

# Gospel Advance Through Trials

*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: 12 September 2021

Preacher: Nick Lauer

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, good morning, church. It's good to be with you all today. Our sermon text today is Philippians chapter 1. We're looking at verses 12 through 18. Philippians chapter 1. If you're new to reading the Bible, if you're new to Christianity, if you're new to the Bible, just a quick way of orientation. The big numbers are the chapters. The small numbers are the verses. So that should help you find your way around. And today we're going to look at chapter 1, verses 12 through 18 of the book of Philippians. So this fall, what we're doing is we're walking step by step through Paul's letter that we call the letter to the Philippians to this church in a city called Philippi. And we're doing so because we want to learn what it means as a church to be citizens of the gospel. You know, we live in a time when there are a number of very loud and very different and at times very compelling visions of what it means to sort of live life well, what it means to kind of do this human thing. But, you know, as the church, we're not meant to be sort of blown and tossed or captivated and compelled by these kind of competing narratives that are around us, whether they be on the left or on the right, whether they be kind of so-called progressive or so-called conservative. Rather, as the church, we're meant to have our identity rooted and grounded in the radical distinctiveness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We're meant to be citizens primarily of the gospel so that when we love our neighbors, when we engage with our communities, then we really are salt and light to the glory of God and not just another kind of echo in the echo chamber.

Now, when Paul wrote this letter, he was writing to Gentile Christians in a Roman colony. Philippi was a Roman colony, so the people in Philippi were citizens of Rome. They were citizens of that great empire that was uniting the known world politically, and it was ruled under the great Caesars who were telling a story about peace flowing through their rule to the ends of the earth. This was Rome.

But Paul's helping this small church in the midst of that to become who they truly are. He wants to help these citizens of Rome become citizens of the gospel, citizens of Jesus Christ, and to live a life worthy of Jesus. And that's what we want too. That's what we want too as a church.

So we're going to jump in, and we're going to read verses 12 through 18, and then I'll pray for us, and then we'll dive in. So chapter 1, verses 12 through 18, after a kind of greeting and a prayer, Paul writes this. He says, I want you to know, brothers, and remember that Greek word includes men and women, brothers and sisters, 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 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. 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 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. Let's pray together. Our Father in heaven, please help us, as we've just sung, to present our lives before you now. Lord, help us to open our hands before you. And God, we ask that by your Holy Spirit, you would speak into the depths of our souls right now. God, we know that your word is living and active, and it pierces down to the depths of who we are. So we pray that you would do that deep work today as we attend to your word.

[ 4 : 19 ] Lord, lift our eyes and our hearts up to you, Lord Jesus. Help us to become more the kind of church that you long for us to be. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

So you have to imagine that when Paul's friends in Philippi heard that he had been arrested and put in prison and eventually shipped off to the capital, to the city of Rome for trial, you have to imagine that they were quite worried. I mean, what was going to become of their friend, the Apostle Paul, and what was going to become of his mission, to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ to the nations? You have to imagine they were pretty worried. After all, it's pretty hard to plant churches when you're chained up in house arrest, right? Paul's imprisonment seemed like a major setback, a massive hindrance to the plan. And they might have even been thinking, how could God have allowed this? And what's worse, they maybe had even caught wind that there were some Christians in Rome or maybe in some surrounding cities that were not supporting Paul in his prison, in his imprisonment, but ridiculing him. Now that Paul was out of the way, so to speak, they could step up and preach

Christ eager to show how much better they were than Paul. You know, oftentimes I think we can be like the worried Philippians, can't we? We think that above all, God must use our strength and our strategies to bring about his purposes. Now there's nothing wrong with planning and strategy, and there's nothing wrong with giving our best efforts. Paul had a strategy, right? And he poured all of his strength into it. Read the book of Acts, and you'll see that what becomes pretty clear is that Paul has a strategy. He would find a sort of city center of a region, he would go there first, he would preach to his fellow Jews, then he would turn to the Gentiles, he would establish the fledgling church with godly leaders, and then he would head to the next city, knowing that if a church had taken root in the city center, then the gospel would radiate out from there to the surrounding region. And that's what we see in Acts. But what happens when our strategy and our strength get curtailed, get hindered by trial and weakness?

Is everything lost? When your good, godly ambitions are seemingly thwarted by physical illness, say, or a lack of financial resources, or a global pandemic, what do you do? When your strategy meets nothing but setback after setback, how should you respond? Well, here's what Paul wants his friends at Philippi and us today to see.

