Disciples Church

Lesson 3: Wednesday May 17, 2017

**Philippians**

**Joy in Suffering 1:12-18**

12 I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, 13 so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. 14 And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

15 Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. 16 The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. 18 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.

Good evening. I am pleased tonight to teach on a topic that is very dear to my heart and one I believe that many Christians misunderstand.

I want to start by reading our passage: *12 I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, 13 so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. 14 And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. 15 Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. 16 The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. 18 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.*

***Cultural context:***

The letter of Philippians is one of Paul’s prison epistles.

The traditional and widely accepted view is that Philippians was written during Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome between A.D. 60-62. Paul’s reference to the “imperial guard” in our text is a reference to the Imperial Roman Palace or the Praetorian guard. We know from the description of his imprisonment in Acts 28:16 that Paul was guarded by soldiers and was, in essence, on house arrest. The simple reading of the text indicates that Paul was indeed in Rome when he wrote the letter.

The city of Philippi was a Roman Colony in Eastern Macedonia. The city held strategic significance in that it protected the land route to Asia Minor. It was also the site of a very important battle called the Battle of Philippi in 42 BC, where Mark Antony and Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius. This victory eventually dissolved the Roman Republic and instituted the Roman Empire.

The colony was granted the coveted status as a Roman Colony. As such, the citizens of Philippi were not subject to the authority of the provincial governor. In fact, many of the Roman Empire’s army veterans retired in Philippi. As such, it’s understood that Philippi was a city that had a lot of nationalistic pride. We see this in Acts 16:21 where the Philippians charge Paul and Silas as “disrupters” to their way of life. For them to proclaim Christ as Supreme King would have run at odds with the Pagan Roman culture. It was expected that many in Philippi would oppose the message of the gospel and indeed even persecute Christians who swore allegiance to Jesus, not the Emperor.

Now, remember, Paul was imprisoned when he wrote this. We know from the context of this epistle that Epaphroditus, a member of the Philippian Church, had sent gifts to Paul to support him. After Epaphroditus had delivered his gift to Paul, he traveled back to Philippi to deliver this very letter.

So, to recap: Paul was in prison. The Philippian Church had sent one of their members, Epaphroditus, to give Paul a financial gift of support. The Philippian church, though vibrant, was also experiencing persecution from the nationalistic culture in which they lived.

With that, let’s dig in.

*12 I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, 13 so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.*

*“I want you to know, brothers….”*  The “you” here is a reference to the Philippian church. Paul calls them brothers. This word, brothers, indicates a love, affection and care that Paul had for this church. It is important that we see the aim here. The application being that those of us in the church, should, in our communication, conduct ourselves with a care and love for one another. There is indeed a sweetness that we should have for each other. We are, as many of us here like to say and as pastor Joshua said last week, a blood-bought family. It’s a foundational point.

And so, as I continue in the text, remember that this is not a dispassionate appeal from someone who didn’t care for the Philippians; rather, this was an appeal from a family member--a dear family member. As such, it holds more weight than if it were to come from a stranger.

*“…that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel…”* What has happened? Paul has been imprisoned. This is most likely a reference to the chain of events that led up to Paul being in Rome. There is too much back story for tonight, but Paul had gone through a lengthy ordeal on his trek to Rome. He was arrested, falsely accused, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, malnourished and bitten by a viper, among other things.

But what Paul says next should shock us. Paul’s jailing and circumstances had served to advance the gospel.

Let’s take a moment to stop here and break this down. An event had happened: Paul had been imprisoned. That event, though terrible by earthly standards, is indeed not terrible by godly standards. Why? Because the suffering that Paul had experienced in this particular circumstance, God was using for His purposes. This really brings us full circle to how God works in our lives. We see the echoes of this in *Romans 8:28: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”*  Though Paul, a powerful man of God, an apostle of Christ, the divinely inspired author of many of the New Testament books, a man who could not be rivaled by any of us, though he be imprisoned, it served God’s agenda.

And what is God’s agenda in this text? To advance the gospel. Through Paul’s suffering, God would spread the gospel. Let’s stop here and ask a question of the text: How? How does Paul’s suffering serve God’s plan to advance the gospel?

Look with me at the next two verses:

*13 So that it [the gospel] has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.* I want us to stop here for a moment.

Paul’s suffering had served to bring the gospel (the good news) to the Roman/Praetorian guard and to all of the rest.

A bit of context about the Praetorian guard may be helpful for us. These men were not your typical hodgepodge soldiers; these were elite soldiers. Their name, Praetorian, derives from the Greek word Praetor. This was a title granted to either commanders in the army or elected magistrates. Thus, they were the personal bodyguards of the army commanders and elected officials. They were also responsible for guarding the Emperor of Rome. In our context, this would be similar to the Secret Service. Paul didn’t have a mall cop guarding him! He had the cream of the crop!

