

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Philippians: Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ,

Session 3: The Progress of the Gospel, Part 1, Philippians 1:12-18a

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This is Dr. Matthew S. Harmon in his teaching on Philippians, Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is session 3, The Progress of the Gospel, Part 1, Philippians 1:12-18a.

Welcome to session three in our study in Philippians.

This session is: The Progress of the Gospel, Part 1, and we will focus on chapter 1:12-18a, and we will read that text in just a moment. I want to begin by refreshing our memory a bit on the last passage. It's always helpful to keep the flow of the letter in view, and so in the previous passage, which we referred to as greetings and gratitude in the gospel, we saw Paul introduce himself, and we saw him pray for the Philippians, express his gratitude for them, their partnership in the gospel, their fellowship in the shared benefits of the gospel, and then how Paul prayed for them.

So now we are turning to the next section where we will see the progress of the gospel, and for convenience's sake, we're actually splitting this passage into two parts. Really, the natural literary unit here is starting in verse 12 and going all the way through verse 26, but I don't want to rush through the whole passage, so we're going to break it down into two parts, and this first part we will read now from Philippians chapter 1, verses 12 through 18. 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 goodwill. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.

The former proclaim Christ 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. So we're talking about the progress of the gospel here in these verses, and we're going to see, starting in verse 12, how the gospel advances in the midst of Paul's circumstances.

And it's contrary to what you might expect. In fact, the way that Paul frames this is to introduce it in a way that suggests you might expect that me being under house arrest in Rome would stop the progress of the gospel, but in fact it is actually accelerating the advance of the gospel. And so in order to understand what Paul's circumstances are, we need to do a little bit of backtracking to fill in the historical background here.

And so we start with Paul's arrival in the city of Jerusalem, probably around the year 57 AD. Paul arrives in Jerusalem. He is arrested in the temple courts and has a hearing before the Jewish council.

And because of a plot against his life, he is moved to Caesarea Maritima, which is a city on the Mediterranean coast, and in the palace of Herod Agrippa, where he is kept in custody for three years. After that, he is transferred to Rome, and there's the famous passage in Acts 27 that tells the story of Paul's sea voyage and being shipwrecked, and God's miraculous protection of him. And so finally, Paul arrives in the city of Rome, probably around the year 60 AD, and when we say he's in prison, it's really a convenient way of saying something about him being under confinement, because in Rome, the situation was a little bit different.

He was actually held in custody in his own rented apartment, and so he had to pay for his housing and his provisions, and the Romans would send in a guard to essentially be chained to him on shifts that would rotate throughout the entirety of the 24-hour day. And so in one sense, it was a little less burdensome in that he was able to be in essentially an apartment, and yet that also meant he was responsible for his own provisions. It wasn't like the Roman government was paying the rent on that, so Paul was in the position of having to take gifts and donations and have the help of others to help pay for his housing and for his food.

And in that time period, he would have had these Roman guards chained to him for probably six-hour shifts every day, 24 hours a day. And so when Paul mentions here in Philippians chapter 1 that his imprisonment has become known throughout the whole, as the ESV translates it here, imperial guard, that really is, the ESV obviously has its conclusion there, but it's the praetorium, and so it could refer to the emperor's palace on Palatine Hill, so that that term that's used here in the Greek can refer simply to the building where the emperor lived there in Rome. A second option is that it could refer to the barracks where the soldiers attached to the palace lived.

A third option is that it could refer to the large permanent camp for the soldiers of the praetorian guard, or as I think is most likely, it actually refers to the soldiers within the praetorian guard themselves. And going on that assumption, some background about the praetorian guard would be helpful here to give you a sense of what Paul's talking about. Estimates are that there were about 9,000 men in the praetorian guard, and they were the elite soldiers and bodyguards for the emperor.

And they were more than just soldiers in one sense; they actually, at points, played a role in deposing and installing different emperors. So this was a very powerful, influential group of individuals. And they would work in these four - or maybe six-hour shifts; the sources might vary a little bit there, in terms of supervising Paul and being chained to him.

