"*Rejoicing in Chains*"

Philippians 1:12-18

January 18, 2026

Prayer (Phil 1:9-11)

Wherever you are is an open mission field for the gospel. It may seem closed. It may feel closed. But it is open by virtue of the fact that you are there as a Spirit-inhabited follower of Jesus who has been commissioned as an ambassador of the gospel.

God is at work. God is always at work. And He is specifically at work wherever His people are. One of the ways that we can enter into this reality is to begin each day praying, ***"Lord, show me how to be a part of what You are doing today to advance Your redemptive purposes."*** This is one of the ways that we can poise ourselves to walk in the joy of the Lord, because seeing God at work has the impact of fueling our joy.

As we return to our study of *Invincible Joy* in Philippians, we get the strong sense that the most joyful man in Rome is the guy chained to a Roman soldier. His joy is not the product of pleasant circumstances but rather strategic living. The very purpose of His life to advance the gospel is flourishing as God providentially works through unexpected means.

The heart of today's passage is this: ***The advancement of the gospel is cause for rejoicing regardless of the costly circumstances through which it spreads.*** *This is because the sharing the gospel is the top priority of our mission as believers. We have many responsibilities, but <u>one purpose</u> to love and honor God. Many obligations, but <u>one mission</u> to spread to the gospel to all who will listen.*

You can imagine that when the Philippians heard that Paul had been arrested for preaching the gospel their hearts sank at the news. "Why would God allow such a terrible setback in the spread of the gospel? What will be the implications for the church which needed Paul's leadership in the face of its own persecution?" Yet Paul writes to the Philippians to let them know that while he is bound in chains, the gospel is not shackled. **[vs. 12-14]** Paul's testimony reveals that…

1. **God may work through unexpected circumstances to advance the gospel** (Phil 1:12-14).

Paul had long desired to go to Rome. In Romans 1, Paul wrote that he had often planned to minister there but had been repeatedly prevented from going. Now he is finally in Rome, but probably not in the way that he expected or hoped to be. He is under house arrest as he awaits trial before Ceasor. Certainly, this was not Paul's plan or missionary strategy—"Let's go to Rome and get arrested for preaching the gospel! That's a good way to get publicity!"

But in God's wise providence, the Lord knew that the most effective place for Paul was not on the streets of Rome or in a synagogue. The mission field God had in mind required an *inside job*. A mission to infiltrate the imperial guard, the emperor's personal bodyguard, with the gospel, taking the gospel to the very heart of Roman society. God was strategically at work through Paul's arrest. So, Paul writes to the Philippians so that they will not be needlessly discouraged, but rather emboldened by what God is doing.

Through Paul's experience, the church would discover that our ***human limitations are not limitations for God to accomplish his purposes***. Paul's imprisonment served to advance the gospel in two ways. First, Paul says in vs. 13, "It has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ." This is remarkable! There were 9000 soldiers in the imperial guard. Paul was basically under house arrest in rented quarters. But of course, they didn't have ankle monitors in those days, so Paul was basically handcuffed to a Roman soldier. And every four hours there would be a new guard on rotation.

Acts 28:30-31 says that Paul "stayed two full years in his own rented quarters, and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered." It was during these years that Paul wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Can you imagine how many times Paul shared his testimony and articulated the gospel over those two years. How many soldiers did Paul personal testify to about Jesus? Yet the message of Christ was spreading even beyond the imperial guard. And it's not hard to imagine how? There must have been a buzz not only in the barracks but in the surrounding city about this joyful prisoner. Paul wasn't your typical criminal awaiting trial. He was abounding in the hope and joy of Christ.

The singular purpose of Paul's life was not thwarted by his adverse circumstances. Paul understood that his arrest was not an interruption to his ministry but a divine appointment for a captive audience—literally. There is some pointed application here for us. ***One of the essential aspects of walking by faith is developing the discipline of looking for and seeing the hand of God at work in our life circumstances.*** When life throws you a curve ball, you should assume there is a redemptive purpose attached to it and begin looking for God's hand in it. This does not mean that we will always be able to see God's purpose immediately, but adverse circumstances should intensify the orientation of our heart toward God.

The second way Paul's imprisonment served to advance the gospel is found in **[vs. 14]**. This is completely counterintuitive. We would expect that other believers, who heard of Paul's imprisonment, would be more cautious about speaking of Christ publicly. But these believers have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them—the Spirit who gives the courage of faith to believers. Furthermore, they see Paul's unwavering devotion to carrying on the mission of the gospel in his present circumstances. They see God at work through his imprisonment, and it strengthens their confidence in the Lord to keep preaching the gospel fearlessly.

