

A shared ambition

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[0 : 00] The reading is Acts chapter 16 and it's verses 25 to 30. About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.

And the prisoners were listening to them. And suddenly there was a great earthquake so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's bonds were unfastened.

When the jailer awoke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped.

But Paul cried out in a loud voice, Do not harm yourself, for we are all here. And the jailer called for lights and rushed in. And trembling with fear, he fell down before Paul and Silas.

Then he brought them out and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household.

[1 : 05] And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds.

And he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

Our second reading this morning is from chapter 1 in Philippians, which is on page 1179 of the Church Bibles.

We will be reading chapter 1, verses 12 to 26. 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.

And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

[2 : 25] Some, indeed, preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. 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 rivalry, 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.

Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage, now, as always, Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.

For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me.

Yet, which I shall choose, I cannot tell. I am hard-pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.

[4 : 07] But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus because of my coming to you again.

So, thanks very much indeed for reading. Please do keep Philippians chapter 1 open. Let me pray for us as we look at Philippians chapter 1.

Psalm 19 The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart.

The commandment of the Lord is pure, over enlightening the eyes. Heavenly Father, we pray that you would indeed revive our souls, that you'd make us wise, that you'd cause our hearts to rejoice and enlighten our eyes.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Now the question I want us to ask this morning is this. Is it okay, is it right to be ambitious as a Christian?

[5 : 44] I wonder how you'd answer that question. If you don't like the word ambition, you can think of it in terms of perhaps what you long for or what really gives you a buzz or what it is you kind of organise and build and construct your life around.

After all, we're surrounded, aren't we, by ambitious people. people. At school, ambitious to do well academically or sport or music or drama or whatever it is.

And then in later life, we'll all know countless friends, neighbours, colleagues who are ambitious. Ambitious at work. Ambitious for their children.

Ambitious to enjoy a particular lifestyle. Ambitious to have the kind of carefully curated social media profile that advertises it and goes with it.

Is it okay to be ambitious? Because let's face it, many of us are ambitious. I guess it depends what you're ambitious for.

[6 : 54] What is the focus of your ambition? Philippians chapter 1, verses 12 to 26, these verses we're looking at this morning, they're all about ambition.

Our ambition individually, but also our ambition corporately as a church. We started this series in Philippians last week.

It was the first church to be planted on European soil. And in many ways, it's a church that's going really well. Just look back to chapter 1, verse 5. The apostle Paul rejoices in their partnership in the gospel, which is a sure sign, verse 6, that God has begun a good work in them.

But we need to read on to see where Paul is going with this, what his longings are for them as gospel partners. So flick on to chapter 1, verse 27, because this is where it's all heading.

Chapter 1, verse 27. Only, let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.

[8 : 15] It is a glorious description of a local church standing shoulder to shoulder for the gospel, single-minded, seeking to make the message of Jesus Christ known.

It's why I've called this sermon series In It Together. because that is the dynamic that lies at the heart of any local, any healthy local church.

But I guess it begs the question, how do you become a church like that? Or perhaps to the extent that we are in part a church like that, how do we become more of a church like that?

Well, it comes down to what we are ambitious for. And therefore, in chapter 1, verses 12 to 26, the apostle Paul shows us from his own life the kind of mindset, the kind of ambition that we need as individuals if, as a church, we are to strive together as partners in the gospel.

Well, if you're here this morning and you are more of a kind of interested observer, so to speak, looking on the Christian faith, we're delighted you're here. And I really hope that this morning you will see something of what the Christian life looks like in practice.

[9 : 36] That is, a life following the Lord Jesus day to day. And it is to be a person of one overriding ambition. So then, the first point on the screen as it comes up, one ambition that the gospel advances, verses 12 to 14.

Now, imagine for a moment that you're a Christian in Philippi. It's a Roman colony. It's proud of its Roman status and privilege. It's self-consciously Roman. A city where to follow Jesus is a very un-Roman thing to do because Christianity is not an official religion.

And then the media post comes in. The Apostle Paul, the Apostle Paul who brought the gospel in the first place to Philippi, he is now in prison in Rome.

