

# The Gospel Is Not Locked Down

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[ 0 : 00 ] Philippians chapter 1 and verse 12. Philippians 1 and verse 12. I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.

What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. The gospel is not locked down. The gospel is not subject to coronavirus restrictions physical buildings may have been closed but churches have never been more open than they are today and the gospel has in living memory seldom reached more people than it is today.

Make no mistake, COVID-19 is no disaster for the gospel for it's never been, that is the gospel, is not and will never be locked down.

We may ourselves feel fearful and anxious and lonely but do not be gloomy concerning the welfare of the gospel. Don't be an Eeyore for whom the gospel sky is falling down because physical buildings have restrictions placed upon them.

I really thought we would all be on thinking of church as a physical building anyway. No, make no mistake. Gospel churches have never been more open than they are today and the gospel of Jesus Christ has in living memory seldom reached more people.

[ 1 : 29 ] I don't presume to know all of God's purposes in allowing this pandemic but one thing I do suspect is that this is a sifting time for us as the Christian church in Scotland because it's forcing us to go back to the fundamentals of the gospel.

For too long we have majored on the minors and we have minored on the majors but now we're forced back onto the major things. It's hard to play the hypocrite when there's no audience to watch and applaud.

It's hard to play at home in this world when the world's viruses kick us in the teeth. It's hard to play at mission when there's virtually nothing else we can do except pray and trust in the sovereignty of God.

It's always been said and it's always been right. Men's extremities are God's opportunities. The gospel is not locked down.

Therefore, lift up your drooping arms and strengthen your weak knees because our sovereign God reigns in love and glory and his gospel purposes for and through COVID, however hard it may be to say this, are for his glory and for our good.

[ 2 : 51 ] If ever we should cry out hallelujah, it is here and now for the gospel is not locked down. That truth came home to me forcefully last week through one Greek word in our text, the word malon.

It is vaguely translated in the book of Philippians as rather, far as in far better, and more as in much more. And I want to use three occurrences of this Greek word in the book of Philippians to demonstrate that though this, as individual Christians, though we may be subject to restrictions, the gospel is not locked down.

First of all, in chapter 1, verse 12, the gospel is advancing. Secondly, in chapter 1, verse 23, the gospel is focusing. And third, in chapter 2, verse 12, the gospel is working.

The gospel, first of all, is advancing, is advancing. You will know that the letters of Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians are sometimes called the prison epistles because Paul wrote them while he was a prisoner.

He was under house arrest in chains for Christ, as he says. It's not clear how restricted he was, but one thing's for sure, he was not free to come and go. He was not free to preach the synagogues, in the synagogues and in the marketplaces, as he had been previously.

[ 4 : 30 ] Perhaps the authorities thought that by literally locking him down, they'd be able to stop the Christian gospel from spreading. To all intents and purposes, common sense would tell you they

were right to think that way.

After all, if the messengers of the gospel are locked down so that they can't go into the highways and byways to call sinners to repentance, then surely the gospel is finished.

Many Christians in our own day have the same fears for the gospel through our lockdown. But because we as Christians are subject to restrictions, so is the gospel.

That the gospel will not and cannot prosper in a lockdown. The same fears which Western missionaries felt when they were expelled from China in the 1940s and 1950s.

Well, listen to what Paul says. I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

[ 5 : 45 ] In this verse, the Greek word *malon* is translated by the English word really. It's really served to advance the gospel. because the Roman soldiers sent to guard Paul heard the gospel of Jesus Christ from his mouth and they believed.

The centers of power which once had been closed to the gospel were now being opened up from the inside. God's superior wisdom in providentially confining Paul in prison had led to the gospel being preached in the very heart of power.

Yes, the messenger of the gospel may have been locked down but the gospel was free and it was advancing faster than ever into places it could never have previously gone.

In his sovereign grace and power God had used instruments designed to lock the gospel down and had transformed them into tools to help the gospel spread.

God used the expulsion of western missionaries from China under the cultural revolution to lay the groundwork for what is the greatest revival of Christianity in history.

[ 7 : 07 ] And today although we are subject to many restrictions the gospel is being heard by people in places what it has never been heard before. We have traditionally been nervous of the internet and of social media but God is using these instruments today to advance the good news of the gospel because in days where there is only bad news the church has the best news to proclaim and God has opened the door for us to do just that.

albeit the figures which were quoted at the beginning of lockdown for church attendance were vastly overinflated figures which suggested that within the first couple of weeks of lockdown nearly 50% of British people had attended online church albeit these were overinflated there has been an explosion of interest in the gospel by the curious the worried the bored and those seeking the truth. But as before we expected people to turn up at church that was our primary means of evangelism now we are becoming more obedient to the command of Christ to go to all the nations yes even into their front rooms as they turn on their computers.

Make no mistake listen carefully to me being worried for the future of the gospel throughout lockdown is rather like being worried for a pride of lions in a herd of wildebeest.

Being worried for the future of the gospel throughout lockdown is rather like being worried for a pride of lions in a herd of wildebeest. Rather than worry we rejoice and are confident in the sovereignty of God because though we are restricted the gospel has seldom reached more people with the saving love of Jesus.

[ 9 : 12 ] The gospel is advancing but secondly in verse 23 the gospel is focusing it's focusing. In these latter portions of Philippians 1 Paul is aware of his own mortality.

The whole prison experience together with all that he has suffered over the years has tired him out. He knows that his body can't take much more of the treatment to which it has been exposed.

He has come to realize just how clear like the vessel in which the treasure of the gospel is stored really is. And so in verse 23 he's exploring with the Philippians his prospect for the future and he writes I am hard pressed between the two.

