

Philippians 1:12-26

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 May 2022

Preacher: Rev. Ben Roberts

[0:00] Well, good evening, everyone. Nice to see you all. I'm Jeremy. Thanks for the wave back there, Jeremy. Will you open your Bible again to Philippians 1, 12-26, page 980.

We just heard it read. It's great if you have it open in front of you. This is that remarkable letter that we started last Sunday. You remember that the Apostle Paul is in prison, probably in Rome, and he's chained to a Roman guard night and day.

He's awaiting his trial, which will likely lead to his execution. And so it would be completely understandable. You could forgive him if he was a complete and anxious wreck, right?

He was a total mess. You could forgive him if he was a little bit like you and I are when we've had a hard week at work. Maybe we have a terrible boss or terrible coworkers, and we get together with some friends, and we start grumbling a little bit.

You know, oh, I really hate my boss. I don't know how much longer I can take it. You could imagine him writing something a little bit more like this. Dear Philippians, I'm thankful for your prayers. The chains have been digging into my wrists, causing all kinds of sores on my arms, and I'm hungry most of the time.

[1:14] Some of the guards are bullies, but I'm going to keep calm and carry on. But instead, we get this letter that's resounding with joy and hopefulness and thanksgiving. What a shock.

So that in verse 18, Paul says, What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. How can Paul rejoice? Or how can he say in verse 21, For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Now, maybe you want to say, Well, of course, yeah, he's St. Paul, after all. He's an apostle. I mean, he's in the Bible, for goodness sakes. So, I just want to say this is the right moment to get that idea out of your head.

There's nothing special about Paul. He's not a superhuman. He is just a normal guy. But a normal guy who has Jesus in his life, and that's what makes the difference.

It's Jesus who makes the difference for Paul. It's Jesus who Paul fixes his eyes on in these difficult circumstances. And so, of course, it will be Jesus that Paul points the Philippians and us to.

[2:26] Fix your eyes on Jesus, he says. Look towards him amidst your similarly difficult obstacles or your conflicting desires. So, it's Jesus and his gospel that draw us into that joyful relationship that can allow us to share Paul's optimism that he says in verse 19.

Have a look at verse 19. For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance. Literally, for my salvation.

Isn't that amazing? How can he say that? Well, we're going to find out. And I have two simple statements for us tonight. First of all, Christ is proclaimed despite serious obstacles.

And we see that in the first half in verses 12 to 18. And then secondly, Christ is honored amidst conflicting desires. And this continues out of verse 18 all the way to verse 26.

So, let's start with that first heading. Christ is proclaimed despite serious obstacles. So, what are these obstacles that Paul's facing?

[3:33] There's at least two types. There's at least two types. The first is described in verses 12 to 14. What he describes as my imprisonment.

They're literally my chains. So, for a traveling missionary to be locked up in chains would be a little bit like a Cirque du Soleil acrobat having their hands and feet tied behind their back. I mean, how is Paul supposed to fulfill his vocation to proclaim the gospel if he's locked up?

But look at verse 12 with me. I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. Paul's chains, he's saying, have led to two unexpected opportunities.

Two unexpected opportunities. First of all, in verse 13. Paul has this captive audience now. Literally a captive audience since the Roman soldiers are chained to him night and day. He's able to evangelize them.

He's able to share the gospel with them. He's able to talk to other people in Roman imperial power. And these people are men and women that he might never have had a chance to evangelize.

[4:43] And then in verse 14, he says, there's a second unexpected opportunity. He says that Christians have become bolder and have more confidence to share the good news because of Paul's example.

It's completely not what you would expect. It's a little bit like this story that Paul Miller shares in his book, J-Curve. He tells the story of Dmitri, who was a pastor imprisoned in Soviet Union for 17 years.

And every morning, Dmitri would stand beside his bed and he would put his arms outstretched and he would sing heart song, heart song, which was his favorite hymn. And as he sang it, the other 1,500 hardened criminals would jeer at him and mock him.

He did this every day for 15 years, thinking that his entire family was dead. Until one day, he wrote some Bible verses on a piece of paper and he posted it on a prison pillar.

And the angry prison officials grabbed him and they took him away and he thought, surely I'm going to my execution. But as he was led away to his execution, all 1,500 prisoners stood up and they sang heart song.

[5:57] They sang this song and the stunned guards asked him, who are you? And Dmitri said, I am Jesus in your midst. So they returned him to his cell.

And soon afterwards, he was released. It's remarkable. The word of God can never be chained. But actually, there's a lot more going on here than just the fact that the word of God can't be chained.

If you look at verse 13, this is how it reads. So it's become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. But that phrase, for Christ, would be better translated, my imprisonment is in Christ, is in Christ.

So that most people would look at Paul and all they would see, all they would see is that he is in chains. But there is a deeper reality that Paul is pointing to.

He says, no, I'm not just in chains. I am in Christ. I am in union with Christ. And this is the participation that he has in the power of Christ's death and resurrection.

[7:00] That's what's summed up in this idea of being in Christ. That's how we get into that relationship, that most intimate relationship with Jesus through his death and resurrection. That's the source of all of Paul's joy and thanksgiving.

It's impossible for him to have that apart from being in Christ, even if he's in chains. So that's the first obstacle. And the second obstacle, what is it? Well, you see it in verse 15 to 18.

So look at verse 15. Paul says, some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. So the second obstacle is preachers who have mixed motives.

Folks going around proclaiming Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. That's verse 17. And we don't know who these people were or what exactly they were saying.

But we do know, we can gather, that they weren't so much false teachers, but more like a false friend. And amazingly, though, even with mixed motives, that can't obstruct the gospel.

[8:08] It can't prevent the gospel from going forward in truth and in power. So verse 18 again. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed.