Now, think about this for a moment. Paul, who we know was unashamed to preach Christ to all those he encountered, would have made sure that his guards would know the message of Christ. The Praetorian guard, who either ran the prison where Paul was housed or guarded Paul personally, would have also likely done shifts in the Imperial Palace, where Nero himself may have heard Paul’s message.

And we don’t have to guess that detail; we simply see it in the text. The gospel *“has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest.”* But, who are the rest? I don’t strictly know, but it wouldn’t be out of the ordinary to think that this message could have been carried throughout Rome by those who came into contact with Paul during his imprisonment.

I want to note Paul’s demeanor here. He is so personally connected to Christ that it simply colors everything he says.

Charles Spurgeon says, “Notice the beautiful self-forgetfulness of the apostle Paul. So long as the gospel could be more widely published, he did not mind where he was, or what he suffered. “

This is our aim, church! We ought to forget ourselves and make Christ known! May this be our refrain: “As long as the gospel is widely spread, I will suffer unto death!”

Have you ever had someone come back to you years later and tell you *that one* thing you once said about Jesus or the gospel, that you (perhaps) judged as insignificant, was monumental in their faith? *I’ve heard this before.* What I’m trying to get us to understand is that our joyful testimony, especially in our suffering, plants gospel seeds in many people that we encounter. Is it coincidental that Rome would eventually fall to the rise of Christianity? No, of course not! It was God’s plan to use Paul and many other Christians to testify of Jesus for the eventual fall of Rome’s rank Paganism!

The beauty of this passage just doesn’t stop! Let us look deeper still!

*14 And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.*

Persecution in Paul’s time was common. Indeed, Paul would eventually suffer the executioners blunt axe for his profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Philippians, who were submitted to Jesus as Lord, would have endured persecution for their rejection of the Emperor as lord. Notice the effect of Paul’s persecution and suffering.

*And most of the brothers..*. Who are the brothers that Paul here refers to? This is those of the universal church! This may be the Philippians, or it may just be Christians who came into contact with Paul. Regardless, many of them became confident in the Lord by Paul’s imprisonment. Why were they confident?

Let us return to Spurgeon for a moment. I read this quote in my study and it was so good that I just couldn’t pass it up.

He says of this passage, “You have sometimes seen a widely-spreading oak tree cut down, and you have missed its grateful shadow; yet, afterwards, you have discovered that many little trees, which would have, been dwarfed beneath its shade, have grown more rapidly in its absence; and, in like manner, the removal of some eminent servant of the Lord Jesus Christ has frequently made room for others to spring up, and more than fill his place.”

Isn’t this amazing? Here we see Paul, a massive oak in the faith, who had been cut down (temporarily, so to speak). In his refusal to let his circumstances and suffering become his identity, he had consequently given those who are also in dire circumstance a desire to be bold!

The point here is this: those who stand firm in persecution strengthen the church. The more I see “oak-trees” stand up to false ideology and gently and boldly proclaim biblical truth, I am emboldened myself. I am emboldened then to share the gospel with those around me! This is the effect of those who stand to inquiry, be it by the sword or by the tongue. If we stand and graciously give our defense and present the gospel, God *will* use this to spread the gospel. God *will,* in His timing, bring lives from death to life.

Perhaps this is the co-worker who shared Christ with someone and strengthened you to do the same. Perhaps this is the Christian who refused to water down his message and thusly helped you be more bold in your witness.

Do you see how God uses our suffering to turn it upside down and instead make us into agents of His grace?

Suffering is difficult, no doubt. But God is able to use it, and use it He will!

*15 Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. 16 The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. 18 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.*

There were those who did preach Christ in the same spirit as Paul, but it appears that there were also those who preached Christ from selfish ambition.

Paul admits this in verse 17: *“The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.”* These men preached with impure motives in order to further inflict suffering on Paul.

What Paul’s his response to this?

*Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice.*

The essence of the text is this: Paul was not indifferent to falsehood being preached; that is not what this text is teaching. Rather, Paul is speaking of motives in the proclamation of Christ. Can Christ be rightly proclaimed by one who has side or ill motives? Yes, he can. Can Christ be proclaimed with right motives by an unbeliever? No, it is not possible. Paul is speaking of false motives in this passage, not false teaching. He is glad that the name of Christ is being preached even though it is being preached from false motives.

A quote from the late Calvinist Preacher, Charles Simeon, is helpful: “Truth, under any circumstances, is better than error, even as light is better than darkness...The preachers who claim not the Lord Jesus Christ, disseminate error...The preacher betrays the hearers to their ruin; and the people, so deceived, must perish for lack of knowledge…Contrast this then, with such a ministry the preaching of one who exalts Christ among his people, and points him out as ‘the way, the truth, and the life’…However unworthy the preacher of it may be, God may work by it.”

