

Philippians: It's All About Jesus

Purpose About Jesus (Philippians 1:12-18a)

The Philippians' story shows that things can get difficult and discouraging...

Let's ask for God's help in prayer... So Philippians is written by an early church leader named Paul to the church he planted in Philippi. Over the past decade, Paul and the Philippian church have shared a great relationship: sharing in Jesus' mission, affection, and in prayer together.

But now the Philippian church is starting to struggle. There's persecution and false teaching, and these stresses from the outside are contributing to difficult relationships inside the church. The Philippians may even wonder if prison is in their future. For Philippi is a very patriotic Roman colony. So they do not take kindly to Christians saying "Jesus is lord", not Caesar, and to Christians also refusing to worship Caesar as a god. So overall things are getting difficult and discouraging for the Philippians.

Relevance: we need guidance when things are difficult and discouraging

I bet I'm not the only one here who resonates a bit with the phrase "getting difficult and discouraging". And if you're like me, you may not always be at your best when things get difficult and discouraging.

Maybe for you it's checking out of life, avoiding difficulties you really need to deal with, or maybe it's despairing as you project today's difficulties into the long term, or maybe it's responding with a burning anger towards God and people that sometimes gets out of control. These kinds of responses in difficulty hurting ourselves and those we love.

And I don't think a culture that invented the term "YOLO" and says life is largely about "looking inside yourself and doing whatever makes you happy" has much guidance for what to do in prolonged difficulty, like say when the report says your cancer has spread.

And so wouldn't it be great if we had a really seasoned, mature Christian to guide us when things get difficult and discouraging?

Enter the Apostle Paul. A man intimately familiar with difficult and discouraging. A man who has undergone much suffering in his life and ministry and writes to the Philippians

while currently chained to a Roman guard 24/7, not knowing if he'll soon be executed for his faith in Jesus.

And so in today's verses, Paul shares an update meant to encourage and guide the Philippians and also those struggling with difficulties today. So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to Philippians, chapter 1. If not, no worries, we'll have the verses on the screen. And if you're new to the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers.

As we saw last Sunday, Christians in Philippi have been partnering with Paul for the past decade in the gospel, the good news of Jesus dying for our sins and rising from the dead to inaugurate a new kingdom of righteousness, peace, and love. Through prayer, encouragement, and finances, the Philippians and Paul share the mission to work for Jesus' kingdom. And because Jesus is working too, Paul is confident that the good news of Jesus will continue to spread, as we saw back in verse 6 last Sunday.

Teaching: Encouragement that Jesus is still working...

Through Paul's ministry (12-13) – So this morning, Paul encourages the Philippians and us with encouragement that even in difficulties, Jesus is still working. We see this starting in verse 12 of Philippians chapter 1. **(12-13)**

¹² Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.

These verses show us that even as Paul suffers in prison, likely in Rome, that Paul still focuses on how Jesus is working. Rather than share of the difficult realities of prison, Paul instead focuses on how Jesus is working His purposes even in those difficulties.

In verse 13 Paul shares how Jesus is working through his imprisonment to spread the gospel among the palace guard, which is 9,000 elite troops. As Paul is under house arrest, he always has a palace guard with him. And I'm guessing Paul struck up Jesus conversations with those guards. And so over time, as more guards are on shift with Paul, word spreads about Paul and his Jesus.

That word spreading even beyond the guards, verse 13 saying “to everyone else” which may refer to the rest of the emperor’s palace.¹ So even in the difficulties of Paul’s unjust imprisonment, Jesus is still advancing His gospel in the heart of the Roman Empire.

Through believers with good motives (14-16) – And not only is Jesus advancing His gospel among those who don’t yet know Him, but also among those that do, as Paul shares in verse 14. **(14-16)**

¹⁴ And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear. ¹⁵ It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶ The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.

A second encouraging way Jesus works through Paul’s imprisonment is by helping most of the Christians in Rome to become more confident in the Lord and thus more courageous in sharing the gospel, as verse 14 says. Verses 15 and 16 show that some of these Christians share Jesus out of good motives, like goodwill and love.

Perhaps these Christians were encouraged as they saw Jesus advancing the gospel even in Paul’s difficult circumstances, and were inspired by Paul’s continued faithfulness to Jesus in the difficulties, and realized that they needed to step up in spreading the gospel while Paul was stuck in prison for its defense.

I like to imagine it’s kind of something like if Pastor Dave got put in the Bexar County Jail for sharing the gospel. And he is suffering in there, but staying faithful, and then we hear about how Jesus leads a revival through Dave’s preaching in the prison. And how all of that would inspire us to share the gospel more on the outside as Dave is stuck inside the prison.

