

Philippians 1:12-18 — Nothing Can Stop The Gospel!

May 10, 2020

Good morning CrossWinds. Social distancing has changed our lives. For some, social distancing changed life in a big way. I have a friend whose daughter was planning a big wedding this spring. They called it off and replaced it with a small ceremony only involving the bride, groom, parents, and a pastor. Social distancing stopped that bride's dream wedding. I have another friend in Michigan who runs two businesses at Silver Lake Sand Dunes. Both businesses are shut down. My friends don't know if they will survive financially. Social distancing stopped their thriving businesses in their tracks. Of course, we also have our own high school students. They were looking forward to a great senior year with graduation parties. All that came to a screeching halt. There are a lot of things this pandemic brought to a complete halt. This morning, we are talking about one thing this virus cannot stop. There is one thing social distancing cannot hold back. What is it? We will find out in a moment.

We are studying the book of Philippians. In the verses we are studying this morning, we find that while a virus can stop weddings; it can shut down businesses; it can devastate the financial markets; it can even take the lives of people we love. One thing a virus cannot do is stop the progress of the gospel. Nothing, absolutely nothing, can stop the progress of the gospel.

A virus cannot stop the gospel's ability to save lives and change lives. In fact, it is when the gospel faces its greatest opposition and Christians are most restrained that the gospel seems to make some of its best progress. It often makes that progress in the most unexpected ways.

This is especially important for us to hear as a church. During this pandemic, when we have limited ability to meet for worship, when we have limited finances and abilities to build relationships, it feels like the church is being snuffed out. We need not worry. Nothing can stop the progress of the gospel. If we share the gospel in the limited opportunities God gives us, we can be confident the gospel will spread and for that, we are filled with joy.

Today, we are in Philippians 1:12-18. Follow along in your copy of God's Word as I read those verses; then we will study them together.

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 to 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 good will. 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. Yes, and I will rejoice... Philippians 1:12-18 (ESV)

Remember Paul's circumstances. He was in prison in the city of Rome. In the book of Romans, chapter 1, Paul told us he longed to travel to Rome to share the gospel. Paul made it to Rome. He just went to Rome in a way he didn't expect. He went as a prisoner.

This is described in Acts 21-28. In Jerusalem, Paul was attacked by a Jewish mob. The Romans arrested Paul not because he committed a crime but to protect him from the mob of Jews that wanted to kill him. When there was a plot on Paul's life, the Romans sent him by night to Caesarea. There he was in prison for two years. Paul eventually appealed his case to Caesar so Paul was taken to Rome for the decision of his case. When he arrived in Rome, Acts tells

us he stayed in a rented house under house arrest for two years. The entire time, he was chained to a Roman guard. Paul was in prison four to five years for a crime he didn't commit.

Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians as a thank you note for them sending Epaphroditus to help Paul personally along with a monetary gift to help Paul financially.

There are some interesting structural issues taking place in this letter. Just as we follow a format when we write a letter to a friend, people during this time followed a format when they wrote letters to friends. We put a date on the top right of a letter. We write the name of the person we are addressing at the top left of the letter. We sign off at the bottom of the letter with the word "Sincerely" followed by our name. That is our letter-writing format.

In the ancient world, they also had a letter-writing format. Their format was more sophisticated than ours. The first part of an ancient letter always began by identifying yourself and to whom you were writing. Paul did that in the first two verses of Philippians when he identified himself as Paul and also identified Timothy, servants of Jesus Christ writing to the saints who are in Philippi.

The next part of any ancient letter always contained a brief section where you wished well to those to whom you wrote. We studied that part of Paul's letter to the Philippians last week. That is when Paul told the Philippians he remembered them and prayed for them with joy. The third part of an ancient letter involved telling people how you were doing. Every ancient letter needed to contain this brief section summarizing how the author of the letter was fairing in

life. This is where we find ourselves in an interesting dilemma. This is where Paul varied this letter from the customary letter writing style.

Paul should have talked about himself and how he was doing. If Paul was honest, he should have done a lot of complaining at this point. He should have been talking about how bad the food was under house arrest. He should have been talking about how difficult it was to be chained to a guard. He should have been talking about how lonely he felt far from his friends. He should have been talking about how much anxiety he felt as he waited on death row to hear about Nero's decision on his life. Paul didn't talk about any of those things.

Instead of talking about how he was doing, he talked about something more important to him. He talked about how the gospel was doing in the city of Rome. What mattered more to Paul than comforts in his life was the progress of the gospel in the city.

