage bit by bit this morning. But what we want to think about is Paul's perspective on suffering. Alex and Connor have already referred to this reality of suffering in all life, in all human existence in this world, and we want to think

about Paul's perspective as a believer on this reality of suffering.

[4 : 38] The man who drove me around Ethiopia about 10 years ago, when I went over with SIM, we just did a couple of weeks of teaching there amongst the Sudanese, who were over the border and who were there in Ethiopia because of the war in Sudan, and we did a two-week talk there.

The guy who drove me around saw his dad taken away by the authorities when he was six. His dad was a pastor, and he described to me, actually through tears as he was driving, that he didn't see his father for two years from the ages of six to eight.

And it was simply because his father was a man who preached Christ. And that was an affront to the regime in Ethiopia at that time, and so he suffered.

I don't know if you heard in the news this week, but there are now proposed anti-terror laws in Russia, which we hear about a lot, especially in the UK and other parts, this anti-terror legislation. Well, Russia is introducing anti-terror laws, which will come into effect on the 20th of July, unless Putin can be persuaded otherwise. And part of his anti-terror legislation in Russia will be to prohibit any activity designed to recruit people into a religious group.

[6 : 15] That means that from the 20th of July, if you are sharing your faith as a Christian in Russia, unless it is in an official church building, you are breaking the law, and you will be subject to the punishment of the law.

It means that you cannot invite people to religious events. It means that you cannot hold meetings, as so many of the evangelical churches do, in people's homes anymore.

It is against the law. Evangelicals in Russia are preparing themselves for persecution again by the state.

So it does raise the question, as we can never assume that that won't happen in Ireland at some point as well, is it worth it to come to know Jesus personally, to begin to talk publicly about what you know to be true in your heart, and then not only to end up maybe unpopular amongst your peers, but maybe end up imprisoned, cut off from family, friends, and society, all because of a public faith in Jesus.

Surely this is going to break our faith, if it happens to little old us. Surely we are going to be crushed, and we will ask that repeated question perhaps, why did I become a Christian anyway?

[7 : 55] Maybe this morning as you come in here, you are carrying, even now, some personal weight of suffering that is connected to your faith, as well as suffering that is just connected to being human.

Well, Paul gives us a perspective on our suffering in this passage. It shows how a person who is alive in Christ, despite terrible consequences for confessing Jesus as Lord, can understand the suffering they may be under.

Indeed, what we find in this letter is that Paul expresses consistently joy, even as a man who is sitting in chains because of his faith.

And so Philippians gives us reasons why Paul and why we can even be joyful as we face, like Paul did in this letter, also, sorrow upon sorrow, he writes.

Because he was struggling as a prisoner, and yet he was full of joy. How could that be? How can he be like that as he suffers? Paul is in prison.

[9 : 22] It's around AD 61. And the reason for the letter very possibly rests on the shoulders of the messenger from the Philippian church who brings this letter back to the Philippian church.

That is Epaphroditus, the elder, who comes and brings a gift to Paul as the Philippians hear that he is in prison for the gospel. So it's very possibly motivated as a letter of thanks, a thank you letter to the Philippian church.

But as a pastor, Paul can't help but shepherd the people that he's writing to. And so from prison, he encourages the church to continue in Christian unity and love following the example of Christ's humility.

we get that very famous passage in verses 5 to 11 which is possibly the quote of an ancient hymn in chapter 2. But what we see in Philippians is that Paul knew these people very well that he writes to.

And so as well as visiting this church which is right on the top of the Aegean Sea between Turkey and Greece right at the top on the coast, this is where Philippi is.

[10 : 37] We read about it actually in the beginning of Acts 16 or throughout Acts 16 we get an account by Luke of how Paul was involved in the planting of that church and how the Lord

established the church there.

But what we see is throughout this letter is this key theme of joy. The word is found 16 times throughout the letter. There's other words as well like fellowship and partnership and gospel that are repeated all the way.

But in all of this joy we have no doubt that even as this letter is being penned Paul is suffering. He's languishing in prison. He was attacked by those who opposed his message about Jesus whilst he was in prison. We know in other parts of the New Testament that he was beaten he was imprisoned he was shipwrecked throughout his ministry all because of this grand motivation of his to communicate the gospel of the Lord Jesus.

And yet we read of a man who had the capacity to look beyond this very real suffering in his life. His focus did not rest on the pain that comes from being a Christian and a witness to the gospel.