This passage is showing us that God can use even our trials, even our setbacks, even our greatest hindrances to advance the gospel. It's not just through our strategy and our strength, but also and especially through our weakness and dependence that God's gospel goes forth. What has happened to me, Paul says, has really served to advance the gospel. Think about it. What's really going on?

[ 7 : 58 ] Well, Paul's in prison. He's stuck. He's awaiting trial, maybe awaiting execution. Yes, all that's true. But what's really going on, Paul says, it's really served to advance the gospel.

Our trials are not meaningless. In fact, they are the very means that God uses to spread the life-saving message of Christ crucified and risen. And what we see in the rest of the passage is that God uses our trials, God uses our setbacks to advance the gospel in at least three ways. So we're going to look at those three ways that God advances the gospel through our trials. First, in verse 13, we see that God uses our trials to advance the gospel in the hearts of unbelievers. In other words, God uses our trials to reach those that we might not have reached before. Verse 13 says, it's become known because of my imprisonment, Paul says, it's become known throughout the whole imperial guard. And to all the rest, that my imprisonment is for Christ. All those guards that kept watch over Paul, all those administrators who work in what he calls the imperial guard, that is the praetorium, these were sort of the executive offices of the empire found in Roman cities throughout the

Mediterranean, they're all hearing about Paul. But not just about Paul, they're hearing about this one that Paul proclaims. This guy Paul has been talking about some new emperor who's taken the throne.

And it turns out it's a crucified Jew named Jesus. And according to this Paul, his death has brought true peace and true justice to the whole world. And everyone, absolutely every man, woman, and child is being called to bend their knee in allegiance to him alone. And to find reconciliation with God by grace.

And to find a whole new life in this broken and hurting world. Because God raised Jesus from the dead. Now imagine citizens of Rome hearing that message.

[ 10 : 11 ] Not just strange, but profoundly countercultural. You see, Rome advanced through strength and through power.

And yet, this King Jesus won his victory and advanced his kingdom through a cross. It's pretty countercultural today too, isn't it?

It's very easy for us to exalt in the powerful, in the brash. You know, we get excited when things hit quick and hit hard.

The best defense is more offense, as we learned from watching Cobra Kai, if you've seen that. We think real freedom is having our own way. And yet, and yet, on the throne of the universe sits a king with nail scars in his hands.

And who demands our utter allegiance to him and his way, the way of the cross. And for this message to get through, to reach those it might not reach otherwise, God uses not just our strength, but our weakness.

[ 11 : 26 ] And not just our triumphs, but he uses our trials. And that seems pretty fitting, doesn't it, when you think about it?

That God would not just use the strategy and strengths of Paul to advance the gospel, but also his weakness and imprisonment. After all, isn't the gospel the message of how God became weak to save us?

And in becoming weak ourselves, then our lips don't just speak the message, but our lives live it. And the message of Jesus, then, is able to reach those that otherwise we could not reach.

You know, have you ever thought that your non-Christian friends, yes, we'll hear the gospel through your well-thought-out answers to their questions. There's a good place for that. But they'll also hear the gospel, perhaps even more clearly, when they see how you endure through suffering and trial.

You know, it's easy for Paul to talk about Jesus as king when he's traveling footloose and fancy-free through the Roman Empire, but when his hands and feet are in chains, and he still speaks about the good news, how much greater must that have struck the hearts of those hardened soldiers assigned to watch over him, those pragmatic administrators just running an empire?

[ 12 : 52 ] It'll be the same for us, friends. God will open new opportunities and new hearts through our weakness, through our supposed setbacks that in our strength we could never reach.

So the first thing we see is that through our trials, God will advance the gospel in the hearts of unbelievers. But second, God doesn't just use our trials to advance the gospel in the heart of unbelievers. He uses our trials to advance the gospel in the hearts of our fellow believers as well.

God's able through our setbacks to reach those we might not have reached before, but he's also able to empower and encourage those we might not have empowered or encouraged before. Look at verse 14. Paul says, And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Now, it was a scary thing to go to prison in the first century. It's a scary thing to go to prison in any century. But when Christians saw Paul go there for the sake of Christ, and when they saw how God used Paul there, it's as if that venom of fear was sucked out of their hearts.

If God can use prison for his purposes, then what have we to fear? What can this empire really do to us ultimately if God is our God?

[ 14 : 25 ] The God who can use a prison to advance his freedom. The God who can use a cross to defeat evil. The God who can swallow up death in the resurrection. If this is our God, why are we afraid?