Though that’s a hypothetical, as Paul encouraged the Philippians about the gospel’s advance in their day, even in hardships, so we are encouraged about the gospel’s advance in our day, even in hardships.

If you missed last Sunday’s message, I shared a ton of encouraging ways that Jesus is at work through our church, advancing His mission here in San Antonio and in many parts of the world through our ministry partners. And because Jesus is at work, even as things get difficult in

¹ The Greek word for palace guard (πραιτώριον) also meant governor’s palace in some contexts (Matt 27, Mark 15, John 18-19), so perhaps the “everyone else” is those associated with the emperor’s palace. *BDAG*, 859.

our lives, or in our city, or in places where our ministry partners work, we can keep praying and giving and serving because we see not just the difficulties, but also that Jesus is still at work. And who knows how Jesus might keep working through our ministry efforts, not only today but for years to come; as Jesus still continues to work through Paul's time in prison, bringing us encouragement and guidance through this letter Paul wrote nearly 2,000 years ago.

Through believers with bad motives (15-17) – While in chains, Paul was also encouraged as he saw Jesus at work advancing the gospel even among those with bad motives. Verse 15: **(15-17)**

¹⁵ It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶ The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.

Sadly, some have bad motives in preaching Christ. Verse 15 says some viewed Paul jealously, as a rival, and verse 17 says they had a selfish ambition to their ministry.

Perhaps their egos were wounded by seeing Paul, while in prison, still being used by Jesus to make a larger impact on their city than they made while free. Sadly, verse 17 says they even hoped to trouble Paul. Perhaps they thought Paul would be jealous of their freedom to go about preaching the gospel or even that Paul as the leader would be held responsible for their preaching.

And so today, there may be a few followers of Jesus that honestly, you or I don't really like that much. Maybe it's a famous preacher, or even someone in our church, and you get this sense that their ministry is more about advancing their name than Jesus', or you don't like their position on some doctrine, or you've been hurt by them, and maybe you don't rejoice when Jesus works through them to advance the gospel.

In poor Paul's case, as if he didn't already have enough difficulties with the injustice of imprisonment and being chained to a guard 24/7 and being unable to do what was on his heart and facing possible execution, now Paul also has fellow preachers jealous of him and hoping to cause him harm.

Requires sharing Jesus' purposes (18a) – Yet look at Paul's response in verse 18. It may differ a bit from how we view the ministry success of any we don't really like. Verse 18:

¹⁸ But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Things have been difficult for the Philippians, and so Paul encourages his gospel partners by sharing how Jesus is advancing the gospel in the heart of the empire even in Paul's difficulties. But here in verse 18, Paul isn't just encouraging, he's also modeling how to respond with resilience in severe difficulties. A resilience even in injustice that's not found in a life that's focused on looking inside yourself and doing what makes you happy.

If you don't know Paul's story, he experienced repeated difficulties and injustices, and yet he does not give up or get stuck in a permanent pattern of only nursing his hurts over and over and over. Paul is able to rejoice, even while suffering in chains with both fellow preachers and his government out to harm him.

How does Paul do it? As we see in verse 18, Paul shares Jesus' purposes. It's kinda like in this passage Paul's being asked, "How's it going?" and his main answer is "the gospel is advancing." That's not the focus of my answer when things get difficult. Paul models for us mature faith.

Paul so shares in Jesus' purposes that he's excited for the gospel to advance even among those hoping to cause him harm while free to do the very thing Paul wants to be out there doing. These preachers think they are harming Paul, but ironically, they are advancing Paul's purpose of Christ preached. So Paul is thankful for their ministry, their preaching causes Paul to rejoice in verse 18.

This raises a difficult question that surfaces in our difficulties. How much do we really share Jesus' purposes? When it gets down to it, are my highest purposes things like personal happiness, comfort, and protection against the world's brokenness, or things like loving all, character growth, and advancing the gospel?

If this circle represents my, or your, highest purposes, and this one represents Jesus' highest purposes for my life, how much overlap is there between the two? Is there none? A little? Some? A lot? The more overlap, the more, like Paul, we can rejoice even in difficulties and shine like lights even when standing against forces of darkness.

Paul has written the book of Philippians to encourage the Philippians that in all of life, including difficulties, it's all about Jesus. And so as we seek to share more of Jesus' purposes, to align the circles more, I urge us to read Philippians this week and every week of this sermon

series. And if you think you might forget, why not put a repeated reminder now on your phone about reading Philippians.

Please don't let all your reading this week be about the bad news in our world, read Philippians as well. It's only four pages in my Bible, but has much encouragement, perspective, and equipping for our current challenges and sharing Jesus' purposes.