What might you be thinking to yourself? Golly, if that can happen to Paul in Rome, might we in Philippi be next?

And far from standing shoulder to shoulder for the gospel in Philippi, you're beginning to have at least wobbles if not more. But then you read verse 12.

[10 : 55] I want you to know brothers or brothers and sisters that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. Now, if I was the Apostle Paul, I think I would want to make it pretty clear how tough life was in prison.

You know, the porridge is lumpy, the mattresses are equally lumpy, that kind of thing. Instead, he wants it to be known that the gospel has advanced because that is his ambition and therefore that is the lens, if you like, through which he views his circumstances.

The porridge and the mattress may be lumpy, but what matters is that the gospel has advanced. Well, how? Have a look at verse 13. because it's become clear throughout the whole imperial guard that Paul is in prison for Christ.

In other words, as the soldiers took it in turns to guard the Apostle Paul, as no doubt he explained to them why he was in prison, as no doubt he was able to explain further the message of Jesus to them.

Why? In Rome, the city where Caesar, above all, the emperor was worshipped as Lord. The imperial guard was discovering and finding out about Jesus who is Lord.

[12:15] It echoes the events of ten years earlier which we heard about in that first reading from Acts chapter 16 when the Apostle Paul first came to Philippi, when he was arrested and put in prison, when the jailer and his whole family were converted and became Christians.

Indeed, if you flick to the very end of Philippians, there's the most marvellous reference in chapter 4 verse 22, easy to miss. As the Apostle Paul writes in 4:22, all the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household, a church even in Caesar's household.

How the Philippians must have rejoiced to hear that. and yet there's more. Back to chapter 1 verse 14. And most of the brothers having become confident of the Lord by my imprisonment are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

It's very striking that Christians in Rome, rather than losing their nerve, have actually been emboldened to speak about Jesus without fear. Why? Why? Well, just notice the phrase having become confident in the Lord.

Notice what it doesn't say. It doesn't say having become confident in the Apostle Paul. Isn't he a wonderful evangelist? No. Having become confident in the Lord.

[13:46] In other words, confident that the Lord Jesus can use even the worst of circumstances, the imprisonment of Paul for the advance of the gospel.

In other words, they've completely changed the way they look at circumstances. Rather than thinking prison equals unpleasant equals bad, they do the maths or do the math rather differently. It goes prison advance of the gospel equals good. Some time ago, a friend of mine went into work one morning and he put a leaflet which he had written and had printed explaining the claims of Jesus on the desk of all his colleagues.

Well, by mid-morning he had been hauled in by the Human Resources Department and told to apologize to everyone who had found a leaflet on their desk in case they had been offended by it. It provided him with the most wonderful opportunity to talk to each of his colleagues individually about the Lord Jesus and all in the firm's time. What's more, of course, as other Christians heard about what had happened, it encouraged them to think of their own ambitions and to realize that actually what matters most in the workplace is the advance of the gospel.

[15:16] Secondly, one ambition that Christ is proclaimed. Now imagine, will you, the effects on some of the churches in Rome when the Apostle Paul arrived in the city.

No doubt there would have been some who would have been absolutely delighted and pleased to partner with him. But no doubt others would have had their noses put out of joint, their pride wounded because he's attracting the crowds, they envy his reputation, they feel threatened, or perhaps they even think that his boldness is attracting undue attention from the authorities. Or perhaps we can then understand something of verses 15 to 17. Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry but others from goodwill.

The latter do it out of love knowing that I'm put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. Now I think the surprising thing here is that Paul doesn't denounce them. Now of course if they were preaching a false gospel or a different gospel or a defective gospel then he would do just as he does with a church in Galatia where he tells them they've turned to a different gospel which is really no gospel at all.

[16:36] And yet this is very different isn't it? I mean just think about it the people he's talking about in verse 15 they're some of the same people who in verse 14 he describes as brothers.

What's more verse 14 they speak the word of God without fear. Verse 15 they preach Christ while in verse 18 he recognizes that through them the gospel of Christ is proclaimed.