And so that sets the background when Paul says that his imprisonment has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard. I think what he's saying is, everybody in this group of soldiers has heard about my imprisonment. And what does that mean? What's the so what of that? Well, the first point Paul makes from this is that the gospel is advancing among the praetorian guard.

And the first thing that he emphasizes is that they know that his imprisonment is, as he puts it, in Christ. Now, of course, if you're familiar with Paul's letters, you know, that's a very common phrase that Paul loves to use to talk about our identity as followers of Christ: that we are in Christ. But here, I think it has a slightly different sense in that when Paul says that people know, these praetorian soldiers know that his imprisonment is in Christ, I think what Paul is saying is, I've made it clear to them that my imprisonment is the result of me being identified with and in Christ.

And that ultimately, who has final say and authority over me is not the Roman emperor, but it is Christ himself. And he is the one who has placed me here in this situation. And Paul makes it clear that not only is he telling them this, but he's actually sharing the gospel with these soldiers.

And I can envision this being quite the experience for these soldiers. And I perhaps am engaging a little bit of imagination here, but I like to think of these soldiers coming in and being chained to Paul for four hours. It's a captive audience.

And Paul is just talking to them about Jesus, telling them about the gospel. And over time, what I envision happening is probably something like this. Some of these soldiers love to hear the message, and they actually believe they're converted.

They become Christians. Others are so annoyed with hearing this message over and over again that they probably start trading shifts with their fellow soldiers. No, please take my shift with Paul.

I cannot take another four hours of hearing about this crucified man in the land of Israel who he thinks is a god. I can't take it anymore. And so word would begin to spread, and some would be fascinated.

That's weird. Paul thinks there was a man in Israel who lived 25, 30 years ago, and he was actually God? But wait, he was crucified? That's just strange. How can that be? And so Paul would share the gospel with these individuals.

And you think, okay, well, how do you know that there were any who were actually converted? Well, there's this very interesting statement at the end of the letter. In chapter 4, verse 22, Paul sends greetings from brothers among the Praetorian Guard to the Philippians. So I think that indicates that there were individuals who came to know Christ.

And this is what's fascinating about this: that would have been a very difficult group of people to get a hearing with. These are not the kind of people that Paul would have probably ordinarily come across in his daily life, walking the streets of Rome if he was doing ministry there. And so it seems as though God had to send someone specifically into that area, into that environment, in order for people in that context to hear the gospel message.

And so what on the surface looks like a disaster for the spread of the gospel is actually God's almost ironic, seemingly paradoxical plan to get the gospel into an area that otherwise would be very difficult to enter. And so when Paul talks about the progress of the gospel among the Praetorian Guard, he is emphasizing the, from a human perspective, surprising advance of the gospel among a group of people that you would not expect to be

immediately sympathetic or open to hearing the gospel message. But it's not as if the gospel is only advancing among the Praetorian Guard.

In this section, Paul emphasizes that the gospel is advancing among believers in Rome. You say, well, what does that mean? How does that work? Well, the first thing that Paul stresses here is that some believers, as a result of hearing about Paul's imprisonment, are becoming even bolder in their proclamation of the gospel. And again, that's counterintuitive.

You might think if Paul, this well-known Christian, is imprisoned for proclaiming this message, that people would be less likely to want to go out and preach the same message. And yet, Paul says, actually, some believers have become even more bold in the way that they are out there preaching the gospel. There's some fascinating overlap in language here between what Paul says and what is said in Acts 4:29-31, where after being persecuted, the apostles pray, and part of what they pray for God to give them is greater boldness in preaching the gospel.

Now, he mentions that this is happening, and yet notice where their confidence is placed. And this is an important point that could be missed, depending on how you read the text. Paul says that their confidence is in the Lord.

And so, if you look at the text again, there in Philippians 1, and you find it there in verse 14, most of the brothers having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment. So, the idea is not that these believers in Rome suddenly have worked up the courage to boldly proclaim the gospel. It's that their confidence in the Lord has grown to such an extent that they are able to be even bolder in their preaching of the gospel message.

So, there's an irony here, right? Persecution has brought about greater confidence. That's not what we would expect. Humanly speaking, we would expect that persecution would actually lead to fewer people proclaiming the gospel, and in fact, it has worked the other way.

