



## **“Dear Philippian Church, It’s Not About Me”**

*Series: Philippians – To Live Is Christ*

Philippians 1:12-18a

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As a church, we would all confess the sovereignty of God, wouldn’t we? But I want to ask you a question – do you really believe it and does it show in the way that you live? That’s a good question to keep in mind as we look at this text this morning, because it is exactly the message that Paul is communicating to the church in Philippi.

After expressing his gratitude and joy for the Philippian church, his great love for them, the evidences of grace that he sees in them, and describing to them the earnest way that he prays for them – this church that is his joy and crown – Paul informs them, in this section, of the state of things in Rome, where he is under house arrest. And he is very purposeful in what he does here. He needs to talk to the Philippians about the conditions of his imprisonment, first, because they are very concerned about him. They had sent gifts to him through Epaphroditus, seeking to alleviate his needs but also to get some kind of idea about his physical and spiritual condition. They love Paul and so Paul writes here to set their heart and minds at rest. But, second, he uses this section as a teaching opportunity, an opportunity for encouragement and exhortation, an opportunity to teach the Philippian church how to keep the proper perspective in the midst of persecution, of trials, of difficulties that come with following Christ. They need to see how Paul, their father in the faith, handles persecution in a way that brings honor to Christ and that brings joy in his own heart and then, they need to follow his example. He begins by describing to them his situation in light of

**God’s Sovereign Purpose – The Advance of the Gospel (12-14)** Look back with me at what we read, beginning in verse 12: **“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel,” (Philippians 1:12, ESV)** Now I want you to think about this statement for just a moment, because it is truly amazing both in what it says and what it does not say. First, I want you to think about what it doesn’t say. If you know the

circumstances that led Paul to be under house arrest in Rome, the fact that he describes the entire ordeal in one phrase, “what has happened to me,” is truly astonishing.

What had happened to Paul was this: He went to Jerusalem in order to do two things, to deliver a relief offering from the churches in Macedonia to the church in Jerusalem and to unify the predominantly Jewish church there with the predominantly Gentile churches that he had planted on his missionary journeys – to unify them in the gospel truth. But, while he was there, you remember that Paul was the victim of entirely false accusations from both people within the church and those outside of it. So emboldened were the unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem, and stirred up by Paul’s opponents and the opponents of the gospel, that they beat Paul and he barely escaped being lynched by this unruly mob only by being arrested by the Romans, though he was completely innocent. As he was being taken away, however, Paul boldly preached the gospel of Christ and told of the miraculous events of his conversion and commission to preach. It caused uproar and Paul avoided being flogged only by claiming his Roman citizenship. From there, he was placed into Roman custody, there was a plot to kill Paul that was uncovered, he was taken to Caesarea, was examined by the Roman governors Felix and Festus, King Agrippa, on an on before he was finally sent to Rome to await trial before Caesar, himself. His entire case was a mockery of justice, false accusations, insult, shame, and malicious lies. He was kept in chains by Roman authorities craving ransom and popularity. He spent years in prison, his freedom gone, his missionary travels at a complete end, his hopes of taking the gospel to Spain a faint memory, and here he was, under house arrest, in a home he had to pay for, chained every moment of the day to a Roman soldier – that’s what house arrest entailed, no privacy, no sanctuary, and he just calls all of this – “what happened to me.”

It’s astonishing, isn’t it? It is hard to conceive that this is all that Paul would say about all he had endured for the sake of his faithfulness to Christ, and yet that’s it. And do you want to know why – because what mattered most to Paul was not his personal comfort, his personal ease – life for Paul was not about him. What mattered most to Paul was the gospel of Jesus Christ. What he says about it all is: ***“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel...”***

Notice the use of the word “really.” Paul is not putting forward some false optimism, here. He is not pretending that it all been butterflies and unicorns. There have been some dark providences in his life –lies, deceit, physical and emotional pain, the specter of death, the

opposition to the truth of the gospel – but contrary to what it may look like, the gospel was advancing. God rules and the pressures of Paul’s life were really the hands of the Potter who is also our Father; the fires of his life those of the Refiner. He trusts God in this. This is how the gospel must advance.

