

# Philippians 1:12-18

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, just a brief word of prayer before I begin. Our Heavenly Father, we have heard this phrase, crown Him now unrivaled King. And yet we know that as we have come this morning, your authority, even in our own lives, has been rivaled both through our circumstances, which have discouraged many from living under your rule, our own sin, which continues to raise its ugly head in our own lives, in our own willful walking from you, and even the circumstances of others which have so discouraged us that we have wondered whether you reign, rule, and are worthy of our continued walk. And so now as we open your word very simply, we pray that through the authority of the Holy Spirit, as it has been read, so your voice would now be heard, and that our allegiance to you would be strengthened. So convict, encourage, support, lead to repentance, guide us in Christ's name. Amen.

Well, it's a fairly regular occurrence for me to walk down my alley here in Hyde Park, take a right turn on 57th Street, go the two blocks, cross the street, duck my head under the lintel, and enter into 57th Street Books. That is always a joyful place to be. And on regular occurrence, I'm there looking for a card. If you've looked at those spinning racks, you perhaps on occasion have had to go find a card for somebody concerning their personal circumstances. Cards seem to be coming to us in one of two umbrella-like terms. There are celebratory cards, and then there are cards in light of one's present sufferings. So if I'm looking for a birthday card, well, it will be there. If I want to wish somebody a happy bar mitzvah, it would be there. If you've gotten a new house and I were to congratulate you, I could find a card for that. A wedding, an anniversary, a number of cards spinning on the racks in front of me. That said, there are times when I walk down those steps in search of a card for someone in the midst of difficult circumstances. Cards for someone who's sick. There are sympathy cards for the loss of loved ones. Difficulties in life. Cards of celebration. Cards of suffering.

On which I write my handwritten note and put it in the mail. Well, we've begun the letter of Philippians, and it's worth asking, what kind of card is it? In one sense, it's even worth asking the question, what kind of card did they send him of which this is a response to it? Obviously, if one is going to read the letter, you'll understand that they put in the mail to Paul a sympathy card. They had heard that he was imprisoned. We saw that phrase even there last week in verse 7. They had shared with him in his imprisonment. They had heard that he was, in a sense, at the most advantageous of ways, perhaps, under house arrest. He was laid up, locked up, freedom restricted. This one who had planted that congregation.

Chapter 3, we're going to see, or chapter 2 in a bit, verse 20-some and following, you're going to see that they'd actually sent Epaphroditus to them, a member of their congregation, perhaps even a staff member or their pastor. So concerned were they for Paul. And in chapter 4, we'll be able to read later, that they had actually enclosed in their card to him a gift, a check from the deacon offering to meet his needs. And so, such was their concern concerning his imprisonment that they said, look, somebody's got to get down to 57th Street Books. On behalf of the congregation, we've got to find a sympathy card, ask the treasurer to write a check. He's got some costs and some other brothers that are in need. And why don't we actually hand deliver it rather than put it in the mail? And so they made their way to Paul, and they arrived, and they delivered all of these things to him. And now, Paul writes back. Over the next few weeks, you're going to see the kind of card he put in the mail to them. Interestingly, he addresses in our opening verse, verse 12, his present circumstances. In his letter to them, he wants to begin or open with what's going on. Now, you and I might have this kind of phrase differently in our language, but for him, it's, I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me. You might say, hello, how are you? You might say, hi, what's up?

You might say, what's going on? Or what's going down? But Paul is saying here, let me tell you what happened to me. My present circumstances. Namely, the circumstances of imprisonment. Did you notice in the reading of the text, that phrase is foregrounded three times, and in each instance, concerning a complete thought that he had in mind. You'll see it mentioned there in verse 13.

[ 6 : 26 ] My imprisonment. You'll see it mentioned in verse 14. My imprisonment. You'll see it mentioned again at the end of verse 17. My imprisonment. What has happened to me? Namely, my imprisonment.

I'm writing to you to tell you what's happened to me concerning my imprisonment. Literally, my chains.

You've seen that in chapter 1, verse 7. It's used in the context of a flurry of legal terms. Look back to last week's text. In the defense and confirmation of the gospel. Evidently, by the time Paul put his card in the mail, he had already stood before the judge, the jury, the Roman way of law, and made his apology. He had entered his plea, and the confirmation of it, he had given the support or the argument for his defense.