And when we face trials with the assurance that this God is in control, our fellow believers will see us and take courage too. This is one of the great benefits of reading Christian history, of reading missionary biographies, of learning about the saints who've gone before us, like Ida B. Wells, the anti-lynching activist, or like Hudson Taylor, the pioneering missionary to China, or like Athanasius of Alexandria, the defender of orthodoxy.

All these, in their own way, stood up for Christ in the face of great danger and great trial. And we can read their stories and be encouraged to speak the word without fear.

Right now, in our adult class, happening on the second floor next door, we're highlighting some of these stories. So, since you're here at the 9 a.m. service, and you're not at that class, later in the week, you can listen to it on the podcast, and you can be encouraged to speak the word more boldly, without fear.

But brothers and sisters, don't you see, your story can encourage others too. The trials that you face, they can become evidence of God's gracious work in your life.

[ 15 : 51 ] They become testimonies to God's powerful gospel as you cling to Him, and find your peace and joy and strength in Him, even through hardship. The trials that you face will encourage others just the same.

They're not wasted in God's providence. God will use them, not just to reach others you might not have reached, but encourage those, to encourage those you might not have otherwise encouraged.

Through your trials, others will become more confident in the Lord, to speak the word more boldly and without fear. So friends, be comforted by these verses. What trial or hindrance are you facing right now?

Maybe it's a professional setback. Maybe it's a relational hardship. Maybe it's a health crisis. But in the hands of our sovereign God, He's able to take it and use it and to come close to you and to advance the gospel, not just in the hearts of those outside the church, but in the hearts of those inside the church as well.

But now there's one more area where God advances the gospel through our trials. Paul says, first, He's going to do it in the hearts of unbelievers. And second, He does it through the hearts of believers. But third and last, through our trials, through our setbacks, God will advance the gospel in our own hearts too.

[ 17 : 18 ] You know, up to this point in the text, everything kind of seems pretty rosy. Yeah, Paul's in prison, but yay, the gospel still advances. But you know, it's not all pretty. It's not all such a straight, easy line.

We learn in verse 15 that when Paul went to jail, some of his fellow believers, turned their backs on him. And they started preaching Christ more fervently really out of a desire to kind of put Paul down.

Or as verse 17 says, to afflict him in his imprisonment. Now, it's hard to kind of reconstruct exactly what was happening here historically, but it doesn't seem like these opponents of Paul were preaching a false gospel.

It doesn't seem like they were preaching a wrong gospel or a false gospel because we know from Paul's other letters that he would have never rejoiced in that. So it wasn't the message of these opponents that was the problem.

Rather, Paul says, it's their motivation. They saw themselves as rivals of Paul and perhaps they didn't care for his methods or care for his style. Perhaps they were jealous of his gifts.

[ 18 : 21 ] Perhaps they were envious of his office as an apostle. Who knows? But whatever it was, when Paul went to prison, they stepped up and started preaching Christ all the more fervently, it seems, in order to put Paul down to discredit him.

You see, Paul's not so great, they might have been saying. After all, he landed in prison. What good is Paul? Where is he now? Let us proclaim Christ to you. You don't need him. Listen to us. Let us proclaim to you that Jesus is king.

Now look, Paul certainly does not excuse these motives. In fact, he is kind of exposing them in this passage, isn't he? But rather than taking offense at them, rather than trying to sort of rescue his own personal reputation, rather than trying to sort of silence his rivals, what does Paul do?

What does he do when fellow Christians are questioning his ministry, ridiculing him for being in prison, making themselves out to be the good guys and Paul the bad guy? What does he do when his good name is at stake?

Shockingly, Paul says, what then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed.

[ 19 : 33 ] And in that, I rejoice. So what if my name is being dragged through the mud, Paul says? So what if other people want to jump in my place?

Is Christ being proclaimed? Is the gospel faithfully taught? If so, then in that I'll rejoice. My reputation at the end of the day isn't worth comparing to the reputation of Christ.

Now, do you see what's happening here? In these verses, in this whole section of Philippians actually, Paul is modeling for the Philippians and for us a heart that values and rejoices in the advance of the gospel more than our personal comfort and more than our personal reputation.

In other words, through the trial that Paul is facing, the gospel is advancing deeper and deeper in his own heart. The supreme worth of Christ, of Christ proclaimed, is more and more taking the uppermost place.

What Paul cares most about is Jesus. Does it matter that people are slandering him? That he's losing his reputation? That some people have a personal axe to grind with him? Through that trial, Paul's saying, look, I'm seeing more and more that what really matters is Christ.