When truth is shared instead of error, no matter the motive, “in that we rejoice; yes, we will rejoice.”

While we see this important teaching of Paul about true gospel preaching, we cannot take from it that its “no big deal” or not of any concern why one shares the gospel. No. Paul is right that truth being spoken is still truth being spoken, and in that we should rejoice. But Scripture is clear that God does care about the heart--the motives--in what a person does. Scripture calls everyone to live from a pure heart and do things, especially things related to God’s truths, righteously. So we must not come to wrong conclusions while affirming what this passage is saying. Pastors and teachers need to be honoring God in heart as well as deed. Those who do things for selfish ambition, for example, should not be praised or celebrated.

***Application***

So throughout our whole passage here we are told of the suffering that Paul endured in this season of his life.

Paul’s approach, heart and hope in his suffering most certainly should be a model for us. Let us follow Paul, as he follows Christ.

Suffering is difficult; there is no easy suffering.

Sometimes our suffering is manifested by living in a fallen world, ruined and plagued with sin. We see brokenness all around us. Perhaps it’s the latest moral failure of someone we admired and looked up to, or it’s our own moral failure. Perhaps it’s the death of a loved one. Perhaps it’s the loss of a child. Perhaps it’s the loss of a job, or a wife, or a home.

We must understand that our suffering, as Christians, has purpose. There is not a singular wasted moment, a moment where our Lord is out of control in His sovereign decree. This is not possible; His word and being guarantee us this.

The apostles knew suffering. Most of them were martyred for their faith.

But there is one form of suffering that I think we all may experience in our current cultural context, and that is typified in Romans 9:1-3:

*Rom 9:1-3 I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.*

Here in this text, Paul employs a deep sorrow and anguish for his kinsmen. Who was this? It was his fellow Jewish brothers and sisters who had rejected Christ. Now, I don’t personally know each of your stories, but I do know that it’s quite common for us, in the church, to experience anguish for our lost family and friends. I have spent moments in sincere prayer and heart-felt emotion asking the Lord to save some of my family. It’s those, the ones who are blind to the truth, who break my heart.

Is this not suffering? Surely we suffer for these folks; our sorrow and grief for them, for their salvation, is real. How can we look at the numbers of those who are close to us who continue to live in their sin? How can we find comfort in the cross in these scenarios? I want us to see the comfort of submitting to God’s perfect plan.

*1Cor 13:12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.*

Though we may not understand God’s will in this life, we will, in future glory, experience the riches of His grace. The answer to, “Why doesn’t God save everyone?”, is not to shake our fist at God. The answer is simply and completely: we are not God. Submitting to this reality rails against our flesh. Our flesh hates this. But, Christ came to put our flesh to death so that we may submit unto God and see the riches of His grace forevermore. We must look to Christ and be satisfied in Him. Perhaps one day, God will reveal to us the majesty of His plan in these things. But He has also left helpful things in Scripture for us now. If sin had not entered the garden by the transgression of Adam, then our Savior would not have been brought low for us. This is the crux of it all. God ordained the story of fracture and death, salvation and redemption, so that we could understand just how majestic and glorious our Father is. Our salvation cannot be achieved. Our place in Heaven cannot be purchased. It’s sheer grace. We are meant to look upon our God and fall to our faces and realize that we can do nothing without Him! Do not give up hope!

But, why does God ordain suffering? We find one of several reasons in our next passage:

*2 Cor 1:3-4 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*

Suffering is a means by which God comforts us. We *are* comforted in our affliction. This is not merely a selfishly-oriented comfort. It is a comfort we share with those who are suffering. There is a horizontal and vertical dimension to suffering. God comforts us, and because He comforts us in our affliction, we shall comfort others. We bend the love of God personally outward for those around us. Our God is not merely a God of justice and wrath; our God is also a God of great love and mercy. Therefore, when we are suffering, our Savior comes low with us and intercedes for us. He does this so that we may then comfort those around us.

God is not just a by-stander who is far away.

*Heb 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.*

Through the incarnation, God sent His son, Jesus. Jesus was tempted in all manner just as we are. He was beaten and marred unto death. He took our deserved payment. You see, suffering cannot really be spoken of without speaking of the gospel. We endure suffering because Christ endured suffering. We rejoice in suffering, not because we know the full decree of God, but because we know that God is maturing us and bringing us through this exile time into the fullness of glory.

I want us to understand that these trials we might encounter, while difficult, really are serving God’s agenda. We don’t stand back as people who endure chaotic suffering. We hold to a Christian worldview and as such, all suffering that we encounter we need to filter through the lens of Scripture. We haven’t evolved from space dust and are therefore just random cells that are incapable of having a morality. No! We are Christians. A creator God has knit us together with sovereign care, and He has breathed life into our soul and lungs; He has subjected us to suffering for a reason!

