

“Whatever Happens to the Christian, Happens to Serve the Gospel”

Today we encounter an amazing perspective on life that the apostle Paul has.

He says in our text today that “I want you to know brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.”

What Paul is saying here is that he believes that everything that is happening to him has a special purpose, and that purpose is to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ in the world.

What is happening to Paul?

Last week I shared with you a bit about what happened to him. Paul was spreading the gospel in the Mediterranean world when a famine hit the holy city of Jerusalem. The small band of Jewish Christians there were already suffering persecution because of their faith, and now with the famine their suffering became even worse. Paul, himself being Jewish, had a deep love for his people so he wanted to collect a love offering from all the Gentile churches in order to take to Jerusalem to help out the Christians there.

In his mind it was the least those churches could do. After all, were it not for God’s covenant promise made to the Jews to bless all the nations of the earth through her, the Gentiles would have remained in darkness, and not been engrafted into the family of God. So Paul went to Jerusalem with the love offering, but while there he was falsely accused of polluting the temple and undermining the Law of Moses, and he was arrested. Fearing that he would not get a fair trial, he appealed to his Roman citizenship and went to Rome to await trial. While he was in Rome he wrote this letter of encouragement to the Philippians. He wanted them to know that as bad as his situation seemed, God was using it for a greater good. God was using Paul’s chains to advance the gospel in the world.

We also learn from our text of another difficulty that Paul was experiencing. The persecution wasn’t just coming from outside the church, but from the inside as well.

In v.15-18 of the text we learn that there were some ministers of the gospel who were gloating over the fact that Paul was in prison.

We don’t know a lot about this situation, but there seems to have been some “rival” preachers of the gospel that did not like Paul. Consequently, they were inwardly rejoicing that he was in prison, perhaps because it gave them an opportunity to win more people to their church, or for them to say something to the effect of “Paul is not a true minister of the gospel, because if he were then he wouldn’t be getting into all the trouble that he is in.” We don’t know the exact nature of the problems that these preachers were stirring up for Paul, but we do know that there were other Christians who were causing him problems.

This might come as a surprise to some, and it certainly is most unfortunate, but the fact of the matter is that sometimes even amongst ministers, churches, and preachers, bitter conflicts and strife can arise from within the fold. The Bible certainly attests to that.

In the OT we see all kinds of backbiting from within the fold. People choosing sides. I'm with Aaron, I'm with Moses. I'm with David, I'm with Saul. I'm with this King, or this prophet. In the New Testament we see jealousy arise between the disciples of Jesus and John the Baptist, or even amongst the 12 disciples themselves. In I Corinthians Paul speaks of a great many factions and divisions in the church. I follow Paul; I follow Apollos; I follow Jesus. And because of those factions the groups were working to undermine one another. The church, for sure, is still comprised of sinners.

Paul was experiencing this in his life. But look at his attitude. Paul said that even though these preachers are making life difficult for me, at least they are preaching the gospel. *(It must be said here that if they weren't preaching the gospel then Paul wouldn't have said the nice things he said about them in Philippians. Paul never had anything nice to say about heretics. To those who preached a perverted gospel he said that he wished that they would go castrate themselves.)* But at least these rivals were preaching the gospel, even though their motives were wrong. "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." (v.18)

So what we see here in the text today is that Paul understood the hand of God to be at work in all of the problems that he was facing. There were problems outside of the camp and there were problems on the inside, but Paul believed that somehow God was working through all of it, for the purpose of advancing the gospel.

In his letter to the Romans Paul said something profound concerning life's circumstances in the life of the Christian. He said, "And we know that in all things God works together for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose." (Rom. 8:28)

Paul did not say that all things that happen to us are good. And here in our text he is not necessarily saying that being in prison for a crime that he did not commit is a good thing either.

All the things that happen to us in this life are *not* good. This world is broken and fallen; bad things happen to us. All of us experience difficulty, sickness, disease, injustice, job loss, depression, broken relationships, catastrophes, and a whole host of the other things in this life that are difficult to swallow. But Paul says that he believes that even in the midst of the bad stuff God is still working together for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose. It is chiefly because of his strong belief in the sovereign hand of God at work in his life that Paul was able to see the hand of God even in his imprisonment.

Joseph, in the OT, saw the same principle at work in his own life too. That is why I choose the text from Genesis 50.

