

Outreach and evangelism take on many different forms, too many to count. And yet all forms of ministry have this one thing in common: they are **“for the greater progress of the Gospel.”** Those are St. Paul’s words in the section from his letter to the church in Philippi which we will be examining this morning. We’re going to talk about that and what it has to do with our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

PHILIPPIANS 1:12-18

Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the Gospel, ¹³so that my imprisonment in *the cause of Christ* has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, ¹⁴and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear. ¹⁵Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; ¹⁶the latter *do it* out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; ¹⁷the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. ¹⁸What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice.

Paul began this part of his letter with these words: **“Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the Gospel” (v.12).** This statement is the foundation for everything else he wrote here. As we learned last week, Paul was in prison in Rome in chains awaiting trial. His condition was dire: His cell was damp brick with iron bars and a dirt floor. It was pitch dark after sunset, and he slept in a pile of rotten straw. He hadn’t bathed in weeks, and he was always cold. His meal was dry bread and water. This was not Club Fed. There were no privileges here for the apostle of Christ.

However, we only know these details because of other literature and archaeological evidence. Paul, himself, didn’t say a word about it. He didn’t curse

or complain, whine or beg. He didn't whimper, "Life's not fair." But he wrote, **"my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the Gospel!"**

The theme for our study of Philippians is "God's Purpose for the Church." This is it, **"the greater progress of the Gospel,"** the furtherance of God's story of redemption for humanity. No matter what, our purpose as God's people is to proclaim that Jesus defeated death, Jesus forgave sins, and Jesus gave everyone who will receive it, a new heart.

Remember the story of Paul's conversion? The Ascended Christ spoke to Ananias, the man who would share with Paul the Gospel. Jesus said to Ananias, **"(Paul) is a chosen instrument of mine, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake" (Acts 9:15-16).** And then after Paul came to faith, Jesus spoke to him too. He said, **"you must (be my) witness at Rome" (Acts 23:11).** Now with the writing of this letter to the Philippian church, after 20 years of ministry, Paul is in prison in Rome, and he was just fine. Everything was going according to plan, God's plan.

Paul saw himself as only a tool in the hands of God; he was but a pawn in the court of his king. Everything he lived for was **"for the greater progress of the Gospel."**

To the Philippians, Paul wrote **"that my imprisonment in *the cause of Christ* has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else" (v.13).** The praetorian guard was the special forces of the Roman army—like the Seals to the Navy—numbering somewhere in the neighborhood of 9,000 men. One factoid is that they were paid twice as much as regular enlisted men. There were only a handful of the guard, of course, whom Paul initially had contact with. But his situation was unique.

Paul had been arrested because of a complaint by the Jewish mucky mucks. It was a nothing burger. But because he was a Roman citizen, and because he had appealed to Caesar, the Roman governor in Israel was compelled by law to send him to Rome. **"You have appealed to Caesar, to Caesar you shall go"** he said **(Acts 25:12).** Everything was going according to plan, God's plan.

False accusations and imprisonments in the Roman system were common. But the courts were fair and just. So cases were usually sorted out quickly and falsely imprisoned people were released. None of the praetorian guard would've been surprised by Paul's innocence. But there was something else about the case that caught their attention. He was half Jew and half Roman, which was an oddity in itself. But the thing that really sparked their interest was that he was the rabbi they had heard about who had been roaming all around Judea and Asia Minor teaching about the supposed Jewish messiah who had been crucified but whom many said had risen from the dead.

So the guards became conversant with their famous prisoner, and then they told other guards the story, and, as Paul wrote, they went on to tell it **"to everyone else,"** which would be the whole population of Rome! Everything was going according to plan, God's plan.

God uses unlikely means to accomplish his purpose: he uses water to introduce us to his Kingdom; he uses bread and wine to renew our communion with him. And he uses his Word to motivate us to love other people and tell them about Jesus. When an elite band of soldiers was converted by this Word, they were compelled in their hearts to share the story with their brother warriors, with their families, and with their neighbors. Paul lit the fire, and God fueled it with the wind of his Spirit.

You can't plan this. We can pray, we can worship and study our Bibles, we can commit ourselves to acts of service and outreach, but it is the Holy Spirit who moves in people's hearts and persuades them to relinquish themselves to the lordship of Jesus.

Further, Paul wrote **"that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the Word of God without fear" (v.14).** Despite his imprisonment, his work continued. There was a mass conversion of the Roman military, plus other preachers who had grown timid because of the persecution were strengthened because of Paul's success and courage.

This is important. Never did Paul berate the preachers who had gone underground for fear of persecution. He always knew that things could go

sideways at any moment, and he wanted each person to know that their decision to bear a cross was between him and the Lord. But he did promise them this: Joy—you will have joy. Whether you live or die, you will know for eternity the joy of living in the heart of Jesus Christ.

He continued, writing that **“Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; ¹⁶ the latter *do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the Gospel; ¹⁷ the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment” (vv.15-17).***

Evidently, Paul had learned there were preachers who were jealous of him, and they were pleased that he had been arrested. With Paul behind bars, they'd get some limelight. Indeed, there've always been preachers with motives which were soiled by pride and envy: One wants a church because he wants to have control over other people's lives. Another one is in the ministry to make a name for himself. Another one wants to build for himself a little fiefdom.

But here's the teaching: Paul does not care! He wrote, **“What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice” (v.18).** He was not concerned about motives. Whether the preacher preached the Gospel from envy or for love, from selfish ambition or for the salvation of souls, he did not care, but only that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was proclaimed, that God's purpose for the church was not watered down, that the center of the message of everyone who opened their mouth on behalf of God was Jesus.

When Carol asks me, What are your preaching about on Sunday, I always say, I have three points: Jesus, Jesus, and Jesus. And she rolls her eyes, and she says, I know THAT.

But that is the point, isn't it? Jesus: Get the story straight, and everything else flows from that. Brothers and sisters in Christ, you don't have to be perfect to share this story. Paul says he doesn't even care about one's motives because it's the message that counts.

Outreach is not about making ourselves perfect in order to have a perfect message. For the message is already perfect. We don't have to worry over whether or not our motives are pure, for the Gospel is pure, and God can and will take care of the rest.

Brothers and sister in Christ, this week, let us prayerfully consider our part here at Faith **“for the greater progress of the Gospel.”**

This week, let us take hold of the story of Jesus as our own, and let us each think about why we love him so. This is the story you will share as a servant of the King of Kings, and he will use it for his glory.

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.