As I thought about this, I found this very challenging on a personal level. If I was writing an e-mail right now and I knew I needed to tell people how I was doing and about what was important to me, I would be tempted to talk about the dip in the stock market, the loneliness of social distancing, and the difficulty some people are having with work. That is what is foremost in my mind. But Paul challenged me. Is that what is most important in this world? Isn't the most important thing to talk about the progress of the gospel in my personal life, in the lives of my children, in the life of my church, and in the life of my community? Since that is the most important thing in life, that is where we should find our joy

in life. This is a challenge for all of us. Let us rejoice in the progress of the gospel more than the comfort of our lives.

This morning, our study will break into three parts all related to nothing being able to stop the progress of the gospel. First, we will see prison couldn't stop the progress of the gospel outside the church. Second, we will see that prison couldn't stop the progress of the gospel inside the church. Third, even preachers with bad motives couldn't stop the progress of the gospel. Nothing can stop the gospel's progress.

The direct application for today is that even COVID-19 — during times of social distancing, financial challenges, and our inability to meet as a church — can't stop the progress of the gospel in our community and our lives. If we will speak the gospel and share the good news of the gospel to people God brings across our paths, I guarantee you the gospel will make progress. Lives will be saved. People will be changed.

Paul's imprisonment couldn't stop the progress of the gospel outside the church.

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel... Philippians 1:12 (ESV)

The Philippians knew Paul was off the front lines when it came to sharing the gospel. Paul was incarcerated for four to five years. Paul had a mission to reach the world for Christ but doing that from prison was not the easiest thing to accomplish.

Paul wanted the Philippians to know, the opposite of what they expected out of his imprisonment was taking place. Instead of a Roman jail constraining the gospel, God was using Paul's presence in a Roman jail to spread the gospel.

Paul said, “What has happened to me has *really* served to advance the gospel.” The word “really” is the Greek word *mallon*. It carries the idea of an unexpected surprise. People thought jail would contain the gospel message. Paul said, “Surprise surprise.” Jail surprised everyone and was allowing him to advance the gospel.

Another important Greek word is the word *advanced*. The word advance in the Greek in nautical terms means to make progress against a headwind. Sometimes the word is used with an army. In that case it means to blaze a trail by removing obstacles in preparation for the arrival of an army. Instead of jail hindering the progress of the gospel, surprise surprise, God was using Paul’s time in jail as a way to prepare for a much greater advance of the gospel in the city of Rome. Paul was clearing the path for what would soon become a worldwide spread of the gospel throughout the Roman empire. He was doing all of it from prison.

Just as putting Paul in the prison when he was in Philippi didn’t stop the progress of the gospel — because God surprised everyone and used an earthquake to swing open all the prison doors to lead the Philippian jailer to Christ — now the gospel was advancing while Paul was in a different jail, a Roman jail. The gospel was surprising everyone and advancing in different but equally miraculous ways in Rome, just like it did in Philippi. I like the way Paul emphasized to Timothy that jail cannot stop the progress of the gospel.

...for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! 2 Timothy 2:9 (ESV)

Right now people are panicked because they cannot stop the advance of a virus. The gospel's advance is more unstoppable than COVID-19. Nothing can stop the advance of the gospel. It will make progress.

Let's see how God was using Paul's imprisonment to advance the gospel in Rome in an unexpected way.

...so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. Philippians 1:13 (ESV)

Let's talk about the imperial guard. Some translations say the Praetorian guard. These were an elite Roman military unit. The soldiers were hand-picked. They were limited to 9,000 in number. They were given double pay, good pensions, and special duties. They were also given leadership positions in the Roman empire. They were very powerful. They also served as bodyguards of the Roman emperor. They were called king makers. Every Roman emperor was chosen by the Praetorian guard. They were that powerful in Rome. Paul was chained to one of them 24 hours a day for two years. Typically, they worked six-hour shifts — four different soldiers a day. Their goal was to make sure it was impossible for Paul to escape. In reality, Paul had them where he wanted them. It was impossible for them to escape. Paul had a captive audience. He had six hours to talk about Jesus with four of them. In other passages of Scripture, where Paul described his chains during imprisonment, the Greek word he used to describe those chains is especially descriptive. It describes a short wrist chain, similar to handcuffs. The chain was around 12 inches.

These elite soldiers were chained to the apostle Paul in six-hour shifts no farther than 12 inches away from him. Could there be a better way to help them

learn about Jesus? Even if Paul wasn't talking to them about Jesus, they were part of every conversation he had when he talked to someone else about Jesus. They were even watching over his shoulder when he wrote this letter. Since they were so close to Paul, they knew the real Paul. They knew how he lived day in and day out. They saw him on the hard days and the good days. They saw his grace, his kindness, his joy, his gentleness. They knew his faith was real and it changed his life. This was like being chained to Billy Graham. How could they help but become Christians?