[12:00] He was looking beyond it. He was looking beyond his difficult circumstances. And so what does Paul tell us about his understanding of his very real suffering?

Let's just go through the text. First of all verses 12 to 14. Remember the heading for this sermon this morning is Paul's perspective on suffering. And the first thing we see is he explains to the Philippians in verses 12 to 14 that his suffering was firstly advancing the gospel.

Paul could see that his difficult circumstances meant that Jesus was being discussed and gossiped about when if Paul hadn't been in prison that wouldn't have happened.

Look at verse 12. I want you to know brothers that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. You see the good news to all people that everyone needs to hear the truth concerning people and the truth concerning God as revealed through his son Paul was passionate about that good news.

So much so that it relieved his pain as he remained locked up to know that the gospel was being advanced even through his circumstance that he was in.

[13:36] And wherever he was we don't know exactly he was either on the coast in Caesarea Philippi or he may have been at Rome and we're not sure or even Ephesus in prison.

But what we know is that he is delighted to know that the local Roman guard around that prison and everyone around it knew that Paul was in prison in front of them there because of what he said about Jesus.

Jesus was being proclaimed as alive and glorified by Paul. The one that Jerusalem wanted dead was alive and would save people from their sins right in that circumstance where Paul was imprisoned.

And Paul found that a source of joy in his suffering that some more people had the opportunity to hear the good news of Jesus Christ.

That's massive isn't it? As I contemplated this again recently this week there's a whole revolution going on in Paul's psyche as it must in all of our psyches as Christians.

[14:57] He's not saying what about me? There's a selflessness here in Paul just in verses 12 to 14 there's a kindness for people there's a humility where Paul is no longer at the center of Paul Christ is.

The good news is. The gospel is. Paul no longer worships himself. He worships the living Jesus. And that's why he can say in verse 12 guess what guys? what's happened to me? It's advancing the gospel. Isn't that amazing?

Look at verse 14. Because of my chains most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and more fearlessly. You see Paul's present pain was also doing something else.

Not only was it advancing the gospel but it was also how it was happening was it was opening up the message of the gospel in this very specific way.

[16:13] In this bad situation Paul was encouraging those younger in the faith to speak up not by him telling them but by them hearing of his situation.

His example was an inspiration to those who partnered with him in the gospel. There was a fearlessness to witness to the living Christ.

And we can become more confident in the gospel fearless dare I say especially as we're inspired by those who have gone before us.

And how can we be inspired by those who have gone before us? Well we read about the apostles, we read about Paul as we get into the word, as we get into the example of Paul's life.

That can be an inspiration for us to be fearless Christians today. But also as we look around us in the church and we hear accounts of people witnessing to Christ. Maybe even at cost, great cost, within a family that is opposed to the gospel and yet there is one light, there is one Christian there in that family.

[17 : 31] It can be an encouragement to us, can't it? And in our day and our age, we need Christians to inspire us to continue on in our witness.

Verse 14, it reminds us, doesn't it, that we need good examples of evangelists, people who are willing to speak up for Christ.

And our fearlessness for Christ can be encouraged through these examples of others and that's why we need Christian biographies to read as well.

Are you going on holiday? Have you been on holiday yet? Just seek out, bring a Christian biography, an account of somebody who at the cost of everything went and served Christ, maybe cross-cultural, read something like that because it can inspire us to be fearless as we come back home again and serve in our local churches.

I don't know if you've watched Show Me Age now, Spartacus, that film from the early 60s by Kirk Douglas, and you know the line, don't you, when the centurion catches all of the men in chains and wants to know which one is Spartacus.

[18 : 52] And one stands up and says, well, I'm Spartacus, and then somebody else says, well, I'm Spartacus, and before you know it, they're all saying, I'm Spartacus. It's that powerful moment in the film where everybody is confident enough to identify with the one the Romans actually want to imprison.

And this is what's happening, this is the dynamic of what's happening as Paul languishes in prison. we know that he was suffering.

We see that in other parts of the letter. He refers to this fear of sorrow upon sorrow if the elder who came from Philippi, Epaphroditus, had died because he'd taken very ill when he visited Paul.

And at times we know that Paul felt alone as this pioneer missionary of the gospel of God to the world. But we see that in this prison cell he is joyful because others are inspired to speak out with Paul's message courageously no matter what the cost.