In fact, Paul says in effect, “There is no mystery as to why I am in prison, everyone knows. I’m not here because I am a hardened criminal or because I am a political dissident. I am here because of Christ.” He says, verse 13, **“it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.” (Philippians 1:13, ESV)** He is in jail because of faithfulness to Christ, because of faithfulness to preach the gospel of salvation by grace alone, not by human good works or keeping some religious rules, but through faith in Christ alone – in his perfect life, in his sacrificial death, and in his resurrection from the dead by which sinners, which we all are, can be forgiven of our sins – no matter how great, no matter how wicked, and receive eternal life. He is in jail for Christ and everyone, Paul says, knows it. And two amazing things have been the result.

First, Paul says, the whole imperial guard has to some degree, heard about Jesus Christ. Now, the imperial guard was the best of the best in the Roman army. They were charged with providing security in Rome for the Roman emperor and for carrying out police functions in the city. They received double pay, were given lifetime pensions, given special benefits because they were elite troops and part of their responsibility would have been to supervise Paul and that included being on a rotation in which they would alternate turns being chained to Paul for 4-6 hours at a time. What Paul could have seen as a huge pain, he saw instead as a huge opportunity – he had a captive audience.

And he was entirely different than any of the prisoners they had ever dealt with before. He didn’t claim innocence, rail against “the man,” or complain about his rights being violated. Instead, when he was asked what he was “in for,” Paul took it as an opportunity to talk about Jesus Christ. “I’m in here for faithfulness to my Lord and Savior, my Master, Jesus of Nazareth who is the Christ.” You can see how this would go. He shared with them the words of Christ, tell them of His miraculous works – no doubt relating the story of way the Lord had raised a Roman centurion’s servant from a deathbed. He would explain how the Lord Jesus was the promised Messiah, God the Son, and that he had died as the Lamb of God to take away our sin, how we deserve eternal death because we are sinners, but Jesus, because He loved us, died in our place and then rose from the dead. He’d call them to repent

of their sins, really turn away from them, and turn in faith to Christ. They would be with him, hearing him as he prayed, as he poured his heart out for their salvation, for the well-being of the church, for the advance of the gospel, as he expressed faith and hope in Christ.

No one ever faced imprisonment with such peace, with such joy, with such faith. Word spread throughout their ranks, through these men to whom Paul would have never otherwise had a chance to preach, to men in the very seat of Roman power – in the palace of the Roman emperor – so that other troops were filled with curiosity about Paul and about his message, his gospel, his Lord and Savior, and a number of them were saved. How do we know? By what Paul says at the end of his letter: **“All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar’s household.” (Philippians 4:22, ESV)**

Paul put his life joyfully at the disposal of Christ, and though he was bound, the word of God is never bound.

The second amazing thing that took place was this: **“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)** This is nothing short of supernatural, beloved. Paul is in jail for boldly preaching and teaching the gospel of Christ. He is suffering persecution for being open and unashamed in his faithfulness to Jesus. What do you suppose would be the natural response of other Christians in the city of Rome? To hide their allegiance to Christ, to hold their tongues, to go undercover and protect themselves, to rationalize how it would be better to let their lives be a silent witness rather than to offend people or attract attention by making too much noise about Jesus Christ – that’s the natural response to danger.

But that is not at all what had happened. Perhaps because they had heard about the revival breaking out within the imperial guard and because they were convinced even more of the power of the gospel by Paul’s bold witness and evangelizing efforts, “most of the brothers” – that’s a reference to believers in general, not preachers but the brothers and sisters in the church – were all the more eager, emboldened and strengthened by the power of God, to commit the same crime that had put Paul in prison – to speak the word of God, to testify to Christ as Savior and Lord and to do it openly. The idea of this word “speak” is the idea of conversation and talking to people. It is not the idea of formal preaching, but conversation between people in the normal course of life. Christians in Rome were simply open about their faith in Christ. The result of Paul’s imprisonment, the chains that shackled Paul were

propelling the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the city, carried by more messengers into more places to more people than Paul could possibly have reached. The church in Rome was on fire for God, not because of Paul's preaching, but because of his imprisonment and that is why Paul rejoiced.