I am sure people in the church of Rome prayed about reaching the powerful officials in Roman government with the gospel. They never expected God would answer their prayer by chaining members of the elite Praetorian guard to Paul for two years. Did it work? Did these powerful men come to Christ? Yes, many of them became Christians. They then shared the gospel with their families. Next, they shared the gospel around the household of Caesar himself. How do we know? As Paul closed this letter, in Philippians 4:22, he said these words:

All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. Philippians 4:22 (ESV)

That closing phrase would have shocked the Philippians. People in Caesar's own household were trusting in Christ! How did that happen? The answer was Paul being chained to the members of the Praetorian guard.

How does this apply to you and me? Some of us are chained at home right now. Others of us are chained to a desk at work. Some of us are chained to a laptop finishing our schoolwork. Still others of us are chained to an assembly

line. Some of us are chained to a hospital bed or a dialysis machine. Wherever we are chained, God has us there for a reason. That is the place he put us because he wants us to advance the gospel in that place because he has anchored us to that place. If God anchored Paul in prison to advance the gospel. He has you anchored where you are right now to advance the gospel.

This also includes your neighborhood. God has given your neighbors to advance the gospel with them. God has anchored you in your apartment complex to advance the gospel there. God has anchored you in your place of work to share the gospel in your place of business.

This is not just true of the good times but this also holds true in the tough times. Sometimes God changes where he anchors us. He takes us places we didn't plan to go. When there are sudden and unexpected changes in our plans, that doesn't mean there were sudden and unexpected changes in God's plan for us. Just as Paul ending up in prison wasn't part of his plan, but it was part of God's good plan for him, in the same way when we face unexpected changes in our lives, God has allowed them for a good reason.

I know some people have recently lost their jobs with cutbacks because of the economy. That is a change in your plan, but it was not a change in God's good plan for you. He is simply moving you from one place he had you sharing the gospel to another place to share the gospel.

Later in Philippians, Paul told us to not grumble, whine, and complain. We grumble, whine, and complain when things do not go according to our plans, but if God is moving us from one place to another to be witnesses for him, our

grumbling, whining, and complaining will only serve to destroy our witnesses for him. See how Paul talked about this in Philippians 2.

Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world... Philippians 2:14–15 (ESV)

This principle reminds me of Chuck Colson. He was caught up in Watergate and as a result spent eight months in jail. God took him from the White House to the jailhouse. In jail, he met people he would have never met. God changed where he chained Chuck. God did it for a reason. In Chuck's best-selling book, Born Again, he wrote these words, which have a great resemblance to the words Paul penned in these verses.

I found myself increasingly drawn to the idea that God had put me in prison for a purpose and that I should do something for those I had left behind. - Chuck Colson, Born Again

Paul realized he was suffering in prison for a purpose, to share the gospel with the Praetorian guard. Chuck realized he was in prison for a purpose, to share the gospel with his fellow prisoners and ultimately to realize God was changing the mission of his life. After getting out of prison, Chuck Colson gave the rest of his life to serving and sharing the gospel with those locked away in prison. He founded Prison Fellowship in 1976. That organization has become the nation's largest Christian ministry serving prisoners and their families.

Paul's imprisonment couldn't stop the advance of the gospel outside the church. Let's see how prison couldn't stop the advance of the gospel inside the church.

Paul's imprisonment gave more gospel-courage to those inside the church.

And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Philippians 1:14 (ESV)

After the Christians in Rome heard about Paul's brave witness to the Praetorian guard, they were encouraged in their faith. When they heard about these elite soldiers becoming Christians because of Paul's bold witness when he was chained to them, the Christians in Rome were encouraged to speak about Jesus with more courage in public because of Paul's courage to share with the Praetorian guard in private.

Roman Christians being fearful to speak about Jesus in the city of Rome was understandable. In approximately two years, Nero's lunacy would reach its peak with the great fire of Rome. He would burn a large portion of the city then blame Christians, making them the scapegoat. There was already hostility toward Christians in Rome at this time. Christians would only worship Jesus as God while Nero demanded Christians worship him as a God. To avoid trouble, Christians in Rome kept their faith hidden.