And in that, I rejoice. And friends, this is such good news for you and I. Because the truth is that whenever we live out our faith in words or in deeds, we carry mixed motives inside of us.

The truth is that my own status, my reputation, my pride, my anxiety, my need for God's approval, all of those things, whatever's behind my actions, my motivations are never pure.

Yet God uses our imperfect motives and brings glory to the name of Jesus through weak, fallen women and men like you and I. He's doing that every day.

And so Paul faces these two obstacles. First of all, enemies from within, this imprisonment. And secondly, enemies from without, these rivals with mixed motives. And yet Christ is proclaimed despite serious obstacles.

[9:17] So consider for a moment what obstacles, what limitations you feel in your own ability to proclaim Christ right now. And Satan loves to remind us of those limitations.

But if the Lord is able to work through serious obstacles like the ones Paul faced, he will work through whatever setbacks, whatever obstacles, whatever limitations you might be facing.

When I was preparing this week, a friend said, Oh, limitations, you're talking about limitations. Have you ever heard of Fanny Crosby? Have any of you ever heard of Fanny Crosby? She's a 19th century hymn writer.

She was a household name in the 19th century because she wrote over 8,000 hymns. Over 100 million copies of her songs were in print. But she did all of that despite being blind.

And this is how she testified to her limitations. This is her speaking. It seemed intended by the blessed providence of God that I should be blind all my life.

[10:26] And I thank him for the dispensation. If perfect earthly sight were offered me tomorrow, I would not accept it. I might not have sung hymns to the praise of God if I had been distracted by the beautiful and interesting things about me.

Isn't that wonderfully unexpected? If you are in Christ, as Paul is, then the Lord will sustain you.

Whatever trial, whatever limitations you're facing or feeling inside. And Christ will be proclaimed despite any serious obstacles. And that's the first half of Paul's message here.

And the second half, Paul considers how Christ is honored amidst conflicting desires. So now we continue into the second half of verse 18 all the way to 26.

Christ is honored amidst conflicting desires. And in these verses, Paul is reflecting on his life and death, which is literally hanging in the balance. You can just hear it.

[11:26] Here's a few excerpts. So he says, if I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.

You can see up and down like a seesaw, back and forth, Paul's weighing the pros and cons of life and death. I mean, death would mean that his suffering ends and he gets to be in Jesus' presence forever.

But then life would mean that he gets to continue his ministry as an evangelist and a pastor. And we have to appreciate, I hope you appreciate Paul's honesty here. He's torn between these two conflicting desires.

Because followers of Jesus aren't robots. We're not robots who simply obey orders. We all have our own wills. We have preferences and we need to discern and listen for God's guidance.

And yet, even amidst that internal conflict, Paul does have a chief desire which remains crystal clear. You can see it in verse 20. It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed.

[12:36] 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. That Christ will be honored, whether by life or death.

That is Paul's chief motivation. And this word honor, it means to magnify, to amplify, to make large. And so this is like Paul's magnetic north.

His compass point that will help him as he discerns between these two competing desires. Where is it that the Lord is leading me? So where is your fixed point?

Where is your discernment needle? That helps you to seek guidance. In all those hundreds of little decisions you make week by week, you know, so many of those decisions that we make, they're not really moral questions of right and wrong.

They're much more subtle, aren't they? Questions like, where am I going to move? What city am I going to live in? Which school am I going to choose? Which job am I going to take? So what if this question was your guiding light?

[13:38] How is Christ honored in this? How will Jesus be more exalted in my life if I do this or that? And I think this is what Paul's really getting at in that often quoted verse 21.

You know, this famous verse. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. So Jenny Allen, she has a book called Get Out of Your Head. Jenny Allen.

She reflects on what lies behind Paul's words here. Let me read you what she writes. To live is Christ. What interesting phrasing. It's not primarily an action.

It's a state of being. It is to be with and to allow Christ to be in and through and with me as I live. It is less of a hustle and more of a state of being.

My son Cooper is adopted from Rwanda and there are times when he will say to me, usually when we're punishing him for something, I don't want to be in this family anymore. His actions and words are trying to change something unchangeable.

[14:39] He is an Allen. It is his reality no matter how he feels about it, no matter how he acts or doesn't act. Getting out of your own head begins with understanding your position in Christ.

We are his and we live that out as a matter of fact. Either aware and surrendered to that truth or in rejection to what is true. To live is Christ.

And here we are once again back at that central need to be in Christ, in union with Christ. Beneath all of our decision making, our conflicting desires has to be our identity in Christ, our love for Jesus.

And then with this foundation secure, Paul is able to surrender his desires, to lay them down and say, Jesus, I know that you will be honored regardless of the outcome if I cling to you.

And so have a look at verse 25 and 26. This is Paul's conclusion to his debate. And there are times, there are going to be times, there probably have been times, when you despair of life.

[16:01] When you don't seem to be able to know which of these is the desirable outcome. How do I choose, Lord, between these two things? You may be feeling this way right now tonight.

So how can Christ be honored amidst those conflicting desires in you? And here are some encouraging words from one commentator on Philipppians as we close. Christians who have few gifts or are weakened by illness, who have grown frail in old age, should pay special attention to Paul's words here.

It is all too easy to feel that you are useless, even a burden to others, and to wish to be away. But here's the secret of maintaining a sweet spirit of adversity. I have a glorious prospect before me when I am with Christ.

But for the present, that same Christ means to help others through my presence with them. Even although I can do very little practically, nevertheless, to me, to live, is Christ.

So Paul isn't writing a silver linings playbook for us. He's painfully honest about the suffering that he's facing. And yet, he can resound with joy and thanksgiving because he is in Christ.

[17:14] He knows that Christ is proclaimed even despite serious obstacles. And he knows that Christ is honored even amidst conflicting desires.

Amen.