

MANUSCRIPT

I graduated High School with a loose plan of getting out of my hometown, Lubbock, and becoming a Youth Minister. I had a great friend who was attending a bible school in Abilene, TX and I thought that my calling was to get trained and get to work. I wanted to help people, I had a great experience in my youth group, and it seemed like a noble profession. Rewind a bit and I can remember being a young man describing his identity as a buffett. I was a chameleon. Hang out with any crowd and fit in. In my church, I found a community of accepting believers, strong male role models, and a variety of leadership positions to give me a sense for ministry. I knew God but I was early in my faith.

At Abilene Christian University, I found an incredible community of believers who encouraged me in my faith, provided a season of rest from playing drums 3 services a week/bible studies/retreats, and helped me process through a long held idol to leave my hometown. During Springbreak of my freshman year everything changed. My stepmother passed away and doors began to close. I was looking to go back home to be with family, ACU was going to be very difficult to keep up, and I was no longer sure about a calling into Youth Ministry. In a few

months, my community changed, there was no immediate path to ministry, a serious relationship that I thought was working ended, and I was moving back to Lubbock.

I was disappointed that my perfection in planning was not there and nor was it enough. I tried to make myself into an image of someone to be used by God. I had attempted to craft that person with the right classes, right environment, and mix of personality that I thought would make a great minister and a respectable man. I realized in coming home and being stripped of my plans that God simply wanted to use me. He alone provides the field, the message, and the spirit's power.

Often our frustrations with our lives are rooted in the lie that we are the protagonist and hero of our story. We get nervous when our bootstraps are not pulling us up. When are "if only's" don't come through. When our suffering and bondage don't seem to let up.

Our text this morning is a reminder that we are not the central character in the story. We are not the protagonist, we are a supporting character. Paul's message this morning is that while we are finite and limited and that our God is relentless and boundless through the gospel. This good news that even in

humanity's rebellion to God's design for our lives, He turns our hearts, He saves us from a life without him, He lived a perfect life so that our sin would be paid for, He was risen to secure our faith, and He stands at the right hand of God and is coming to redeem and make all things new.

Paul is showing us this morning that this Gospel is truly good news to three distinct vantage points of the church; the Doubting, the Suffering, and the Bitter.

The Gospel spans from the highest to the lowest levels of Paul's imprisonment and context. Unhindered by limits of suffering, it spills over and even compels those outside of the walls with even more intensity. Even more, the gospel advances in spite of the agent giving the message. God is relentless in accomplishing his redemptive and restorative work.

The Doubting

Let's set the context. Paul is speaking to the church at Philippi in a rough time. They are being persecuted, one of their key leaders almost died twice, Paul is in prison in Rome, and there are warring factions within the church.

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.

Paul addresses this concern with reality and reassurance that his imprisonment *really* does serve the gospel. Although, it doesn't seem helpful, it is not convenient, God is still at work through the message of the Gospel. Paul gives two contexts of this gospel at work.

First, Paul points out his context of imprisonment. He tells them that the reason for his imprisonment, preaching the gospel, has been made known throughout the imperial guard and the rest of his imprisonment.

From the prisoner, the guard, the gatekeeper, all the way to the imperial guard, often translated as the general's tent.

Can you hear the skepticism that Paul is addressing?

“Brothers, I want you to **know**”... “happened to me has **really** served to advance the gospel.” Paul's exhortation for the church is to really know, not acknowledge, not

trust, but to know that God is doing something miraculous in still moving while he is bound in Rome.

The gospel spreading throughout the ranks of all levels of the military. Do you see the effect of Paul's life as a result of his obedience and heed for the words of this gospel? Rome's intent to make an example out of him, turns him into a example on ***how to live.***

Secondly, Paul points to the gospel's work outside of his imprisonment and gets to the core issue of his audience's doubt. Paul is pointing to both factions saying that advancement of the gospel is still moving despite what might seem like a setback. On one hand, it's advancing in spite of the imprisonment and efforts to stop the message of the gospel. On the other, it's advancing even in spite of Paul and God is emboldening others all the more to preach. Even though enemies of Paul preach out of strife, the gospel is bigger than their intent. It's about the gospel not about the messenger. Do our lives spur others to press on in their faith even in the mundane or affliction? Even though the kids are crazy, work is piled up, and all you can do is show up to a city group, are you able to see that God uses this to show that He is still worth it?

For the doubting, would you entertain that there is something peculiar about the movement of the gospel to outpace Paul and embolden others to proclaim this good news? Do you see God's kindness in first addressing those in the same boat as yourself? Do you see that he is speaking to those who may be early in their faith and able to say that he is still worth it? For those who have seen more life, can you see that Paul's obedience to the call of gospel is an invitation to participate with God and his current redemptive work? Maybe that is your neighbor, maybe it's your children, maybe it's the seemingly insufferable coworker that you are being compelled to connect with. Where is he calling you to come with your doubts and see that he is at work around you?