Oh, the power of modeling faith and faithfulness through suffering! House arrest was better than other forms of imprisonment that Paul had previously experienced. But it was not pleasant. Yet Paul would not allow any form of suffering to overshadow God's call on his life to proclaim Christ—*one purpose, one mission!* This was not Paul's first rodeo. And I would suggest that one of the reasons Paul was able to remain faithful and even joyful in his current ministry is because He had ample experience with God's faithfulness through past hardships. He had a track record of God's sustaining grace.

Just consider what Paul had endured up to this point. One early church tradition suggests that Paul had been imprisoned up to 7 times throughout his lifetime (1Clem 5:6).[1] On his way to Rome under Roman custody, Paul and his companions endured a shipwreck on the Island of Malta and there he was bitten by a venomous snake from which the Lord healed him.

In 2Corinthians 11 Paul wrote,

> "Five times I received from the Jews 39 lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I've been on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches."

[1] George Guthrie, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT: Philippians*, pg. 92.

Paul's life was not easy. He endured many different forms of suffering. Yet his faithfulness to Christ, according to vs. 14, became a ministry of encouragement to embolden other believers in the ministry of the gospel.

Each of us will have our own cup of suffering throughout our lifetime. But never underestimate how God might be working in the lives of others through your humble faithfulness to Jesus amid trials.

- Peter O'Brian[2]
- Pastor Larry

We may not be able to see the full extent of God's purposes in the suffering we endure, but God is faithful to steward every hardship that He gives us the grace to endure by faith. How do we do it? By staying focused on the simplicity of our calling: *<u>One purpose</u> to honor Christ in all things; <u>One mission</u> to make Christ known. So, whatever circumstance God has you in today is an opportunity to walk in the hope and grace of Jesus.*

As we have seen vs. 12-14, *God may work through unexpected circumstances to advance the gospel*. But as we turn now to vs. 15-18, we will discover that *God may also work through imperfect messengers to advance the gospel*.

2. **God may work through imperfect messengers to advance the gospel** (Phil 1:15-18).

In vs. 14, Paul testified that through his imprisonment many of the brothers gained confidence in the Lord to speak the word fearlessly. Now in vs. 15-18, Paul identified two different kinds of preachers. **[vs. 15-18]**

One of the things that preachers, and all Christians, need to wrestle with is our motivations—including the motivations behind our ministry. Paul is experiencing the impact of both compassionate preachers as well as competitive preachers. The compassionate preachers are those who preach Christ out of good will. They are motivated by love, not only for Christ but also for Paul. They understand that his imprisonment is for the sake of Christ, to make a defense for the gospel before the Roman emperor. Paul's suffering has emboldened them to keep preaching the gospel fearlessly to advance the kingdom of God. They are stepping up in Paul's absence in a spirit of love.

But others have also been emboldened to preach, but not with the purest of motives. These are preaching with a heart of envy or rivalry. They are motivated by selfish ambition, seeking personal gain at Paul's expense. What might this personal gain look like? Perhaps it was as simple as gaining recognition as prominent preachers and effective evangelists, rising to a place of prominence in the church of Rome now that they were not overshadowed by Paul's leadership.

We don't know a lot about these competitive preachers, but we can be confident that they are not false teachers. If they were distorting the true gospel, Paul certainly would have taken them to task. For example, in Galatians Paul said that those who distort the gospel are to be accursed (Gal 1:6-9). But here Paul can rejoice that Christ is being proclaimed, even though the motives of the preachers need further sanctification.

Paul is by no means condoning impure motives in ministry. He is calling them out for their selfish ambition. But what matters most to

[2] Tony Merida and Francis Chan, *Exalting Jesus in Philippians* (Christ-centered Exposition), pg. 52

Paul, is that the gospel is going out to those who need to hear. The messengers may be personally flawed, but the message is essential. The goal of course is for us to preach a pure gospel from sincere hearts motivated by love. Paul himself modeled this in 1Thess 2 where he wrote,

> "After we had previously suffered, and we were treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, we were emboldened by our God to speak the gospel of God to you in spite of great opposition. For our exhortation did not come from error or impurity or an intent to deceive. Instead, just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please men, but rather God, who examines our hearts. For we never used flattering speech, as you know, or had greedy motives—God is our witness—and we didn't seek glory from people, either from you or from others."

There is no place for selfish ambition in ministry, yet there is an ample supply of it in the church because our flesh is prone to loving our own reputation. This is such an important issue that Paul will go on in Philippians 2 to exhort us to adopt the mind of Christ by doing nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but rather exercising greater concern for the interests of others than for ourselves (Phil 2:3-5).