And now, as he writes, he's awaiting the judgment of the jury or of the Roman rule. Will he be acquitted and set free, or will he be condemned, and in this case, even put to death? Now, we know that because in the book of Acts, this is continually coming up. When Paul was arrested and on his way to Rome, he hears these responses to other people like, I'm not sure why he's arrested. I'm not sure he did anything worthy of imprisonment chains or of death. These two things, imprisonment and the degree of which the judgment could come down, death. So Paul is here hanging in the balance, life on the line, waiting to be acquitted or condemned. Evidently, I don't think he was a flight risk. I'm not sure he had the anklet, the ankle brace, the ankle thing on to let you know where he was, but he was under arrest, but he was a willing prisoner. Every indication of Paul was that even if the doors of his jail cell had been opened, he would have sat there and waited. And so he was probably in house confinement with a bit of freedom, with the ability to take visitors, not behind the glass, but face to face. And even to get a letter out on occasion to those to whom he wanted to write.

His present difficulties, as you now see, far from being something for the church to lament over, in his mind are being used by God to promote the progress of the gospel. They send him a sympathy card and he says, this doesn't seem to make sense to me. Let me alter your perspective on my situation.

[ 9 : 45 ] Verse 12, I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel or that the gospel is now making progress. You're concerned that somehow I'm in a bad way.

Well, let me spin the rack, pull the card. I'm good. And put it in the mail. In three ways. Look at his argument. First of all, verse 13, so that has it become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. The imperial guard. In the original language, you had an individual in Rome who would have been a praetor or a civil or judicial magistrate who had executive and even military power. And the place in which that individual lived throughout the kingdom in strategic cities was called the praetorium. And what the phrase is here is that the news of my imprisonment, the news really of Christ, is now traveling through this judicial executive branch of Rome and that those who are charged with me are hearing about the gospel precisely because I'm here.

So you are wondering, how's Paul doing? We've got to get word to the man. With the actual fact, Paul would like to say, pity the poor boy who's got charge over me because I'm just talking about Jesus all day long. This praetorium, Pilate was said to have had one in Jerusalem. We know there was one in Caesarea. Archaeologists have uncovered this throughout the Roman Empire. All of these buildings were built on the same model and it was the center of life in that particular region for Rome. Paul is in one of those places.

The question, of course, has been raised from where is Paul writing? I think the evidence is increasingly coming to a position that he's writing this letter from Rome.

If you look at chapter 4, verse 22, he actually sends greetings, especially from those of Caesar's household. It's possible that he's not in Caesarea or Ephesus or anywhere else. He's actually in the mother load of all praetorium.

[ 12 : 37 ] He's in Nero's charge in Rome, which would then make this letter one amongst a cadre of letters that could rightly be described as some of the last words we get from the great apostle.

So here he is, perhaps around 62 A.D., shortly before death, writing to a church concerning his perspective on things at the close of his life. And what he wants the church to know is that even in this dark hour, the things that have happened to him have been used by God to advance the gospel.

In other words, he says, He says, About four decades before some of you were born.

And he was a college student at the time. And after coming to Christ, he ended up in the Philippines and did gospel work for about 20 years.

Recently, he had been back in the Philippines last year and was arrested. You know, there have been death threats on his life for literally years and years. And charges were trumped and he found himself incarcerated and really without a way forward or a way out.

[14:42] In August of 2014, though, a prayer letter that came to our house and to all those who have supported him now for about 30 years, he quotes Philippians 1.12, I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.

Dear friends, he writes, During my arrest, I was questioned by both the Philippines NBI and the U.S. Homeland Security agents. They both told me that my life, my reputation, my ministry, and further support for what I was doing was finished.

We thank God they were mistaken. Because of God's grace, I saw inmates and family members, guards and lawyers come to Christ.

Being falsely charged, arrested, and told your service for the Lord is over was very troubling. But experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit in my cell, where hopelessness and despair are the typical moods, illustrated the excitement and joy that comes when you trust God and not man.

Now, that's a true story with a personal acquaintance. Anecdotal evidence that what Paul writes of in the ancient world still takes place in our own.

[15:59] And it ought to begin to reshape the church's perspective on the circumstances of those in the world that are presently suffering for Christ.

This is not a letter or a passage that primarily indicates, you know, you need to have a different view on your own circumstances, although that point can be made.

It's primarily a portion of the letter to alter the church's understanding of the circumstances of others who are suffering for Christ. In other words, Paul would say to the church today, don't send a sympathy card.

Reorient your perspective to understand that the gospel is going forward with the arrest of every Christian on the globe today. That as that arrest takes place, as those sufferings take place, the proliferation of the message is in play.

And it will go to the highest and to the lowest. My dad is fond of saying, when asked, you know, was he a person of privilege or power, because he certainly had some of that being in the NBA for about 20 years, but his phrase was always the same.

[17:17] Oh, he said, I know some people in low places. Paul, at the height of the Roman Empire, perhaps under Nero, is actually speaking the gospel to men who are privileged but in low places.