The Suffering

We see from Paul that something more is happening in addition to the issue of doubt. It's an even deeper question that while God is at work; why isn't he just using Paul in a more comfortable or pleasant way rather than making him suffer in prison in Rome? That would help the Church in Philippi settle the factions in the church, help them address the persecution of the time, and put Paul back to work in his missionary journeys.

Paul's question of his suffering helps provide further

clarity, namely that his suffering is helping to advance the gospel. Paul is pointing out that he is neither the hero of the gospel nor the church at Philippi, and even more that God is using Paul's suffering for a reason.

That reason is to embolden others to preach and advance the gospel. He's not the first string star player.

He is simply obedient and his model of obedience in tandem with the spirit's power is infectious!

There is a classic story of the famous English preacher, Charles Spurgeon. He was late for a service and his grandfather took over the service in Charles's absence.

The Grandfather waits at the beginning of the service.

Waits until service starts and begins the liturgy. Waits during the first songs and Charles is not there. Being a gifted preacher, the grandfather begins a message and Charles comes in while the grandfather is preaching.

His grandfather makes a similar remark to Paul's message that we see in Philippians, "My grandson is here now; he may be a greater preacher than I, but he can't preach a greater gospel."

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This is very comforting as I even preach this message this am. Tim Keller has made the comment often that a

preacher's first 100 sermons are going to stink. I can live with the fact that God will use my feeble words to accomplish his work through his spirit. Pray for those this summer who are following this call to preach.

Thank them for being obedient and ask yourself where you can serve. We have no shortage of needs and a great God already leading the way. Come with us and let's see the gospel made known to our families, marketplaces, neighborhoods, city, and the nations. We need you!

Think of the good news that Paul is communicating while suffering and bound in Rome. Even with little means, resources, especially freedom, the gospel is bigger than the messenger. The polarity of the depth of our suffering and brokenness in the world is matched by the boundless grace, mercy, forgiveness, love by the Father through the Son by the power of the spirit. Maybe you find yourself in a prison of sorts:

- of debt
- of disappointment
- of keeping up appearances in a loveless marriage

- of unrealized expectations for your life or your kids

Maybe you are only able to pray, maybe you are only able to give, maybe you only have limited bandwidth.

Would you consider that God could be inviting you to step out in faith to be used to show the power of the gospel even with little means. As stated in vs.6 he is faithful to complete the work that he has started.

The Bitter

This brings us to the last area; that of bitterness. Paul ends this passage by showing the dichotomy of those preaching the gospel out of good will and those out of ambitions to afflict Paul. The clearest illustration of bitterness is the idea of taking poison and waiting for the other person to die. This is often because the reasons, feelings, and depth of your bitterness are often unexpressed and therefore not obvious to the other party. Bitterness is the blooming fruit of someone who believes their role is the protagonist in their life. It is ripened by the idea that your goals, dreams, aspirations are the *ends* of your life. That they are not only yours to attain but also yours to secure.

If only people would recognize my talents, if only I was in the room, if only my child would..., if only my husband

or wife would.... This fixation on ourselves is a weight that is not only exhausting to carry, but ultimately one that you cannot fully bear.

Paul expresses the effect of the gospel as both emboldening those with good motives and those attempting to afflict or hurt Paul. Paul is pointing out that his joy is that Christ is proclaimed. Three times he says that he will rejoice. He's not concerned that he'll be the hero. That he will be their example. That he will be their model of ministry or faithfulness. Not even that he will be their model for the Christian who has their life together. Our bitterness is mercifully answered by the fact that we are not the center of the story, we can not preach a better gospel. This allows us to submit all of our if only's and what if's to the God who exchanges our bitterness into joy. He knows your reasons, he is aware of the hurt, he knows why you feel like you can't find peace. He groans with you and on your behalf for your good. He not only has a better story for you but he is your end. Come with your bitterness and taste and see that He is good.

Are you willing to trade your expectations of others and yourself this morning for a true joy and better story?

Call

Where do you find yourself this morning? Do you find yourself hoping on if onlys, on diversions from your current suffering, or maybe even apathetic? Would you press into the God who is not only present but also actively rescuing?

Where is he calling you? Is he calling you back into His pure and perfect love, showing you a greater story than the one that you have been trying to make? Is he calling you to look to him even though you can't see the next step, trusting that he will lovingly walk with you?

Could it be that at the very least He is stirring you to come to him with your doubts and wrestle?

Church, Paul's message for the Philippians is for us today. Their doubt, their suffering, and their bitterness is ours today. It is true, present, and it does matter. Even so, He has truly met our deepest need living a perfect life and giving us righteousness, in putting to death our sin, and raising to secure our hope in him. In the gospel, he brings assurance to our doubt, hope for our suffering, and a wellspring of joy to our bitterness.

Would you cast your anxieties, your hopes, your disappointments this morning, for the God who loves you and the world around you? Would you ask him

where he would call you to take this gospel into our city, our country, and the ends of the earth? For His mission, his glory, and our good. Our God truly is relentless and boundless.