He saw things from a divine perspective and his place in God's eternal plan. Paul was willing to suffer imprisonment, willing to suffer loss, willing to joyfully endure any circumstances so that the gospel would advance. This freedom of soul that Paul enjoyed, this joyful courage, was not for Paul alone, but the brothers and sisters in Rome who were fearlessly risking their lives to make the message of Christ known were experiencing this freedom and joyful courage as well. And he shares this the Philippian church so that they would be encouraged and strengthened to do the same.

It challenged their souls and it should challenge ours as well. Are we willing to joyfully make Christ known despite the risk to our reputation, despite the risk to our personal comfort, despite the cost that we might face for allegiance to the one who laid down His life so that we could be saved? What are we willing to endure for the sake of faithfulness to Christ, for the advance of the gospel? What are we willing to lose? Legitimate questions, all of them. We must take seriously the words of Christ: ***“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.”*** (Luke 9:23–26, ESV)

Would Paul have preferred to be free, preferred to be on his way to Spain to preach the gospel, preferred not to be awaiting trial for his life? Of course – but Paul viewed this all from the lens of God's sovereign purpose – the advance of the gospel, the pursuit of the souls of lost men and women, the salvation of the lost and the edifying of the church, and he saw the circumstances of his life in that light and was willing to endure whatever he must for the sake of the gospel with a view to the glory that is to come. That was his focus, but he wasn't blind to his present reality, either.

**Paul's Present Reality – Both Envy and Good Will (15-17)** Look at what he says starting in verse 15: ***“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 1:15–18, ESV) Paul gives the Philippians some straight talk about what’s going on in Rome and this time he talks about the preachers.

There are two camps in Rome. There are those whom Paul describes as preaching from “good will, out of love, knowing that Paul is in prison for his defense of the gospel, those who are preaching Christ in truth, that is, from a godly motivation.” There are some Paul says, who are preaching out of good will and love – good will and love toward others – sincerely wanting people to be saved and to know the love of God in Christ. Good will and love toward Christ – wanting to be found faithful to the Lord and to please him through their faithfulness. And good will and love toward Paul – seeing Paul’s imprisonment as a demonstration of his loyalty to Christ, his stand on the truth of the gospel and as a consequence of his obedience to the truth. They preached the gospel because they wanted to please Christ, but also to encourage Paul. They knew that the best way to delight Paul’s heart was to make sure that the work of preaching the gospel did not suffer while he was imprisoned, but continued to go forth in power.

But there was a second group in Rome who preached Christ from “envy and rivalry, from selfish ambition, insincerely, thinking to afflict” Paul in his imprisonment. Who were these guys? Paul doesn’t tell us, but apparently they preached the truth about Christ. Paul doesn’t say of them as he did of the false preachers in Galatia: ***“If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.”*** (Galatians 1:9, ESV) The problem wasn’t what they were preaching; they were preaching the facts of the gospel – the holiness of God, the sin of man, the saving work of Christ – his perfect obedience, atoning death and resurrection from the dead, the call to faith in Christ as the only way of salvation. The problem was their motivation, their hearts, in doing it. They were self-seeking and desired to hurt one whom Christ had died to save and set apart as his apostle. They were double-minded. They preached, not in sincerity and in love, but because they were jealous of Paul’s place as an apostle, his authority, of his character. They saw Paul not as a brother but as a rival as a competitor. Their desire was not for Christ’s glory, not love for Christ or even love for people – their desire was to make a name for themselves at the expense of Paul. Fueled

by selfish ambition, from the desire to make themselves great and to tear Paul down, they used the pulpit to preach Christ, yes, but also to slander and defame Paul. In contrast to the faithful preachers who knew that Paul was in prison because of his defense of the gospel, they used Paul's trials as a means to denigrate Paul and win converts and followers for themselves. And in this way, they hoped to stick it to Paul, to add affliction to his soul, to trouble him and hurt him personally and emotionally.

