

Keeping the Focus

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[0 : 0 0] I'd like to wish all of you a Happy New Year. It's very good to have you with us today. We're looking at Philippians chapter 1. We're in the second part of a series in which we're going through this wonderful letter on joy.

And a very personal letter as well. And it'd be helpful if you turn to page 185 and just follow along starting at verse 12 as we look through.

It is a new year and a year that at the beginning of the year you often look back to things that have happened in the past in our own church. One of the difficult things that happened last year is that David Short had a mountain biking accident.

And I won't say anything more about it because he's not here yet. He's just coming back in a day or two. But what I will say is the result of that accident that we saw some very encouraging things.

I saw a great care and concern of this congregation for David. Your prayers for him, your expressions of concern, the food that you gave him and all the ways that you supported him was a marvelous thing for us to see and for me to see as well.

[1 : 1 3] And, you know, this is what happens here in this letter of Philippians as well. It is really a letter that is written because a congregation decided that they were very concerned for Paul.

That there were things going on in his life which was causing them great distress. And they were worried about him. And so they write knowing that he is in prison, probably in Rome.

And they know a bit about his past, the things that have happened. They've kept track of him. They know that he went to Jerusalem and that there he was almost killed by a mob and beat severely. That there was a plot to kill him by very influential leaders in Jerusalem as well.

That he was in prison for his own safety, supposedly, but was stuck in a very corrupt judicial system in jail for two years. And finally is taken as a prisoner by ship to Rome.

And that ship endured storms, was wrecked, was almost killed. The prisoners were there by the soldiers so they wouldn't escape. And he ends up here in Rome where he is waiting a very uncertain future, a decision by the emperor whether he will live or whether he will die.

[2 : 3 2] And so they are concerned and they send a message to Paul of that concern. But it's very interesting that Paul writes this letter.

And the theme is all about joy. And a question for us this morning is how could Paul have such joy in his harsh circumstances?

And certainly many of us here in this congregation today are experiencing harsh circumstances. You are experiencing times of darkness or uncertainty in the future.

And it is hard to know joy during those times. In those times of trouble, joy is often the farthest thing from our minds. So what's going on with Paul?

Is he a Pollyanna who's always looking on the bright side? Or is he constantly in a state of denial? Well, I went to a large church in Toronto for a couple of years when I was going to school there a few years ago.

[3 : 32] And at the church you could count on the service beginning with a very upbeat pastor saying, you all need to put smiles on your faces. And I want you to sing the opening hymn with big smiles.

And I'm sure he would have stopped the hymn if those smiles went off as well. Well, that's not what's happening with Paul here. He's not saying, I walk around with a smile constantly on my face.

He's very open in his letters about being anxious at times, about being angry, about the great pain of loneliness and being betrayed, the pain of physical deprivation.

Yet through it all, when you read his letters, he is an apostle that talks about joy. He is known as the apostle of the free spirit. So what's going on with Paul?

Well, we see in verse 12 through 26 what is going on. And that is very simply that the great passion in his life is succeeding.

[4 : 32] We tend to live for our passions. That's human nature. We live for the happiness of our children. We live sometimes for our sports teams. And long-suffering Canucks fans are experiencing great joy right now in this season, despite two recent losses.

There are those who live and die with the stock markets. There are those who live and die with their careers. There are many things that are passions in our lives that we live for.

Well, Paul's passion and the thing that controls his life is the proclaiming of the good news of Jesus. That's his passion. That's his passion. And it is a unique passion, very different from any other passion that humans can have, because it is a passion that never disappoints.

As good as your family might be, they will create anxiety at some point in your life. The Canucks, the markets, your career, at some point, all of these things will cause you great anguish.

But Paul teaches us in this passage that the gospel of Jesus is the source of joy that continues through all hardships and all dangers. In fact, it is a joy that he says continues right through death.

[5 : 50] And he uses his difficult circumstances to show the Philippians where that joy comes from, how it comes about. He does it by giving his testimony. And what he does is he talks about his past and his present and his future.

And in verse 12, he speaks first about his past. And he says this, I want you to know, in other words, he's saying, this is very important, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.

And if you look at the last seven chapters of Acts, and I invite you to do that this week, you will see that Paul has actually been able to do this through all the circumstances of his life.

He has talked about Jesus by preaching to a mob who wants to kill him, by speaking his testimony to the group of chief priests and religious leaders who had charged him.

He speaks about what God has done in his life in Jesus to one-on-one, to two governors and to a king. And then with the prisoners of the ship that he was on, as well as the guards.