Rejoices in Jesus' work (18a) – As our purposes become more aligned with Jesus', we can join Paul in rejoicing in Jesus' work, even while in difficulties. Let's read verse 18 again.

¹⁸ But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Here in verse 18, Paul does not rejoice in the difficulties of his unjust imprisonment. And we aren't to rejoice in our difficulties themselves. We are not to rejoice in what is bad. Rather, like Paul in verse 18, we are to rejoice in how Jesus is at work even in our difficulties. And Paul is not a guy who lives in denial about his difficulties. In the Bible book of 2 Corinthians Paul shares about a difficulty so hard that for a time he despaired even of life.

So Paul's rejoicing here in verse 18 isn't a superficial happiness that denies difficulties, but a mature rejoicing that trusts that Jesus is advancing His purposes even amid the difficulties. And if we don't have any of this kind of rejoicing in our lives, we may want to reflect on how closely the circle of our highest purposes aligns with Jesus' highest purposes.

For Paul, those two circles were very aligned, so he could rejoice even while in chains. It reminds me of hearing a pastor² share about another man of faith rejoicing even while in chains.

The pastor talked about Nelson Mandela's autobiography *The Long Walk to Freedom*. There Mandela shared about his experience while in a South African prison for 27 years. Over half of those years were spent working under horrible conditions in the lime quarries of Robben Island. The difficulties there designed to wear down the prisoners' bodies and spirits until all hope was gone.

And it was working until Mandela and other prisoners began to rejoice through singing. And as they rejoiced, singing folk songs and spiritual songs, encouragement and hope sprang back to life.

² Craig Barnes.

After Mandela had spent 14 years in prison, he got to see his daughter for the first time since he was imprisoned. Now an adult, she brought with her Mandela's new granddaughter. In their tradition the grandfather names the child, and when his daughter asked for the child's name, Mandela immediately said "Zaziwe", which means hope.

When Mandela named his granddaughter "Hope", the discrimination of apartheid was still in effect and he was only halfway through his imprisonment, 13 long, difficult years to go. Most would look at his circumstances and say there was no reason for hope, yet Mandela continued to rejoice through singing.

Next Step

And may we rejoice, seeing in our difficulties that Jesus is at work and seeing something of His dreams for how things will be in the fullness of His kingdom.

So that's our next step this morning, in difficulty, rejoice in Jesus' work. As we go through Philippians, we'll see Paul call us many times to join him in rejoicing in Jesus. So I'm starting to think this whole rejoicing even when in difficulties thing might be really important.



But it's also really difficult, at least for me. When God isn't giving you what you want, allowing you to stay in a difficult, discouraging circumstance, it's hard to try to see how Jesus is at work. It's even harder to ask: "How can I rejoice?" Not rejoicing in the difficulty, but in how Jesus is working to advance the gospel in my life and in the lives of others in the difficulty.

Just this week I had an event trigger an ongoing difficulty. Nothing compared to what Paul and many others face, but a difficulty. And that night I'm thinking about it in bed and having trouble going to sleep. So I get out of bed. It's almost one in the morning, and I go in the bathroom. And there I pray and think about, "How might Jesus be at work as I'm in this? How can I rejoice?"

And I'm able to see some ways Jesus might be at work in me and in others in this difficulty. And He helps me to bring my circle a little closer to His, and to rejoice a little in His work amid the difficulty. And then I lie back down and fall asleep. That's where I'm living, and why this passage matters to me.

And this passage also makes me think of a conversation with Isaiah Cooke. Many of you knew Isaiah, but for any who didn't, Isaiah and his wife Erin went through a very difficult battle

with cancer that ended in Isaiah's passing a few months ago, in just his early 30s. About a year ago I had a conversation with Isaiah at his apartment. Erin said I could share with you.

That day Isaiah shared with me about how Jesus was working through his suffering, growing Isaiah's appreciation for the importance of relationships, of the importance of the person right in front of him, Jesus making Isaiah much more empathetic.

Isaiah also shared that if it was up to him, despite his growth, he'd still gladly choose the no cancer route instead since things had been so, so hard. But in deep difficulty, Isaiah was able to find a place where Jesus was working, and in that, he rejoiced. That day I saw a courageous young man who had a lot of overlap between his circle and Jesus'.

As Paul sought to encourage the Philippians so long ago, so that day Isaiah's encouragement in Jesus' work spread to me. May we, like Isaiah, rejoice in Jesus' work. And as our encouragement grows, may we then share it with others, as Isaiah did with me.

We're going to ask Jesus to help us with that. After we pray together, Jake will play as we each spend a few minutes seeking Jesus' help in our difficulties. Let's pray...