You can imagine how it would go. Paul, they would say, was in prison, not because he was faithful, but because he was hardheaded, because he was too unbending, too inflexible. He was in prison because he had some deep character flaw that put him in trouble's way. "I wanted to believe the best of Paul, his ministry blessed me once a long time ago, but clearly God has removed his blessing from him. After all, many others and I remain free and preach the gospel. My ministry is being blessed while he rightly suffers in prison." How does Paul deal with this? How would he deal with such duplicity, such hatred, such ill will? How would you deal with this sort of thing? Paul sees it from an eternal perspective.

**Paul's Eternal Perspective – I Rejoice (18a)** He says, verse 18, ***“What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.”*** (Philippians 1:18a, ESV) What an incredibly godly response. What an eternal perspective. Let's just be honest. Most of us would be discouraged and depressed if not downright angry by this kind of betrayal and antagonism. We would probably devote most of strength and energy to defending ourselves and exposing our opponents, maybe complaining against God or even withdrawing from everyone. That is the natural response, right? But that is not Paul. He rejoices. Rather than letting their sin to eat away at his soul, to make him discouraged or cynical, Paul determined not to be diverted from the main business of his ministry – exalting the name of his Lord Jesus Christ. He rejoiced that God is in control, that God is the righteous judge, and that Christ is being proclaimed and Christ's gospel cannot be defeated no matter how men may treat him or think of him.

Paul says, "What do I say to all of this? Whether in pretense and in selfish ambition or in truth and sincerity, the truth about Christ is getting out and that fills me with joy. The word of God is the word of God and people are going to be saved by hearing about Christ whether the words come from a man who is driven by his flesh or man who is driven by the Holy Spirit and love – the gospel is what saves people, not men." How in the world could Paul respond like this?

It all boils down to motivation, to what moves your heart most, to what matters most to you above everything else. This is where these verses we are looking at are heading. This is what it all comes down to – what matters most in your life, in my life, in Paul’s life. What holds the greatest sway in our hearts?

Paul finds his greatest delight in the advance of the gospel, in the glory of Christ being made known, in Jesus’s praise and fame and honor, in souls being saved, in the spiritual growth of Christians, in Jesus being worshipped, even if that requires sacrifice and suffering on his part. And he trusts God to do it.

Paul’s goal in life was not to be admired by everyone, or to achieve great fame, or to be rich, or to have a great reputation, or to be universally loved, or to live a life of relative ease and safety. It wasn’t all about himself for Paul. His goal was to exalt Christ and be faithful to Jesus, to live for the praise of Christ. He lived for Christ. As he would say later in this letter: **“It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”** (Philippians 1:20–21, ESV)

DA Carson says it right when he says: “Put the advance of the gospel at the center of your aspirations. Our own comfort, our bruised feelings, our reputations, our misunderstood motives – all of these are insignificant in comparison with the advance and splendor of the gospel. As Christians, we are called to put the gospel at the very center of our aspirations. What are your aspirations? To make money? To get married? To travel? To see your grandchildren grow up? To find a new job? To retire early? None of these is inadmissible: none is to be despised. The question is whether these aspirations become so devouring that the Christian’s central aspiration is squeezed to the periphery or choked out of existence entirely.” Man, he is right.

Our lives must be centered on the gospel. Here’s the truth. The more that I live, the more I am faced with this question. What matters most to me? What is the central desire of my life? For what am I willing to suffer loss, whatever it may be? We all know, as Christians, what it should be – the gospel of Jesus Christ. But is it? That is the question. It is the question that



all of us need to ask ourselves in light of this text. It's the question that Paul answered for himself in these verses that we have read and it is the question that he wanted the Philippians to answer in their own hearts.

What is of supreme value in your heart? For what do you live and what is of greatest joy to your heart? How you sincerely answer that question will have a profound effect on the whole of your life.

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