[7 : 00] And then now with the most powerful people in the world in Rome, and with many people that knew him under house arrest. These are very difficult circumstances.

But in them all, Paul's passion is able to come out. He is able, through those circumstances, to proclaim Jesus Christ. And he never would have been able to talk about Jesus with that many people, and with those influential people, unless those dark circumstances had taken place.

That's the power of the gospel of Jesus, that God uses the dark things that happen to us to give opportunities to speak of the good news of Jesus. It's very interesting.

After the service at nine o'clock, I talked to a woman who had suffered a great deal from cancer. And she says, you know, it has been remarkable that through that experience, through the pain and through the treatments and so forth, I have had many opportunities to share the gospel of Jesus Christ, where people who are non-Christians have asked to pray for me.

And she has seen that happen in her own life. It is something that continues on and on through the years. The power of the gospel of Jesus, God using dark things, so that the gospel will be advanced.

[8 : 18] And Paul experienced this. You know, none of the things that he planned for and hoped for. He was like a CEO with grandiose plans. He planned to really spread the gospel throughout the world, and he had a very laid out plan going all the way to Spain.

But none of it happened. Things were a disaster in a sense. He was no longer able to have the freedom to visit churches like Philippi and travel to strengthen the church.

Yet, the gospel was advanced in ways Paul never would have thought it if he had planned out his own life, if he had been able to avoid the darkness and the hardships.

So that's Paul's past. He says, you know, I receive joy because the gospel has advanced through it. But Paul also talks about the present. And that's in verses 13 through 18.

And what you see in those verses is suffering. Paul is clearly suffering. He talks of his imprisonment in verse 13 and 14. And that word is actually about chains.

[9 : 20] He says, I'm in chains. He could not go anywhere without being chained from his wrist to a guard that is with him. And he was humiliating.

And probably it was very convenient, inconvenient, and very uncomfortable to live that way. And there was a worse suffering in verse 15 because it came within the church, from the body of believers that should have been supportive of him.

Fellow Christian leaders preached Christ and probably did it well, but they did it with a purpose. And that was to turn people away from Paul and to build a following for themselves.

And this would have hurt Paul immensely because he cared deeply for the church and for all Christians. And yet in that kind of anguish, there is a strong note of joy again throughout verses 13 and 18.

It's because the gospel is advancing through his suffering. And so here's what's happened. And in verse 13, we see that the gospel has been made known throughout the whole Praetorian Guard.

[10 : 26] And those are the group of soldiers who were handpicked, the elite of the Roman Empire. They know that Paul's imprisonment is for Christ.

You see, he is in chains for one reason, and that is that he has talked publicly about Jesus Christ rising from the dead. And there must have been dozens, hundreds perhaps, of opportunities of people who said, why are you in prison?

Who is this Jesus that you are standing for and who you may die for? And it was a perfect chance for him many, many occasions to talk about how Jesus had transformed his life with the most powerful people in the world.

But it not only affected those people who were not Christians, it affected Christians as well. So look at verse 14, and I think this is a very important verse for us. He says this, And most of the brethren, brothers and sisters, have been made confident in the Lord because of my imprisonment and are much more bold to speak the word of God without fear.

Without fear. And this is important for a couple of reasons. First, it says how encouraging testimony is to fellow Christians. When I see somebody share their faith or hear about people doing that, it gives me more courage.

[11 : 49] And it always motivates me to take more risks with the gospel. When I hear about how people have shared and stood up for Christ in a difficult time or a difficult place.

And we, like Rome, are living in a time where we are pressured to keep our faith silent. To keep things to ourselves. Keep private. So to see testimony clearly given is the antidote to that pressure.

And so when you share Christ, remember that you're not just affecting that person with the power of the gospel in ways you don't see, you are also encouraging and strengthening other Christians in their witness as well.

But the second thing that verse 14 tells us is that most of the sisters and brothers were much more bold to speak the word of God. And this is saying something in some ways very scary.

You know, as evangelicals, we fall into the trap of saying the preacher must proclaim the gospel of Christ. And that's true. And I hope that you hold it to us. But Paul is saying that it is the job of every Christian to speak the word of God in their various settings.

[13 : 00] To allow God's gospel, the power of it, to advance through each of us. He puts the responsibility and the power of the gospel onto every single believer.

And in fact, he says that proclaiming of the gospel together unites us in a very powerful way. In fact, this is the amazing thing about this chapter.

It unites people in such a powerful way that that unity overcomes deep personal pain. And even this incredible wrongdoing of preachers tearing down Paul as they preach the gospel.