God used Paul's imprisonment to change that. When Roman Christians saw Paul's boldness to share Christ in jail, they were encouraged to have more boldness in sharing Christ out of jail. Paul said the majority of Roman Christians became "much more bold" in sharing their faith. The Greek word behind the English phrase "much more bold" means to display great courage even in the face of death. Let me give you a contemporary example of what the means.

Last week, Cindy, Deanna, and I were flipping through television channels. One channel was playing a Mission Impossible movie. Since Deanna hadn't seen

any of those movies, we decided to watch it as a family. It was the one where Tom Cruise climbs a rope dangling from a helicopter hundreds of feet in the air. He falls, catches himself on the rope, and is able to climb the rope again. Eventually he gets in the helicopter and saves the day. I know none of those scenes took place. It is all computer graphics but it still gives me butterflies in my stomach to watch. Tom Cruise portrays an action hero who embodies courage in the face of what could be death. He is willing to risk his life. That is what Paul was describing. Christians all over Rome followed his example and were willing to risk their lives to share about Christ with great boldness out of jail just as he did in jail. The Christians of Rome were like Tom Cruise action heroes running around Rome. The gospel was making progress. Nothing could stop it.

There is a great application for us. When we courageously live for Christ or share the gospel of Christ, we will inspire other Christians around us to do the same thing. The courage we have when we live our faith will inspire other Christians to have courage as they live their faith.

I think of the story of Eric Liddell. He was an amazing Olympic runner set to run in the Olympics. When he arrived at the Olympics, he discovered his race was on a Sunday. He refused to run out of conviction that he should honor God on the Sabbath. They ended up switching Eric to a different race in the Olympics. Even though he never trained for that race or had ever run in that race, he won the gold medal. After that stunning Olympic medal, when he came home, he turned his back on all the prestige and became a missionary in China. Like Paul, he felt the progress of the gospel was more important than anything else in this

world. The progress of the gospel is what brought him more joy than an Olympic medal.

Countless men and women have been inspired to courageously live for Christ because of Eric Liddell's example. Many Christians were inspired by his courage to put honoring his God before before honoring his sport. Many other Christians were encouraged to turn their backs on wealth, fame, and earthly prestige and to pour their lives into spreading the gospel, because the growth of the gospel is of greater value than any pleasure this world can offer. Courageous bold examples of living for Christ in this life inspire other Christians to live with greater boldness for Jesus in their lives. That is what Paul's example did for the gospel in Rome.

Each of us have the opportunity to do the same with our lives. Live courageously for Christ and get out of your comfort zone to share Christ, and when you do, you will inspire others to do the same.

Envious evangelists preaching the gospel with impure motives couldn't stop the progress of the gospel.

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. 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. Yes, and I will rejoice... Philipians 1:15–18 (ESV)

While Paul was in prison, others in Rome were preaching the gospel. Not everyone was preaching the gospel with pure motives. Some were preaching the gospel from good will. Their desire was the progress of the gospel. They were on Paul's team. They didn't care about their names. They cared about the gospel's fame.

Paul said there was another group out there. With Paul in prison, they were preaching the gospel but they were preaching the gospel out of envy or rivalry. Since Paul was locked up, they saw this as their chance to take Paul's place of prominence in the church. They saw this as their opportunity to steal people from Paul so they could have all the attention focused on themselves. They saw Paul's imprisonment as an opportunity to make their names famous and to throw Paul under the bus. These guys were preaching the right gospel, but they were preaching that gospel with the wrong motive — selfish ambition.

Even though they were sharing the gospel, the desire of their hearts was popularity, fame, and prestige.

Paul also said they were undermining him. How were they undermining him? Paul didn't tell us, but we can guess what they were probably saying. I suspect some claimed the reason Paul was in jail was because God put him there to punish a secret sin in his life. That was the same accusation Job's friends leveled at him for his suffering.

There was also probably the name-it-claim-it group that claimed Paul was in jail only because he didn't have enough faith. If he had enough faith, he would be wealthy and healthy like they were. This was the prosperity gospel crowd.

First Peter 5 tells us Christian leaders may be preaching the right gospel but they can do it for the wrong motives. Some preach the gospel for money. Others preach the gospel for power, influence, and control over people. Third John 9 tells us about someone like this. His name was Diotrephes. He was known as the man who always had to be first. He had to be the center of

attention in every room. He was preaching the right gospel with the wrong motives.

How did Paul handle this? He didn't get upset. He left his reputation in God's hands. I love what he said, "As long as the gospel is being preached and the gospel is making progress in people's lives, I will rejoice." Even if his reputation was being destroyed by corrupt evangelists sharing the pure gospel with impure motives, his was OK.