You remember the story. Young Joseph was a young, cocky hotshot, who had dreams of being great one day. His older brothers were offended by his arrogance so they fixed him real good. They sold Joseph into slavery down in Egypt. They meant it for bad, but God used it for good, for the advancement of the gospel, because later in the story a famine would strike the Promised Land and Joseph would end up saving his father, his brothers, and their families by bringing them down to Egypt, where God had blessed Joseph to a position of high standing. Joseph was able to save his brothers from starvation. Joseph said to his brothers, “Do not be afraid. You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” (Gen 50:20)

For those of us who are in Jesus Christ this is a wonderful principle for us to remember. Our suffering has a purpose. God uses it to bring about good in our lives and in the world.

Let us now look at how God was doing this good thing through Paul’s imprisonment. The good thing that God was doing was He was advancing the gospel in the world.

Through Suffering, the Gospel Advances in Our Lives

The first way that the gospel is advancing is in the life of the apostle himself.

Much of what Paul is talking about in this text, in regards to the advancement of the gospel, has to do with evangelism, the spread of the gospel to others. But on this first point I would like for us to see how the gospel actually advances within the life of the Christian himself. The gospel still needs to advance in our lives, does it not? Is not the Christian life a lifelong journey of growing into the full measure of Christ?

God was using the imprisonment to deepen Paul’s faith through this time of testing. God was using the difficult circumstances to build him up and to cause him to rely more heavily upon Jesus Christ. That is what our difficulties will do for us; they will cause us to cast our burdens upon the Lord, because they are too difficult for us to bear alone. This is a good thing because it teaches us deeper dependence upon God. While suffering in prison Paul had great reason to (and much time for) praying and studying the scriptures.

The point here is that God causes the gospel to advance in our own lives through our sufferings.

Through Suffering, the Gospel Advances in the Lives of Those Who Do Not Yet Believe

The second way the gospel is advancing is in the lives of those who are not Christian. This gets us into the evangelism bit.

The text tells us in v. 13 that “it has become clear to the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.”

Because of Paul’s imprisonment he was able to share his faith, both through word and example, with people who otherwise might never have heard the gospel. Because of his chains he was able

to share Christ with the soldiers who guarded him. They, in turn, would have passed the word along to people who lived in the imperial household. And it is likely that the word would have spread outside of the imperial palace and out into the neighborhoods. Paul's chains were having a domino effect.

Paul took his difficult circumstance and he saw the sovereign hand of God in it and he said to himself this is my situation in life at this time, this is where God has permitted me to be, so what does God want me to do in the midst of my situation? God wants me to do the same thing that I was doing when I was free. God wants me to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When one is suffering one's witness for Christ becomes very powerful. People's lives are positively impacted when they see you remaining faithful to Christ in the midst of your suffering. There is no greater witness.

The Suffering, the Gospel Advances in the Lives of Other Believers

The final way the gospel is advancing is in the lives of other believers.

Paul tells us in v.14 that "Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the Word of God more courageously and fearlessly."

The people that Paul was close to in the faith caught fire because of Paul's example. Perhaps they thought to themselves if he can do that while in prison then most certainly I can do that with my life while I am free. And should I ever end up getting in trouble for Christ, our brother Paul has shown us the way. We must remain faithful to God's calling in our lives, regardless of how difficult things might get. Paul's witness empowered other believers to do what God has called us all to do, to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ in the world.

This means that for anyone who is here today and is suffering God wants you to show us the way. For one day we too shall face suffering, one day we too shall stare the prospects of death face to face, one day we too might be persecuted for our faith, either outside the church, or even inside the church, and we will need the encouragement that you have shown to us by your faithfulness.

We want you to point us to Jesus in the midst of the suffering. Show us what it means to be faithful to Christ in the midst of the chains. Your suffering is not without purpose and your calling has not changed because of your suffering. In fact we might be able to say that your calling has been intensified because of your suffering. It is now more important than ever that your life advance the gospel in the world.

Conclusion

I entitled this morning's message "Whatever Happens to the Christian Happens to Serve the Gospel." I gave it that name because I believe it is true.

Your purpose in life (*and some of you are always wondering what your purpose on earth is for*) never changes, regardless of your circumstances. If you are a Christian then your purpose is to advance the gospel and to have the gospel advanced in your life, and God wants to do that in you and through you, whether you're free or in chains; healthy or sick; facing death or have your whole life ahead of you; have a miserable job, no job, or the greatest job in the world. It does not matter the situation; whatever the circumstances your purpose in life never changes.

Whatever happens to me and whatever happens to you, has really happened so that the gospel of Jesus Christ may be advanced (1) in our lives (2) in the lives of those who do not yet know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (3) in the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ who are in need of encouragement and having the way shown to them for their time of trial and tribulation.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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