You see the gospel was propagating itself through the Holy Spirit as Paul expressed this joy of knowing the gospel was advancing through him being there and through others being inspired to speak up for Christ because they knew he was there.

[20 : 25] Maybe just turn quickly to Romans 8 to get the real rich perspective of where Paul's coming from in all of this.

Romans 8 just verses 17 and 18. Here's what can drive us to have the same perspective as Paul in our suffering.

Or maybe just verse 18 of Romans 8. Paul just says as he thinks about the future glory to come that is reserved for him as a Christian.

He says I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. That's Paul's perspective and it's what keeps him faithful to his gospel proclamation even as it results in him being in chains.

Can we have that perspective? Considering our present sufferings even if they're connected to our witness as Christians as not worth comparing to what is reserved for us as Christians.

[21 : 36] So we see that Paul's perspective on suffering means that he understands that the gospel is advanced in verses 12 to 14.

What about verses 15 to 18? We also see something interesting that even Paul's own assassination of character advances the gospel.

In verses 15 to 18 we read that there's a lot of argy-bargy going on as Paul is in prison as well. You see Paul was also aware of those opposed to him as a leader or just as Paul.

And he describes these people as those who were publicly proclaiming Jesus but maybe for the wrong reasons. Some of them he refers to preaching the gospel maybe or proclaiming the gospel in some way out of envy and rivalry with Paul.

There was some bad blood. There was some opposition. There were those who were competing with Paul and seeking to undermine his ministry.

[22 : 43] They were maybe even in the church proclaiming Jesus for the wrong reasons out of a selfish ambition with insincere hearts thinking that they would make more trouble for Paul whilst he

was in prison even.

And of course can you imagine how that would feel when you're in that powerless place in a cell. That's when those things can really get to you and you really do suffer psychologically perhaps as you feel let down and abused by those outside the cell.

There's no doubt that Paul must have been deeply hurt and there's no doubt we can see that sin was prevalent even in the church as Paul was languishing in prison.

And also there would have been those who were belittling the gospel that Paul was in prison for.

There were the Judaizers Paul's constant thorn in his side who kept saying and he keeps dealing with in his letters there were this group who kept saying that yes it's great to be a Christian but you need to add all of our Old Testament traditions as well really to believe in the gospel.

And they kept saying this to the Greeks who were coming from a pagan background coming into the church and they were saying oh it's great that you know Jesus but have you been circumcised? Have you gone through this?

[24 : 05] Are you making sure that you're ceremonially clean? They were a real pain in the neck to Paul and his ministry because their practice and their teaching was undermining the gospel of Christ.

And they were jumping up as well at this time. Paul writes about them in chapter 3 of the letter.

They were taking the opportunity to say well you see this proves that what Paul says is wrong.

They were preaching this Jewish tradition was needed for a person to be saved. But in verse 18 here is Paul's conclusion to all of the argy-bargy.

To all of the trouble that's connected as well to him being in prison. What does he say? He has come to a position in his mind hasn't he? In verse 18 despite all the sinful motives and the fallen rhetoric of people he's saying that Christ is being preached.

Christ is being put on the map. Christ is being referred to. And so even as he is being hurt, even as he is being publicly slighted and receiving this character assassination as a person, Paul is saying yeah, it's okay.

[25 : 28] Because Christ is being referred to. That means even as the gospel is being explained by those who reject it. Well you see this is what Paul believes back in prison and they may have been explaining.

Paul is saying it doesn't matter. Christ is being preached. preached. The Spirit of God can only have helped Paul to have this joyful perspective whilst in prison.

Even though there were those attacking him as they preached Christ or as they referred to Christ.

And Paul's perspective on his pain is to look beyond the immediate experience of that pain in the present, in his circumstance, the way people were hurting him.

And he looks beyond it again. He keeps looking at the horizon of glory. He is not dwelling in the present suffering. He is looking beyond it.

He could see that the kingdom of Christ was being advanced no matter what and that was the source of his joy. And so we must acknowledge that in all circumstances for us this morning, if we are Christians, all our circumstances can be good if we believe in the sovereign God of the Bible.

[27 : 02] Paul's circumstance as a follower of Christ was God's sovereign means of saving Paul from death and from hell. And so Paul rejoiced because his imprisonment meant that the gospel was being gossiped around.