- [ 20 : 56 ] So what about in our hearts? When hard times come, can we say, Christ is proclaimed and in that I rejoice?
- Can we say that when our best laid plans go awry? When fellow Christians ridicule us? It's hard, isn't it?
- We live so much of our life wanting comfort, good friends, a good name, a good job, a good living, good health.
- And all of those things are, well, they're good things, right? There's nothing wrong with them. But if they're threatened or if they're taken away, can we still rejoice?
- Can you still rejoice because the greatest good, the advance of God's gospel, is still undaunted?
- [ 21 : 57 ] How do we get our hearts to stop loving lesser things more than we love the gospel? Well, the good news is we can't do it on our own, but God can.
- Through the Holy Spirit, our hearts do change. And how does the Holy Spirit do it? The Holy Spirit does it by shining the spotlight on Christ in the midst of our trials and weaknesses.
- When comfort or approval or our reputation fall away, when our trials and setbacks show us how fleeting they are and how insecure they are, the Holy Spirit in those moments of trial comes and He shows us Christ, who He is and what He's done and what He's doing right now, right here.
- How do you get to the place where you rejoice in Christ being proclaimed more than you rejoice in your own comfort, more than you rejoice in your own reputation? You get there when you see afresh what Christ has done for you through the working of the Holy Spirit.
- When you see that He's done for you what no one or no thing else has or can do. Can the idols of comfort or the approval of others compare with Christ?
- [ 23 : 29 ] Christ gave up His comfort for you and Christ gave up His reputation for you. The Lord of history became a servant. The all-powerful one became powerless and died for your sins and for mine.
- And because of that God raised Him up. And in the resurrection God the Father was proclaiming the ultimate divine yes over the price that Jesus paid and over the divine love that Jesus demonstrated.
- It's as if in the resurrection God says yes this is who I am. Not a tyrant who makes others pay for their crimes so that I can get better but the God of self-giving love who pays your price in your place and my price in my place.
- Christ is King. The crucified Jesus is the risen Lord and the world cannot stay the same.
- You know friends the church is the one place on earth where heaven has broken through to stay. And with our citizenship in heaven we form a colony on earth.
- [ 24 : 50 ] This earth that God is reclaiming for His glory. Will we lose comforts as we live as citizens of the gospel? Probably so. But if Christ is proclaimed if the king is getting glory and the kingdom is breaking through and the new creation is taking root so be it.
- We are living for something bigger and better and more lasting than mere comfort. Will our reputation suffer as we live as citizens of the gospel?
- Will even fellow Christians disappoint us? Maybe even ridicule us as we follow in the footsteps of our crucified king? As we follow in his footsteps and choose service over power?
- Choosing gentleness over anger? Choosing forgiveness over fear? Choosing justice and righteousness over the status quo? Yes as we do this in Jesus' name our reputation will suffer.

But if the name of Christ is exalted if our king and our redeemer is getting praise if his name is great then let ours be small.

[ 26 : 00 ] Let our puny little matches be outshone by the burning radiance of his glory. If Christ is proclaimed then let us rejoice.

And if the road that God has for us is one of weakness and dependence and not just of strength and strategy then let us rejoice because we are sharing the sufferings of Christ himself.

Paul says in this text that his imprisonment isn't just for Christ but it literally says my imprisonment is in Christ. We are walking in the footsteps of our Savior in union with him as we walk through trial and suffering and setback.

And as Paul will tell the Philippians in chapter 3 let us share in Christ's sufferings so that we too may share in his resurrection. Let's press on to make Jesus our own because he has made us his own.

So friends when trials come and when setbacks happen and when the best laid plans of mice and men ultimately go awry remember at the end of the day our greatest good is not threatened at all.

[ 27 : 21 ] Christ has made us his own and the gospel will advance through our weakness as much as through our strength and his gospel will advance through our setbacks as much as through our successes not just in the hearts of unbelievers not just in the hearts of believers but in our own hearts too.

And if that be so and Christ is proclaimed that no matter what comes we can always rejoice. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven we pray that by your spirit you would grant us to begin to imitate the example that we see in the apostle Paul in these pages to be able to say with joyful confidence not that his circumstances are good but that you the good God take any circumstances and advance the gospel our greatest good.

Oh Lord help us to live as your church in this confidence this week and we pray Jesus that your beauty and your majesty and your worth would become more and more real to all of my brothers and sisters and friends in this room.

Help us to turn from trusting in ourself and place our deepest trust in you. We ask this Father in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.