The only glory that we should seek in the church is the glory of God and Christ. We should not be envious but rather *rejoice* in the fruitfulness of others. And this is precisely what Paul is doing here. He's rejoicing in the progress of the gospel, even through immature preachers. Paul could do this because his passion was the reputation of Christ, not his own. In 2Cor 4:5 Paul said, "For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bondservants for Jesus' sake." In other words, we are servants of Christ, and for His sake servants of men. As one author wrote, "*Make it your ambition to make Christ known, not yourself*."[3]

Once a month I get together with a few other pastors in our immediate area *who hold fast to the gospel*. We gather to pray for our community, for each other, and for our churches. When we first started meeting together, I said to them, "Trinity needs you to be strong. You need us to be strong. We need to support each other in the work of the kingdom because we live in a hostile world that desperately needs Christ and none of us can reach this community alone."

A competitive spirit among gospel-loving churches is a detractor from the mission Christ has given us. There's a place for discussions about particular doctrines, philosophy of ministry, best ministry practices, but where the true gospel is being proclaimed that there is salvation from sin by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone—not a Christ of our own making, but the Jesus we know from the inerrant, authoritative Scriptures alone as the Word of God—where this gospel is proclaimed, we can rejoice!

But this is also true within our own church family. Let's not grow envious of one another's gifts or roles, or ministry effectiveness. Let's rejoice in how we see God working through each person to advance His kingdom to the glory of Christ!

Now, let me draw your attention to the significance of the last word in today's passage—*rejoice*! There are two kinds of joy. First, there is an exuberance of joy that overflows our hearts when we experience the goodness of God in a variety of ways. We might call this *passive joy*. It's the reflex of a happy heart that has tasted the goodness of

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[3] Tony Merida and Francis Chan, *Exalting Jesus in Philippians* (Christ-centered Exposition), pg. 57.

God. We're joyful because something has happened to us. This is how we typically think of joy.

But the joy captured here in the word *rejoice* is an *active joy*—a joy that we exercise by faith. Don't miss the simple observation that *rejoice* is a verb. It can be defined as the act of expressing joy or gladness. But my favorite definition of rejoice is "to cause to feel joy." ***Rejoice* – to cause to feel joy** We can pursue joy by giving thanks for God's many mercies and calling to mind the grace of God and the attributes of God that gladden our heart. We worship.

This definition seems particularly appropriate here because Paul is making *a willful choice to rejoice*. In fact, in the last phrase of vs. 18 (which we will pick up on next week), Paul says, "Yes, I *will* rejoice…"!

Paul could have ruminated on the selfish ambition of the competitive preachers. He could have sulked about his imprisonment and grumbled about all the past suffering he had endured. But instead, he caused his heart to exercise joy by focusing his attitude on the good progress of the gospel.

Let me encourage you to do two things this week.

1. **Practice the discipline of *rejoicing*** (2Cor 6:10). Train your heart to rejoice. This is possible even in the turmoil and grief of painful circumstances. In 2Cor 6:10 Paul said that he was "*sorrowful yet always rejoicing*." Our hearts will feel the sorrow of our trying circumstances. The very reason we need invincible joy is because suffering is inevitable.

   Yet amid painful circumstances…
   a. We can rejoice in the redemptive hand of God (***Where is God working*?**).
   b. We can rejoice in the gracious and faithful character of God (***What truth about God's character do I need to cling to and find hope in*?**).
   c. We can rejoice in the invincible hope we have in Christ, and in the good ways that God is developing our faith, character, and ultimate joy in making us like Christ (***How can I anchor my joy to what is ultimately true?***). So, look for God's hand, remember God's faithfulness, and recall God's promises. *Rejoice*!

2. **Prioritize the progress of the gospel**. Our church could never have enough programs to adequately reach our communities for Christ. But when each of us take hold of our calling to be an ambassador for Christ, everyday has countless opportunities to impact our world for Christ.

   Where do we begin?
   - ***Adopt an awareness that you represent Jesus wherever we go*** with your demeanor, heart, words, and actions.
   - ***Pray for God to give you eyes to see where/how He's working*** and the grace to join Him in it.
   - ***Get comfortable with articulating the basic truths of the gospel***. Rehearse them to yourself. Rehearse how you would express the gospel to a particular person.
   - ***Be conscious of having a servant's heart and the courage to use your words in ways that are gracious, truthful, and redemptive*.**
   - **Keep your focus on loving God and loving people**.