And now we read in verses 15 to 18 that Paul was joyful because he knew that his present suffering was actually part of this process of being Christ's disciples.

His suffering were reinforcing his new identity in Jesus. They proved that he was actually like Jesus, being led to future glory.

And he knew it. He knew that his pain was somehow empathizing to some degree with the pain that Christ went through when he, the creator of the heavens and the earth, suffered pain for him.

Look at verse 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.

[28 : 19] So we've got to reflect on this now, won't we, for a sec, before we move on? What are you doing with your circumstances?

What are you doing in your circumstance that you've carried in here this morning? The one that's with you all the time. The new one that has arrived and you don't want.

Are you trying to run away from it? Do you perceive it as some kind of punishment from God? Do you see it as a reason to sulk with God and sulk with God's people and maybe disobey him? Back in Romans 8, Paul says, doesn't he, in verse 28, that in all things God is working out his purposes for those who love him.

Paul's perspective on suffering is that God is leading him leading him to glory through his suffering and therefore he's looking beyond it and so should we.

[29 : 35] Keeping perspective. Lastly, verses 19 to 26, we see that even the prospect of death secures us in the gospel and this is what Paul saw as he has this perspective on suffering suffering in his life.

Look at verse 20. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body whether by life or by death.

Do you see how positive Paul is? Paul knew that his pain was as a result of his witness to Christ and to the good news and so he knew that Jesus was being exalted through the suffering in his life and so then there is this overconfident if you like eager expectation and future hope in his life as a servant of Jesus.

He was confident that he would be able to stand before Jesus in the future as one who fought for the cause of Christ in his life. he was looking forward to the reward from Jesus as he hid in Christ in the present and represented him.

He was convinced and he was delighted in Jesus his savior and he was privileged even to know that he was Jesus was being exalted in his body as a prisoner of the Lord Jesus.

[31 : 15] us. But the truth is as Paul was probably wrestling with this in his cell pain and suffering and dislike and unpopularity and disdain as a Christian we don't want it do we?

We avoid putting ourselves into that situation. We maybe fear the pain we can receive because of what we think it means to us.

But here's the true perspective. For Paul he is rejoicing knowing that that pain of the present experienced because of his public faith in Jesus is leading him to future glory.

And so he's looking forward to that. He knew his time in prison wasn't embarrassing. He knew that his suffering wasn't pointless. He knew that it was leading him to Christ.

Today, do we, the Lord's people, share Paul's clear conviction on suffering?

[32 : 37] does our suffering actually increase our focus and worship on the Lord? Or are we just bad tempered Christians?

We need him. And we need Paul's perspective or we cannot be active, vital believers in our churches.

others. Much of our lives can be about focusing on what's most comfortable in the West. Isn't that true? What's the easiest, most lucrative way for me to proceed through life while I'm still here?

And of course, we don't want to be irresponsible. We need wisdom, especially if we're bringing up children. We need to know how we're to progress and plan through life. But for Paul the Apostle, he has this grand perspective that we all should own this morning.

He realised that the circumstance of his life, even if it meant chains, was part of this investment for the future reality of seeing Jesus.

[33 : 51] His journeys from town to town, confronting people with the truth in the synagogues of the day, were confirming the power of the gospel in his own life. His future was being secured as he lived out the gospel even in a prison cell.

He was looking beyond the present. And it helped him to put his present suffering in perspective. in the evangelical world, the common assumption and the common false doctrine is that if anything bad is happening to us, we must pray it away, and if it doesn't go away, our faith obviously isn't strong enough.

How do we square that common presented teaching in churches with what Paul says here?

Because what Paul is saying is the polar opposite to the health, wealth, prosperity gospel that is so common on our TVs and in our churches even in Cork.

we can be lifted like Paul's word, like Paul's life through the reality of future glory in Christ in our present sufferings.

As Christ's subject, Paul was certain that his suffering was not in vain. it was God's route for Paul to enter glory.

[35 : 34] And because of that perspective, Paul had on his present pain, I want us to see that something's happening. Look at verse 21. Because Paul didn't just, he's not focusing on the present.

Oh, life's tough. How are you getting on? Oh, I'm really struggling with this. He wasn't focusing completely on the present suffering. He was focusing on the future, verse 21.

For to me, you know, look, this is the sum up of my life, says Paul. For me, well, you know, it's either to live, live is Christ, and whatever that means, including prison, and to die is gravy.