It would be great if Paul had sort of stopped there and said, yeah, more people are preaching the gospel. It's great. But he does say that there's more going on than that.

And what I mean by that is he identifies that there are two contrasting sets of motives that he sees at work in those proclaiming the gospel, proclaiming Christ. So, on the one hand, he actually refers to a group of people who are preaching the gospel out of envy and out of rivalry, which seems like such a strange thing to say at first. But I think what Paul is emphasizing here is that some people were proclaiming the gospel in an effort maybe to cause Paul some trouble in prison, that they thought if we just kind of keep talking about Jesus, that that will cause Paul difficulty in his imprisonment.

And you think, well, that's an odd way to go about doing ministry. But there's also this mention of rivalry, and this is where it seems as though Paul is saying some people are preaching Christ in an effort maybe to build their own following, to build their own ministry. And since I'm on the sidelines, so to speak, I can't be out on the streets of Rome preaching the gospel; they see this as an opportunity to step into that void and build their own personal ministry, their own personal following.

So that's one group of people, envy and rivalry motivating them to preach the gospel. The second group of people, though, Paul says they are motivated out of goodwill and out of lust. In other words, they love God.

They love Christ. They love Paul. They want to see people come to know Christ.

They're not motivated by selfish ambition or rivalry or envy. They simply want to see the gospel go forward. And what's striking here is Paul's conclusion, so to speak, when he gets to the end there in verse 18, when Paul says, what then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed.

And in that, I rejoice. Now we might not expect Paul to say that, honestly, especially if we read something like Galatians, where Paul announces a curse on anybody who proclaims a different gospel. So we need to step back and say, so what are the lessons that we learned from what Paul is saying here? The first is to say, look, the fundamental thing is Christ is being preached.

The gospel is being preached. Paul is not saying they're out there preaching a different message. He's saying they're preaching the right message, but their motivations are not Godly.

And yet he says at the end of the day, I'm grateful that Christ is being broken. Okay. So let's try to summarize a little bit, some of these lessons from Paul's example.

First, stepping back to the big picture, I want you to think about this. Humanly speaking, Paul was in prison or confined for five years, five years. Now, from a human perspective, that seems like an incredible waste of an elite-level church planter, missionary, and apostle.

From a human perspective, that seems incredible to think, well, why would you put someone like that on the bench and have them not actively out there in ministry, planting more churches and doing these things? Humanly speaking, it seems like a strange way to go about things. And yet Paul, looking through the lenses of this, steps back and says, the gospel is still busy. And he's viewing all of his circumstances through the advancement of the gospel.

Now, I think if we're honest with ourselves, that is not our natural inclination. When we go through hardship, when we go through suffering, when our circumstances are not to our preference, our typical response is to say, God, why? Why are you doing this? What is going on here? I don't understand this. And it's not that I think Paul never prayed that or fought that.

But I think what Paul models for us here is that the more important question is not why, but it's how. God, how are you going to use these circumstances in my life to advance the gospel? And keep in mind that in the context of this passage, the idea of advancing the gospel includes not just the proclamation of the gospel to unbelievers, but it also includes the growth in godliness of other believers. And so Paul is modeling something for us here to say, look, we need to evaluate our circumstances through the lens of how might God be choosing to advance the gospel through these difficult circumstances.

Third, notice that Paul sees himself as appointed for this purpose, again, speaking to God's direction in his life. He says that, in verse 16, the believers know that he is put here for the defense of the gospel; that could also be translated as appointed for the defense of the gospel. And so it's important for us, I think, to learn from his lesson of having a sense of God appointing us, putting us in places for his purposes, even if we can't understand.

It's not realistic to think that we will always have a clear understanding of what God's purposes are and why he's got us in certain circumstances and why he does things and why he doesn't do certain things. But I am confident that we can say, based on what Scripture says, that God has his purposes for putting us in places and that we can always think of it in terms of, okay, Lord, how do you intend to advance the gospel through my circumstances? So the gospel advances through the conversion of unbelievers. That would seem pretty straightforward.