This is the refrain of the Christians in the new testament:

*Jas 1:2-4 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

*Romans 5:3 Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance*

*Matthew 5:12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

*Phil 1:18 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.*

Joy in God is not optional; it’s a mandate. Paul will say later in this letter, “Rejoice in the Lord always.” This is a command on us. When we are joyful, and when we are satisfied, especially in the midst of suffering, we glorify God in a way that is magnificent. Think about this. Paul, who is in a situation that is terrible, is not giving in to his flesh. Instead, he is seeking joy in the midst of this trial. But, how is this the case?

Let us look to the foundation of joy: It’s the gospel. Because Christ has paid our debt, because we have been freed from the dominion of sin, now we are free to stand condemned by the world and simultaneously sing praises to God.

This is the paradox of living by faith! We know our bloody champion is resurrected, we know that the world will hate us, and we proclaim joy! We know that nothing can stand in our way. We encounter the hardest trials, and because God was faithful to raise Christ, and because Christ was faithful to purchase our salvation, we rejoice!

Believers are marked by this reality. History is littered with martyrs’ testimonies whereby they were sheep led to the slaughter, but were led in a manner full of song and praise. They feared not the executioner’s axe! We know that our mission here is temporary; we know by our rejoicing God will use our faith to proclaim a bold testimony to those around us.

One of my favorite preachers, John Piper, says it this way:

*“Are you going to throw your life away with the rest of the world by striving to minimize your suffering and maximize your comforts in this life? Are you going to work for the bread that perishes? Build bigger barns? Lay up treasures on earth? Strive for the praise of man?*

*“Or will you see in Christ crucified and risen, bearing the sins of his people—will you see in this God-Man the all-satisfying treasure of your life? Will you say with Paul, ‘To live is Christ and to die is gain... I count everything as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord’?”*

You see, when we encounter suffering, we must not treat it as the world treats it. The world hates suffering. The world works to minimize all of suffering, all of the time. That is the point of drug addiction. These are men and women who give themselves wholly over to a substance. And, in some sense, they are better at pursuing joy than most of us. The problem is that they are looking for joy in the wrong place!

We must see the plan of God in our lives to bring us into suffering. Not as a means to dissuade us of the truth, but a means by which God will strengthen and test us. It’s intended to make us stand strong against the headwinds of evil. We ought to pursue joy in Christ at all costs, even in our suffering.

We suffer for our King because He suffered for us.

***Conclusion***

I want to share a portion of my testimony tonight. Perhaps tonight isn’t the time to share it in its fullness, but let me give you a glimpse into my life.

By the age of 16, I was heavily addicted to various drugs and on multiple medications for depression. I was deeply dysfunctional on many levels. I remember many times being fearful of myself; I feared what I may do to myself. I knew the taste of evil and darkness. I hated God. I rejected Him. I sought idols as a means of “grace” for my life. But they did nothing to give me grace, as they could not. I literally was suffering sinner who only knew how to spit in God’s face.

For many years, I was lost. But God has so changed me in amazing ways that it’s really rather alien for me to even think about who I was. Much of the darkness of that person is simply gone, and I praise God for that. Most people who knew me when I started coming to Olive Drive, knew that I was a messed up person. I still struggle with momentary sin, but I am really a different person.

But how am I to look at my suffering or what I went through? Now, I don’t know if I was a believer when I was 16. I could have been. Indeed, I had made my own profession of faith when I was younger and had been baptized into the Christian church. I do know that I was NOT living in a way that showed the world that Jesus was Lord. I was living with myself as lord. Perhaps my suffering was a means of grace in order to execute my sin and eventually bring me to repentance and belief into Jesus. Perhaps I didn’t really know the Lord until much later; I don’t know.

My familiarity with addiction, with depression, with suicide has given me an ability to empathize and sympathize with those of you in our congregation who also suffer or have suffered in this way. God wasn’t making a mistake in decreeing that I would sin and run from Him for many years. God is not making a mistake in any of His will of decree, even if we don’t like it.

Look to the words of Paul. He suffered, but he knew for whom he suffered: Jesus. Let us, as Christians, suffer for Christ. Let us see our suffering, whether inflicted by our exile, or by our own sin, or by those persecuting us for simply loving Jesus, as a means by which we are honored to show the glory of Jesus to a lost world!

In my personal study through Acts, I found Paul’s testimony captivating. Prior to his conversion, when he approved of Stephen’s execution, he had no idea of the suffering he would endure. But God did. Indeed, God willed from eternity past that He would take a murderer of Christians and turn him into one of the most amazing missionaries to walk the earth. And what happened to Paul in return? He found joy. He found Jesus. He was captivated by His grace.

Who are we to question God’s ways?

I pray that in your suffering, you would humble yourself and be captivated by His grace as well.

Let’s pray.