To die is gain. here's the great summarizing verse of the suffering Christian. Here's the glorious context in which Paul places his sufferings in prison.

And so for us, friends, it reminds us that we are in a victorious life. Not because of us, but because our life is in Christ.

[36 : 47] Christ. And that's what we can say this morning if we're in Christ this morning. If we're identifying with his death as our death, his resurrection as our resurrection, as his defeat over our sins, as something we understand and believe in, if we understand that, his life is our life.

And so as you go on into verses 22 to 36, we read this wonderful bubbling debate that Paul has in the cell between toying in his own mind with what's best, I'm not sure, all hinging on verse 21.

To paraphrase, he's going, well look, on the one hand, if I stay alive, that means serving Jesus, and that means being fruitful for God, which is going to be rewarded. Or on the other hand, well maybe if I die tomorrow, if they execute me, I'm immediately caught up into the presence of the Lord Jesus, which is going to be wonderful.

Which one will I choose? I don't really know. I tell you what, I'd like to stay alive, because it means I can be a blessing to you, says Paul.

And he shares this loving decision as a pastor to this church that he saw formed. He says, look I want to stay on earth, I want to minister to you, I want to see you encouraged through my ministry to you, so that your faith progresses in joy.

[38 : 19] And when we see each other in the flesh again, I can witness your joy. But either way, I'm a winner. Do you see, friends, how even in the worst circumstances that you may have brought in here this morning, we are in a victorious position as Christ's eternal friends.

Even in the pit of despair, even in the depth of sickness, when we are rejected because of our faith, even as we face death.

We are in Christ, and Christ is in us, meeting us on either side of eternity. He's meeting us now in the present of his children. He meets us when we pass into his presence in eternity.

we are with him. And so it's all about him. And it's all about where we have placed him in our lives.

And so this morning, if you have resolved to be a worshipper of the Lord Jesus Christ, if we resolve to make him our focus rather than ourselves, he gives us this glorious perspective in our present pain.

[39 : 42] And through this passage that Paul was inspired to write as he sat in chains, he's actually living out this teaching. He's not just preaching it from a pulpit.

And it's one of his more joyful letters. so what does this give us in the present, in the face of whatever we face in this life?

Friends, I want to encourage you this morning as we go that you can go out of here joyful. And that's a huge thing to say because I don't know about you, but I know for me I can very easily be joyless because of present circumstances and whatever else.

But actually we ought to leave here joyful if we worship the Lord Jesus Christ. We ought to leave here full of hope and even dignity as a child of the living God.

We can suffer with joy, with hope and with dignity and that in itself is pointing others to Jesus for those who know maybe the bad stuff that's going on in our lives.

[40 : 57] things. But like Paul in the face of our hardships we can be secure in our sufferings safe in the knowledge that the Lord who allows us to experience hardships as well as pleasure he is using it all to guide us home to him.

So may we all share in Paul's perspective on suffering whether it's suffering for our witness to him or even because it's just suffering because we're human beings.

May it all contribute to our progressing faith in him that leads us to glory. Amen.

Amen. Can I pray and then hand over? Yeah. Let's pray. To live is Christ.

To die is gain. Heavenly Father we thank you for your word to us this morning. We pray that it would reach the very depth of our souls the very depth of our hearts and minds.

[42 : 18] Lord we come here with real problems and with real causes for concern and varying degrees of suffering. But we pray Lord that you would help us to gain a right perspective on those things so that you may continue that great work in us as we trust in you despite it all.

help us to be confident Christians in these days. Help us to continue witnessing to you no matter what the cost.

And bless us Lord as your people in this part of the world. Bless Tim Week and Summer Bible Week and Lord we just pray that you would continue to protect us and grow us as a family of churches in this area.

Thank you for all that you're doing and thank you that you are speaking to us as individuals even now through your word. In Jesus name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thanks very much Andy.

[43 : 39] I don't know about you but it was a great encouragement for me to hear about Paul even through his suffering. The gospel was advanced.

Even because he was in prison people were as Andy put it gossiping about Jesus. It was a great encouragement for me anyway to take from today that no matter what you're going through God will ensure that his gospel is being proclaimed.

So we're going to finish with our final song it's Knowing You. So thanks Mary. This song is actually based on a passage in Philippines Philippians chapter three.

So if you flick to the last verse of the of the song.