And that's what he would have the church know. So I say to us this morning, as we increasingly hear of Christians around the globe being imprisoned for the gospel, understand that while it can have a detrimental effect on our psyche, we can begin to be defeatist, discouraged.

This letter would have us take our eyes off of that reality, difficult as it is. And it would have us read history through the lens by which all things in life are measured, namely the progress of the gospel. Now that's a mind-altering thing. Think of it. The effect of opposition is this proliferation of the gospel.

Now the circumstances of Paul had an effect not only on the outsiders in the imperial guard, but look at verse 13. His imprisonment had a mutually beneficial effect on the insiders, or those who were the brothers in Christ.

[18:53] He says, Let me tell you about what's happened to me.

Guys who have never heard the gospel are now hearing it because God has restrained me in suffering. But the word is now traveling back to those who have already embraced it, and my imprisonment is empowering them to go ahead and speak without fear, and in all boldness.

I mean, this is contrary to conventional understanding. When opposition begins to take place in your workplace or in your neighborhood, we begin to cower. However, as a Christian community, we go mute.

And what really happens is that we should do just the opposite. So, if you're a high school student, think of it. The opposition that the gospel faces by those in your midst and parents of them who do not want the Christian message to be proliferating down the hallways, Paul is saying, I got in trouble for all of that, but the brothers, rather than going mute, are beginning to go public without fear. Now, this is very instructive for us. Think of it in your office. The persecution in the West is going to come much more quickly to the person in the pew than it will to the pastor in the pulpit.

[ 20 : 28 ] Your life, your place of work and worship is going to be increasingly one in which you're going to be tempted to go mute. And Paul says, whoa, get a hold of this.

The sufferings of one embolden the witness of the many. So take that back to your office. If you're in graduate school, imagine the one who begins to follow Christ as a result of coming to Holy Trinity Church.

Well, I can't say anything about the gospel in my program. Man, if I actually go on the gospel, oh man, this whole thing gets shut down. Professional advancement stops. Well, professional advancement isn't the end of all things.

The advancement of the gospel is the end of all things. And if you professionally suffer for the advance of the gospel, well, that is your glory and your crown. Don't substitute that.

And so when people begin to speak negatively of the faith, negatively of Jesus, negatively of your ability to pursue Christ in your vocation, rather than zipping the lips and becoming mute, what should actually happen is, well, that's really interesting that you mention Jesus in such a term.

[ 21 : 44 ] I'm actually following Him. With boldness and without fear. Think about our neighbors. With the increased cost of following Christ, we generally succumb to increased quietness.

So when others would silence the faith, that is the precise moment to speak for Christ. The greatest hindrance, I think, to the advance of the gospel is not outspoken opposition, but our own words left unspoken.

Let me say it again. Not outspoken opposition, but our words gone unspoken. Imagine what would take place if everyone in this room responded just in this week to every word we heard that challenged the gospel in the coming six days with a rebutting word that actually asked people to reconsider the very gospel they're speaking against.

If that happened, this week, the gospel would go forth boldly and without fear in all kinds of spheres. Well, what a point Paul is making.

I think of the African American church as this wonderful tradition of call and response, you know. sing a line. Others join in the line. That's what's happening here.

[ 23 : 11 ] Paul is saying, I'm singing this line. And then other people are like, oh, I've got some confidence to come in and sing that too. So don't let Paul sing alone.

Get in the game, says Paul. He does not want the church in Philippi to go mute at such an hour as this. He has one more thing to say about his present circumstances.

His sense that, hey man, it's all good. Not only are outsiders hearing, not only are insiders speaking, but verses 15 to 17, he's not even concerned anymore about those who are his agitators. For even as they agitate, the gospel is making progress. It's making progress among the imperial guard. It's making progress among the brothers.

It's making progress among those who are just bothering Paul all the way through. Take a look at 15 to 17. Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill.

[ 24 : 18 ] The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition. Not sincerely, but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.

What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. There's every indication in these verses that Paul has now adopted a different perspective that he had early on in life.

Early on in life, if you crossed Paul on your motivation for what you were doing, he was in your face, whether it be Peter or anyone else. He wanted it done.

He wanted the message out and he wanted it done with pure motive. At this point, he basically says, you know what? I could care less about your motives. In other words, I think he, in one sense, is writing these words to let his agitators know that you can't bring him out on this fight anymore.

As a younger man, he would challenge, he would fight, but now, the message is going out even if the motives are misguided. Now, there's some question when you read this of wondering, who are

these people?