And then the gospel advances through the boldness of other believers. Now, I want us to think a little bit about this combination of God's character and our boldness. So God's character and our boldness.

I think we can take away a couple of lessons about God's character from this passage. The first is that God sovereignly chooses unusual means to advance his gospel. God sovereignly chooses unusual means to advance his gospel.

It is wise for us as human beings to make plans, to think strategically, to use wisdom, to make efforts to think about what is the best way to reach a certain population or to advance the gospel. And yet, at the end of the day, we have to hold those things loosely because God often chooses to work in unexpected or unusual ways to advance his gospel.

The second lesson is the irony of what we see here. Think about this. Rome imprisoned this threat, Paul, only to find him spreading his beliefs among Caesar's very own household. So Rome sees this man as a troublemaker, as a potential threat to the stability of the empire.

And ironically, that is God's means of getting the gospel to a population that otherwise would be very challenging to reach. So how does that relate to our boldness? Well, let's think about a couple of reasons why we lack boldness in communicating the gospel. I think the simplest one is that we have a greater fear of man than God.

And this idea of fearing God is something that we don't talk as much as we probably should about in the church today. And it's not this idea of being scared of God so much as it is the sense of awe and reverence and wonder of being in the presence of someone who is so transcendentally holy and great. And when we fear what other human beings say or do more than we care about what God says, we will lack boldness.

We will maybe choose not to share the gospel when it could cost us something. Second reason we lack boldness is that I think we often don't fully grasp the awful reality of eternal punishment and hell. I think we don't like to think about it, and we don't hear a ton of preaching on it, oftentimes.

And so as a result, we don't really grasp the horrific destiny that awaits those who don't know Christ. And if we kind of put that at the back of our minds, we're probably less likely to

be bold in sharing our faith. Now, one of the things that Paul does mention in here is his discussion of defending the gospel.

He talks about defending the gospel. So I want to think about that idea here just briefly. One sense, what Paul is getting at here is more explanation and removal of objections.

And this is what some people like to refer to as defeater beliefs. In other words, people hold certain ideas or beliefs that make it essentially impossible for them to embrace the truth of the gospel. And so part of defending the gospel then is to help a person see how that belief that they hold doesn't match up with their experience and with reality.

And so when Paul talks about defending the gospel, I think that's at least part of what's included there. Also, I would say it includes the idea of clearly explaining the truth of the gospel, not just defending it against objections, but making sure you're clearly explaining it and articulating it. But I do want to exercise a bit of caution.

It's important for us to recognize that we will never argue a person into the kingdom. That doesn't mean that there's not a place for engagement and apologetic discussions and arguments. There is, absolutely.

And yet we will never argue someone into the kingdom with our persuasive skills or our apologetic arguments. And part of my young ministry experience was being full-time staff of campus ministry. So I was doing daily evangelism and discipleship in a big secular public university.

And one of the things that I learned over time in that experience was that not every objection to the gospel was a serious objection to the gospel. Sometimes they were smokescreens. Now, of course, sometimes people had legitimate intellectual questions, and I would do my best to engage with those and talk through those.

But over time you began to sense, okay, I feel like I'm getting some objections here that kind of feel a little bit like a smokescreen here. And so I learned to ask this question. I would ask if I am able to answer all of your questions.

Let's say hypothetically I could. I'm not saying I can, but let's say hypothetically I could. If I could answer all your questions, will you commit your life to Christ? And oftentimes the answer I would get is, I don't think so.

But okay. So then I would ask, so then what is holding you back from following Christ? If I could satisfy all of your intellectual objections, what is it that would hold you back? And typically it was something going on in their life where they realized, if I decide to follow Jesus, my life is going to have to change. And I would say, let's talk about that because that's really the bottleneck.

That's what's keeping you from following Christ. And let's talk about that. And then if necessary, we can talk about some of these other things along the way.

And so that question might be helpful if you're having conversations with people about the gospel. If one objection after another, and it seems like they may not be that serious in those objections, that's a clarifying question that I have found helps typically get to the

heart of, this is why this person is not willing to put their trust in Jesus at all. One other area that I think this text invites us to reflect on is evaluating the ministry of others.