My desire is to be my desire is to depart and be with Christ which is far better. The word translated far is the word *malon* that word translated really in verse 12.

And what Paul is saying is this his sufferings have had the effect of loosing his attachment to this world and binding his attachment to heaven.

[ 10 : 27 ] he's realizing as he would go on to say in Philippians 3 that his citizenship is in heaven and from there he eagerly awaits his savior Christ Jesus.

It's forced him to recognize that as Jesus said he may be in this world but he's not of this world. The impact physically emotionally mentally of all he's suffered has focused his attention on the future

state of glory with Jesus in heaven which is better by far than anything here.

You might think that Paul's near-death experiences have taught him to cling to this life here and now. They have taught him rather to value being with Jesus in heaven even more.

I wonder sometimes whether the biggest problem afflicting the western church today is that Christians are so attached to this world and all its pleasures.

We are so well off. So much more prosperous than our ancestors could ever have dreamed possible. We are richer than the rich man in the story of the rich man in Lazarus.

[ 11 : 49 ] Life's a breeze for most of us as we go to sleep on our feather beds. Because we are so attached to this world and our lifestyles, we are no longer in a position to say with Paul that being with Christ is better by far.

That it's better to be in heaven with Jesus because there we're going to experience an eternity of true joy and true peace. If you have in any way learned the lesson of this pandemic then you will now realize that all the pleasures this world can offer us, all our possessions, all our status, they mean nothing.

The virus itself can take them all away in the space of one cycle of a ventilator. And even if we don't catch the virus, the restrictions surrounding lockdown have removed many of the pleasures upon which we once relied.

And Paul says, knowing Christ and being with Christ is better by far. If you're learning the lessons of this pandemic, it will have loosed your attachment to this world and it will have bound your attachment to the next.

You'll realize that you're a stranger and a pilgrim here, that just as the old spiritual hymn says, this world is not my home, I'm just a passing through.

[ 13 : 29 ] Rather than clinging on to what we have, the COVID-19 pandemic has put us into the shoes of the early Christians for whom life was uncertain and faith in Jesus was crucial.

If anything, the pandemic doubles our resolve to pray for the Lord's return and with him to bring an end to all human pain and all human suffering for our Lord to return and take us to be with him so that where he is, we may be also.

Gospels focusing our minds. And then thirdly and perhaps most challengingly of all, chapter 2 and verse 12.

The gospel is working. The gospel is working. Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now not only in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

Philippians 2.12. The gospel is working. Many, if not most of us, have struggled spiritually throughout this lockdown and the restrictions of the pandemic.

[ 14 : 43 ] One reason for this is that as Christians and as human beings, we need one another's company and fellowship. We have not forsaken the assembling of ourselves together.

We have simply not been able to. We felt rather like the psalmist in Psalm 42. who says mournfully, these things I remember as I poured out my soul, how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God.

Psalmist misses the fellowship of God's people. So do we. many of us, if not most of us, have struggled.

And yet I would argue that something extremely productive has come about through that struggle.

In Philippians 2.12, the imprisoned apostle Paul, recognizing that he's not been able to visit the Philippian church, writes, therefore, my beloved, as you've always obeyed, so now not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

And in this verse, the Greek word malon is translated by much more, much more in my absence.

And what Paul's saying is that his absence from them, far from retarding their obedience, has led to them working out their own salvation with fear and trembling.

[ 16 : 14 ] His enforced absence has weaned them off dependence on him. Whereas before you had Jesus and Paul and the Philippians, now it's just Jesus and the Philippians.

Paul's no longer in the equation. They've had to learn to sink or swim. And in the same way throughout this pandemic, our ability to depend upon one another has been retarded.

We've had to sink or swim. We've learned that our ultimate accountability is not toward one another but to God and that a faith which is dependent upon other people is no faith at all.

We've had to learn that hard lesson that it's for us as individual believers and for no one else to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling.

We've had to learn to obey when no one is watching. As I said earlier, it's hard to play the hypocrite when no one's applauding from the sidelines. At its most basic level, it's gone back to being about Jesus and me.

[17:40] Yes, of course, we're longing to get back together so that we can build one another up. If you're at home and you could be here this evening, there are spaces, please come along if you can and enjoy the fellowship of God's people.

But I would hope that through the struggles of lockdown, we have learned perhaps for the first time that the gospel is at work in our lives as individual Christians.

It's been rightly said that we only realize Jesus is all we need when Jesus is all we have. We've had to learn to trust in Jesus for all he's worth, not for what other people tell us he's worth.

this shows that the gospel is working on us so that when we get back together and when we crowd into this building, our fellowship in Christ can be doubly as precious to us as it was before.

And that's why I say this is a sifting time for us. For there shall be many who call themselves Christians in the church, not just ours, but in every church, who because they did not have a living relationship with Christ in the first place, merely a vicarious relationship with him through others, have fallen, are falling, and will fall away.

[19:07] The gospel is not locked down. I'm not being Pollyanna because we can all too painfully see the problems that we're all experiencing. But I am suggesting that we employ the malons of Philippians to help us understand that though we may live under pandemic restrictions, the gospel knows no such restriction.

The gospel is advancing. Chords of our connection with this world are being loosened, and our direct relationship with Jesus is growing.

the gospel is not locked down, and spiritually speaking, neither are you and neither am I. This is an opportunity for all of us to get to know Christ in new and exciting ways.

May the Lord bless your gospel pilgrimage evangelize with him. Amen. Amen. Thank you.