[ 25 : 36 ] I mean, who in the world would start preaching Christ out of a kind of skewed perspective? The clues to their identity are present in the words used to describe them.

They do it out of envy, rivalry, selfish ambition. Now, anytime those words appear in the New Testament, nearly every time, they are appearing in a list of words that are vices, not virtues, and they are attended by a warning that you shouldn't be this kind of person and that judgment will come on account of these things on that person.

So, it isn't merely that they're preaching Christ and all is good. There's something twisted inside their heart that they ought to be warned about and indeed be ready for judgment if they continue to go forward in that way.

Look at the word pretense, whether in pretense or in truth. Fascinating word. Six other occurrences in the New Testament, one of which is by Paul, another by Luke, his sidekick.

In every case, the context in meaning to pretext is connected to someone with ulterior motives. So, in 1 Thessalonians 2.5, in which the city of Philippi is even mentioned in the context, this word pretext is defined four ways.

[ 27 : 00 ] Paul, in contrast to being a man of pretext, was not out to please men, was not out to do something with powerful words, was not out to make money, and was not out for personal glory.

Those are the four. That's the interior world of those who are motivated by selfish ambition. They do what they do to look good in the presence of others.

Or, or in addition to, they do what they do, not out of purity, but they do what they do in order to look persuasive in the eyes of others.

Or, they do what they do with the ulterior motive of really gaining money from what they do. Or, they just want glory, honor.

Paul says, whether in pretext or in truth, Christ is proclaimed. interestingly, while the person in the pew might struggle to understand why someone would preach Christ from these motivations, I'm just going to say, you know, I don't do a lot of self-disclosure up here, just my personality by nature.

[ 28 : 25 ] But, I don't think there's a pastor that reads those verses and doesn't know exactly what's going on. every preacher in the pulpit is aware of the internal cancerous cells of our soul that have to be put to death if we're going to accomplish our calling.

And, the need to repent and come square on making sure that you're not preaching to please men, not preaching to just look powerful with words, not preaching for financial gain, not preaching for elevated status in the world.

All these things are on the pressure of the pulpit. And, Paul says, I know those things are out there. And, I know that people would try to injure me thinking that I'm just going to get all agitated if they're doing those things.

Well, he says, verse 18, what then? Or, so what? Or, who cares? Or, I'm done with it. Whatever. That's what he says there.

Whatever. Can't bother me. I could care less, says Paul, about their motivation any longer.

[ 29 : 51 ] And, by way of design, then, I think to the church in Philippi, and stop, stop worrying about these people yourself. Stop sitting around in church group meetings, unfolding all the motivations of, of the pastors that we know around the country, and why they do what they do.

I could care less anymore. I've just resigned to the fact that all that's out there, and if Christ is going out in some way, well, so be it.

I could care less, and there it is. There's the end game. And, in that, I rejoice. Let me, let me put it this way.

We're going to see it over the next few weeks. They sent him a sympathy card, and I got a feeling he sends them a get well card. You all worried about me?

You all need to get well. Because my circumstances are promoting the growth of the gospel around me.

[ 31 : 02 ] My circumstances are emboldening others who walk with me. My circumstances are actually promoting the gospel even from those who would agitate me.

In other words, the conclusion of Paul on his own circumstances is this. it doesn't matter what's happening to me. The word is getting out. The brothers are speaking out.

And my agitators now know I'm not coming out. Only this. I rejoice.

So Paul says, how's it going with me? Well, let me tell you how it's going with me. as you think of my imprisonment for Christ, take heart. For I am rejoicing in the proclamation of Christ.

Can it be said of us? It's a reorientation of mind concerning your own circumstances and the circumstances of others about whom you are concerned.

[ 32 : 21 ] Well, I think of coming here to the Lord's Supper. Hebrews. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Jesus, when he was arrested, did not lament his circumstances but those who were among the Roman guard began to hear the news of the kingdom for the first time.

Jesus, after his resurrection and ascension, actually emboldened the witness of those who knew as a result of this, I'm going to walk into the same sufferance he walked, yet walk they did.

Know this, that Jesus will one day put aside all his agitators, but until then, his name needs to be proclaimed.

Church of Hyde Park, Holy Trinity, know the hour in which you live and know how to interpret your present circumstances and those of the ones you love and are concerned for.

[ 34 : 10 ] Our Heavenly Father, we now turn our attention to the table where we remember the circumstances of our Lord Jesus Christ who suffered that we might have good news.

So as we take this meal, may it embolden many here after partaking with their lips, may their lips be loosed this week.

After partaking of this meal, may our mind be altered to see things from your perspective. it. After taking this meal, may we be unconcerned for all the competing motivations in life and simply rejoice.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.