And that's what true unity is. It actually perseveres through that. And so you see in verse 18 a remarkable thing that Paul says. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in sincerity or truth, Christ is proclaimed.

And in that I rejoice. And he says that after describing these terrible actions of these preachers. He rejoices simply because these preachers are proclaiming that Jesus died and rose again in order to save a lost world.

[14 : 13] And this is a teaching that we need today. You know, many in the church believe that the way to unity is to understand each other better, to be nicer to each other, to have tea together and potlucks and so forth.

And if we could only do that, then divisions would all cease. Well, Paul says, no, unity does not come in that way by being nice. It comes in this way.

If the church together proclaims the good news that Jesus died to take away the sin that separates humanity from God and to bring the world to God, a necessary thing, and that he rises to be our Lord, that we would humbly obey him and his word.

It's only through faith that we come to have life forever. That is the gospel that Paul has been proclaiming and that unites us. In some parts of the people of God, including parts of our own diocese, many aspects of the gospel are compromised and dismissed and no longer are considered relevant to our new understanding.

And that's why within our denomination there is deep division and disunity. Well, verse 18 gives us the way forward. It says that the only way to oneness that overcomes personal dislikes and differences is through proclaiming the one true gospel that Paul was proclaiming, because that's the power of God.

[15 : 39] It's the power of God for salvation, for wholeness. And that's why Paul's great desire for the church is at the end of verse 27. I wonder if you'd look at that with me.

Here's his great desire. He says this, My desire is that I may hear of you, that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.

And this is the only way for our church and for our body of Christian believers here at St. John's to be united. It is the only way for our diocese to be united as well.

It is through commonly proclaiming the true gospel of Jesus. Well, Paul closes his testimony after looking at his past and his present circumstances.

He contemplates the future. And it is very uncertain. He may be executed. He may be freed to go back to Philippi and to the other churches. But, you know, when one is facing death, the one thing that everybody experiences is they will think about what is truly important in one's life.

[16 : 51] Paul is no exception. He does that. He tells us what is the controlling factor in his life, what is all important. And it's in verse 20. And verse 20 says, It is my eager expectation.

And the original language said, This is the thing I turn to, to the exclusion of everything else. And I focus my attention. And that is this. My eager expectation and hope is that I shall 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.

That word honored in the original means magnified. And so this is Paul's mission statement, the controlling principle in life, that Jesus is enlarged in his life.

The goal that controls everything about what he decides and what he does about his life is that the greatness of Jesus' love, the greatness of his forgiveness and mercy and power and authority and purity and goodness would be made known through his life.

In a very uncertain future, that is his certain goal. And I believe that that should be every Christian's mission statement as well, that in life or in death, we would magnify Jesus, show his greatness to the world and to each other.

[18 : 18] That's not easy to do. It's not something we can just make a New Year's resolution about. But look at verse 19. Paul says that he can only hold to this mission through your prayers and the help of Jesus Christ.

He's saying that the church's prayers and the Holy Spirit go together. that through our prayers, the Holy Spirit empowers and strengthens us to proclaim the gospel.

And as we face an uncertain future, this is a strong word for us. At St. John's, we must pray together and commit ourselves individually to pray for the church so that the Holy Spirit will help us to magnify Jesus Christ.

Many of us individually face uncertain times. And certainly the future of the Anglican church is uncertain. But the great certainty is that all of us will see Jesus in our future.

We will see the one who we have been proclaiming. And Paul is so sure of this, that he says to depart from this world is to be with Christ. To die and depart from this world is to be with Christ.

[19 : 30] And he's torn between this life and the joy of serving the gospel and death, which means being with Jesus. This is the controlling factor in his life. We need the Holy Spirit to make this true in our own lives as well.

And I want to end by saying that Paul has looked at his past and his present and his future. It involves ups and downs, a lot of hardship and suffering, and uncertainties, perhaps more than most of us experience in our lives.

But it is a life that is defined by the gospel. Through everything that happens, happened in the past, happens now and will happen, he magnifies Jesus Christ.

And throughout this passage and letter, there is a strong note of joy because that is his passion, that he is able to proclaim the gospel. And so he, in every circumstance, can do that and experience the joy that will always last.

So I think that God's word this morning calls us to look at our own passions and to look at what the great goal of our life is. It asks to consider what controls our decisions and our resources and the use of our time.

[20 : 48] If we choose to make our passion the enlarging of Jesus in our life, the passion that Paul had, if we choose that passion, we are guaranteed to have joy.

And that joy will be made complete because we will see the one who we have been proclaiming, the source of our joy, Jesus Christ, the risen Lord. Amen.

Amen.