So Paul says in here, ultimately, as long as Christ is proclaimed, he's going to rejoice. And yet he still calls out the motives of these people. And so I think we need to reflect a little bit on the difference between this passage and a passage I mentioned earlier, Galatians 1 verses 8 through 9. Because in Galatians 1, what Paul does is he pronounces a curse on anyone who preaches a different gospel than he has proclaimed.

And that's the fundamental difference here: in Galatians, he sees a group of troublemakers, as he calls them, proclaiming a different gospel message. And there, he's like, look, I am asking God to bring judgment on those people for proclaiming a different message. Here, in Philippians 1, Paul's saying, it sure seems like their motives are sketchy at best for proclaiming Christ.

And yet, they're still proclaiming Christ. And so I can rejoice in the fact that Christ is being proclaimed. And so it is okay for us, I think, to point out what appear to be ungodly motives, even if the message is right.

I think that's appropriate for us to do. And yet, at the same time, we should be able to rejoice in the advancement of the gospel by others. I know that one of the biggest temptations for those in ministry is to often look at what God is doing through other ministries and to feel envy when they are blessed.

And you think, but they're not even doing things the right way, as I see it. And yet, it seems like God is blessing them. And it is tempting for us to become envious.

And I think what Paul would have us realize from this passage is that we need to learn to be able to rejoice that the gospel is being proclaimed. Even if we have serious questions about motives and the actions of certain people proclaiming it. So, I think stepping back, this is again part one of this passage.

But I think the central thing that Paul stresses out of this particular section in Philippians 1: 12-18a is that the progress of the gospel must shape how we evaluate our past and present circumstances. We need to allow the progress of the gospel to shape how we evaluate our past and present circumstances. Now, in the next session, we will talk about the second half of this passage, which Paul turns attention to the future.

But I do want to end this particular session with some reflections on application. Again, using our same four-fold grid of what does God want me to think? What does God want me to believe? What does God want me to desire? And what does God want me to do? So, let's end by reflecting on that. I think from a passage like this, that God wants us to understand that he has larger purposes for my life than my comfort.

That that is not God's number one priority: how can I make this particular child of mine comfortable? His priorities go much bigger and larger than that. So, we need to understand that, to shift our thinking away from this idea that the primary goal is our comfort. To remember the second belief.

We need to believe that God can use any and all of my circumstances to advance the gospel. And I don't say that lightly or flippantly. And I don't mean it in a way that's intended to diminish the reality of really hard things that we experience.

Knowing this, believing this, doesn't diminish the hardness of certain circumstances. They're still hard. There are still causes for grief and sorrow and frustration.

And yet, we have to come to a point where we truly believe that the Lord can use any and all of those circumstances in his unexpected ways to advance the gospel. Whether that's opportunities to share about God's goodness to us in the midst of it, or whether it's an opportunity to be an encouragement to other believers, God can use those circumstances to advance the gospel. Third, desire and feel.

I think we should long to see the gospel advance, no matter what our circumstances are. I think it is easy to become so comfortable in our everyday lives, when our circumstances are good, to kind of lose that edge of getting the gospel out there, seeing the gospel advance. And this is a passage that reminds us of the centrality of that.

And I think it's right for us to ask God to cultivate in us that longing, that desire to see the gospel advance. And then lastly, do. Maybe consider identifying one person in your life that you can pray for an opportunity to share the gospel with them.

One person. And start praying for them. Start asking the Lord, Lord, would you give me an open door to start a conversation with this person, to have a gospel conversation? And Lord, make me ready.

Because I've had this experience where I've prayed for that, and then the Lord gives it, and I'm not ready for it, or I'm not expecting it. And then I look back, and I go, oh, there it was. And I wasn't ready for it.

So I have to pray again. Lord, give me another chance. Give me another opportunity to share the gospel with that person or have a spiritual conversation.

And so that is an overview of the first part of this passage, the progress of the gospel, where Paul's focusing on his past and present circumstances. And in our next session, we will see Paul turn his attention to the progress of the gospel in his future steps.