If the message was pure but the messenger was impure, that was OK, because the growth of the gospel was more important to Paul than his reputation. Nothing can stop the progress of the gospel, even the corruptness of the person speaking it!

There is great application for us. When the gospel is spoken it carries God's supernatural power. *The gospel can make progress and people are born again even when the motives of the preacher are wrong. This also means the gospel will make progress even when our ability to share it is weak.* Few of us are skilled communicators. When many of us share our faith, the best we can do is share our testimony and quote John 3:16. That may feel spiritually weak and ineffective, but it is not! That pure but simple gospel message is imbued with the power of God to change lives, even if it is spoken by people with impure motives and even if it is spoken by people who lack eloquence and linguistic poise. The message of the gospel is what produces life change, not the messenger of the gospel.

This should be great encouragement for us. Don't be afraid to tell people that God loves them. Don't be afraid to tell people God sent his son to die for their sin and to free them from the power and punishment of their sin. Don't be afraid to invite people to confess their sin and place and trust in Jesus Christ to forgive their sin so they can be born again. Even if we are unskilled in presenting that message, that won't change the supernatural power of God to use that message.

On the other side, it is worth noting that if a gospel speaker's message was wrong, and they were presenting a different gospel, we see a different reaction from Paul. We see this in Paul's letter to the Galatians.

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. Galatians 1:8–9 (ESV)

Why did Paul beat on the Galatians but not on the envious evangelists in Philippians? What matters is the message more than the messenger. I can overlook a messed up messenger but I cannot overlook an impure message.

How can we apply this to our lives?

Hard times are not a derailment of God's plans, they are part of God's plan. They give us new ways to share the gospel.

God had Paul in prison for a good reason. Prison for five years was a change in Paul's plans, but it was all part of God's good plan. God used prison to chain the powerful Praetorian guards so Paul could lead them to Christ, which led many in the leadership of Rome to Christ. As Christians, God has a reason for every hard and unexpected change we face in life. He is simply moving us to

a different group of people so we can share the gospel with those people and be a light for Christ to those people. Hard times may be a derailment in our plans for our lives but they are not a derailment in God's good plan for our lives. He is just giving us a new mission.

God anchors us where he wants us to share the gospel.

Wherever God has us right now, he has us for a reason. He has us in our neighborhoods to share the gospel with those around us. He has us around our neighbors to love and serve them and make the gospel attractive. If God has us chained to a hospital bed, he has us there for a reason. A great encouragement to me in this was my mother. I remember my mother in the nursing home while she was dying of cancer. She used her final days in the nursing home to tell the nurses about Jesus. She would have never met them unless she had cancer so she reasoned God had her in the nursing home to tell the nurses about Jesus. I pray I can look at where God anchors us the same way.

Joy comes from the progress of the gospel, not the comfort of our circumstances. The progress of the gospel is the most important thing in this world.

Where do we find our joy? It is easy to find joy in our circumstances and our bank accounts. It is also easy to lose our joy when our circumstances are not good and our bank accounts diminish. Paul challenged us to find joy in what really matters, which is the progress of the gospel in our lives and in the lives of others around us. Paul found joy in jail, because people were coming to Christ. Paul found joy when other Christians were encouraged to be more bold for Christ. Paul even had joy when his reputation was being destroyed but the

gospel was still being preached. For Paul, the progress of the gospel is what gave him joy.

Where do we find joy in our lives? Where do we put most of our hopes, thoughts and prayers?

When we speak the gospel, nothing can stop the progress of the gospel.

The gospel is the most unstoppable force in the world. It is more powerful than an army. It is more unstoppable than a virus. No amount of social distancing can hold it back. If we will only speak it, no matter how restrained we find our lives, God's gospel will spread, lives will be changed, and people will be born again. Paul said it this way.

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. Romans 10:14–15, 17 (ESV)

My friends, will we speak the gospel and let God use this powerful message to change the world or will we be silent?

This week, will you prayerfully make it your goal to share the good news of Jesus with one person God brings into your life? Will you join me in praying each day for God to open a window of opportunity where he has anchored us to tell one person about Jesus? When we are restrained, God opens doors of opportunity in surprising ways for the gospel to make progress in this world, because absolutely nothing can stop it. Just as Paul was surprised by the way the gospel made progress when he was locked in jail, we will be surprised by the

way the gospel will make progress if we will merely speak it to those God brings into our lives this week.

Let's pray for God to give us one clear opportunity to share the gospel message with someone who needs to hear it before next Sunday. Absolutely nothing can stop the gospel!



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