He couldn't possibly have said such things about people who are preaching a different gospel or a watered down gospel. And yet isn't Paul's response so very surprising?

Verse 18 what then? Only that in every way whether in pretense or in truth Christ is proclaimed and in that I rejoice. Isn't that remarkable?

Paul isn't hurt by the snipings of other well I guess he probably is hurt by the snipings of other Christian leaders but it's not it's not in his response that he demonstrates that hurt.

[17:40] Far from it. And no doubt he'll have been grieved by the way which some have taken advantage of his imprisonment to benefit their own ministries and yet despite all of that he rejoices that Christ is preached and the gospel is proclaimed because that's his ambition.

In other words the most important thing for him is not his reputation he's not kind of building his own empire but simply the message of Jesus is proclaimed and as long as it's proclaimed faithfully even where the motives of those who do so are tainted why he rejoices because that is his great ambition.

Thirdly one ambition that Christ be honoured verses 18 to 26 Now just remember for a moment here is the Apostle Paul he is in prison he doesn't know what the outcome is going to be whether he'll be released or condemned and it's that ambiguity that lies behind verses 18 and 19 verse 18 end of yes and I will rejoice for I know that through your prayers and the help of the spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance deliverance that is either by being declared innocent in this life and released from prison or deliverance if he is executed ultimate deliverance on the final judgment day from God himself.

Notice will you Paul is not superhuman I think sometimes we can imagine can't we that Paul is superhuman he is not superhuman he needs the prayers of the Philippians and the help of the Holy Spirit but it's his mindset that's the key do you notice it verse 20 but with full courage now as always Christ will be honoured in my body whether by life or by death notice once again it's not his circumstances that matter because he has a greater ambition something more important honouring the Lord Jesus Christ in fact the word honouring here it's a bit weak I gather in the original the word actually means making very very large in other words in our world where the Lord Jesus is so often made so very very small and he simply uses a swear word or perhaps someone we remember at Christmas once in a while if we're lucky

Paul's ambition is that he be made very very large and it's a mindset that is unpacked further in verse 21 for me to live is Christ and to die is gain if you and I are living for personal ambition or indeed if we are living for anything other than following the Lord Jesus then of course to die will be the most enormous disaster because we will lose it all but if to live is to live for Christ and to serve him then to die is great gain because verse 23 it is to be better it is better to be with Christ and yet it's funny isn't it because Paul seems to be he seems to be torn between the two between what he describes in verse 23 as being better in other words to be with Christ and what in verse 24 he describes as being necessary that he remain alive for the sake of the church in Philippi and their progress and joy in the faith

[21:32] I was very struck last week by a discussion on the radio about the queen and it's about her pledge made on her 21st birthday in 1947 in Cape Town to the peoples of the British Empire that she would devote her whole life whether it be short or long to the service of her people and one of the comments in this discussion was this the queen lived by an ethic of give your life whereas we now live in a world of live your life very perceptive live your life it's the world we live in children are taught aren't they from the youngest age that you can basically be what you want to be live your life fulfill your ambitions well of course at the other end of the spectrum you have your bucket list you know and you want to kind of fulfill all of that stuff before you go whereas for the queen her ethic was give your life as it is so very clearly for the apostle Paul to give his life for the honour of the Lord

Jesus such that he is made very very large now of course we could read Paul's words here and kind of think well it just all sounds a bit kind of super spiritual and otherworldly but they're not of course he's simply persuaded of what is true if we're followers of Jesus you see have a look at verse 21 again I imagine many of us believe verse 21 to be true at some kind of level but if I can put it like this is it simply a box that you tick or is it something that you are genuinely persuaded of and shapes your ambitions and priorities now of course it may be that you're more of an interested observer here this morning in which case I'd love you to take verse 21 away and to ponder on it because it really is the message of Jesus in a nutshell the Lord

Jesus who died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins who rose again three days later never to die again if we put our trust in him we are given a new life we're born again as the Lord Jesus himself put it and to serve him rather than ourselves and then with the certainty of new life beyond the

grave as well what's Paul's ambition that the gospel advances that Christ is proclaimed that the Lord Jesus is honoured but of course they're not three different things are they they're just one thing in three different ways but it's one ambition so back to our question is it right to be ambitious of course it is it just depends what you are ambitious for and I hope we're beginning to see as well that the way in which we as individuals answer that question in other words what

I am ambitious for has enormous implications for us as a church because again remember where the apostle Paul is heading with this he longs chapter 1 verse 27 that the church in Philippi would be standing firm in one spirit with one mind striving aside for the faith of the gospel and not frightened in anything by your opponents and we can only do that together as a church if our individual ambitions are all pointing in that same direction can you see the link between our individual ambitions and our corporate ambitions as a church because it's the sum of our individual ambitions which shape our corporate ambitions a church where some people are ambitious for the gospel to advance but for others the focus of their ambitions lie elsewhere for their career to advance or to produce successful children or financial security or simply to have more me time and an easy life well a church like that is going to be like an orchestra where the different instruments are all playing different music in other words what you are ambitious for matters to all of us can I say that again what you are ambitious for what I am ambitious for matters to all of us every person in this room now notice what Paul isn't saying and I'm not saying it which is you need to be busier last week

I chatted to someone after the sermon who said something to the effect of I'd love to have more time for this gospel partnership thing I don't have that time at the moment but I'd love to have that time one day and I guess it's possible that others might have thought a similar thing I'm too busy but I wonder if you can see how actually that just gets the apostle Paul completely wrong because of course we do make time don't we for the things we're ambitious about this flyer came through my door our letterbox last week inviting me to sign up for a year long gardening course every Monday evenings in Hearnhill from 5 to 7 p.m.

[27 : 54] starting tomorrow the 19th of September now I quite enjoy gardening I like being creative I like being outdoors and if it's a year where there's some rain or enough rain that falls then the results are fairly pleasing but I got that flyer and I immediately thought do you know I just don't have time for that kind of thing and yet on reflection of course it's not that I don't have time for it it's that my ambitions lie elsewhere I'm not particularly ambitious to understand plant science or nutrition or soil improvements so please don't harden your heart to what the Holy Spirit is saying this morning just because you are a busy person do you know it doesn't take any time at all to change your ambitions thought about that it takes no time whatsoever to change your ambitions but of course once you have changed your ambitions it's going to turn the way you use your time completely on its head but to change your ambitions and that's what the

Holy Spirit is saying to us this morning takes no time whatsoever well I'm very conscious that for some of us this passage will be a challenge because other ambitions hold the trump card when it comes to deciding what is important in our life Gordon Fee in his excellent commentary on Philippians asks this question he said one wonders what the people of God might truly be like if we are once again people of this singular passion he goes on to say too often it's for me to live is Christ plus plus work leisure accumulating wealth relationships etc and if the truth be known all too often the plus factor has become our primary passion ambition he concludes Paul's ambition gives us both focus and perspective in a world gone mad yes for some this will be a challenge but I hope for others actually this passage will be a great encouragement for us because actually this is our ambition and this is how we see our circumstances we see our circumstances through the lens of advancing the gospel after all things are forever aren't they popping up in our lives saying I'm important give me some time hello I'm over here do this thing life is like that things are popping up all the time demanding our time and energy and ambitions and yet amidst all of that to keep our ambitions focused on proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ and honouring him is a wonderful thing to do and not only wonderful for us individually but wonderful for us as a local church because it means that corporately we can stand shoulder to shoulder for the gospel let me give us some time to reflect and pause and then I shall lead us in prayer I want you to know brothers that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel heavenly father we praise you for the Lord Jesus thank you for those who belong to him to live really is to live for him and to die really is gain we thank you heavenly father for the apostle Paul's single ambition to see the gospel

advanced and the lord Jesus proclaimed and honoured and we are sorry when our own ambitions lie elsewhere and we pray heavenly father for your mercy on us that our ambitions individually and therefore as a church would indeed be focused on this singular ambition that we might stand firm as a local church shoulder to shoulder making Jesus name and we ask it in his name amen