

PAUL: THE PREACHING PRISONER**Philippians 1:12-30****Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road****Plymouth, Michigan 48170****Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 01.11.2004**

Rabbi Hugo Gryn used to tell of his experiences in Auschwitz as a boy. Food supplies were meager, and the prisoners took care to preserve every scrap that came their way. When the Festival of Hanukkah arrived, Hugo's father took a lump of margarine and, to the horror of young Hugo, used it as fuel for the light to be lit at the festival. When Hugo asked why, his father replied, "We know that it is possible to live for three weeks without food, but without hope it is impossible to live properly for three minutes." Joy and hope—even imprisonment and the threat of death cannot extinguish them. And this is precisely what we see in Paul, the preaching prisoner, in Phil 1:12-30.

¹²Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. ¹³As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

¹⁵It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸But 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.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²²If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

²⁷Whatever happens, as citizens of heaven live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together with

one accord for the faith of the gospel ²⁸without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. ²⁹For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, ³⁰since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

When Paul, writing to his fellow Christians and friends in Philippi, brings them up to date about his situation, he says very little about himself. Perhaps he expected Epaphroditus to fill them in on personal matters. Paul's focus is not so much on *what* has happened to him as it is on *how he views* what has happened to him. It may be that Paul is thinking more of the Philippians than he is of himself, and so he writes to aid them in their struggle with adversity. Paul is not simply making the best of apparently bad circumstances; he is actually turning them around for the glory of God.

To the world of Paul's time—and especially to the citizens of Philippi, a Roman Colony—Caesar was proclaimed as “lord” and “savior.” But to Paul and to the Christians in Philippi, only Jesus Christ was professed to be “lord” and “savior,” and the lordship of Christ over Caesar was already making itself felt through the penetration of the gospel into the very heart of Roman political life.

Paul views his imprisonment in Rome as an event that has served to advance the gospel. First, anyone in Rome who has come to know about Paul's confinement had also come to learn that it was not because Paul was a criminal, but it was because Paul was a Christian. Second, most of Paul's fellow believers have been inspired by his imprisonment to spread the gospel faithfully and fearlessly. Paul's imprisonment is not simply the *result* of his preaching of the gospel, but is itself a *means* of preaching the gospel. Paul's own courage and confidence in the Lord have encouraged other Christians. Whether by his life or by his death, Paul expects to advance the gospel and to bring glory to God.

Somewhat surprisingly, we learn that some of those who are boldly proclaiming the gospel do so because Paul is out of the way! They preach Christ from envy and rivalry, out of selfish ambition and insincerity. Astonishingly, Paul declares that such motives do not matter! Since it is the gospel that is preached, Paul rejoices.

“Yes, and I will continue to rejoice,” writes Paul, “for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will

turn out for my deliverance.” Paul anticipates “deliverance.” But what kind of deliverance does he have in mind? The phrase “what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance” is an exact quotation of Job 13:16 as it reads in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. In that context, Job expresses confidence about his vindication in a heavenly court. What Paul is confidently hoping for is not a deliverance from his present plight, but is a favorable verdict from God. A favorable verdict from God renders immaterial the judgment of the earthly Roman court. Furthermore, the Greek word translated “deliverance”—σωτηρία (*sōtēria*)—would be better translated “salvation” (some versions note this in a footnote). And since in every other occurrence of this word in Paul’s writings it means salvation in the sense of God’s ultimate and final saving action, an even better translation would be “vindication.” Just as Jesus was put on trial before an earthly court and was vindicated by a heavenly judge, as we shall see in 2:6-11, so Paul sees himself as following in the footsteps of Jesus.

Perhaps some of the most well-known words from Paul are the following:

²¹For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²²If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!

²³I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

Paul has a problem: he can’t choose how he wants to serve Christ—whether by living or by dying. But Paul does not have to choose, for God has already chosen. For Paul, “living is Christ” which is to say “life *means* Christ.” Life is summed up in Christ. Life is filled up with, occupied with Christ, in the sense that everything Paul does—trusts, loves, hopes, obeys, preaches, and so on—everything is inspired by Christ and is done for Christ. Christ and Christ alone gives inspiration, direction, meaning, and purpose to existence.

Paul’s desire “to depart and be with Christ” is the subject of much debate. At issue is the question of consciousness, for which in Paul we have no direct evidence one way or the other. Paul does not spell out here the nature of the gain brought by death. So, let’s stick with what we can know with certainty. What we know for certain is that death cannot separate a Christian from the love of God in Christ Jesus (cf. Rom 8:38). Our present existence “in Christ” makes it unthinkable that we would ever—even at death—be anywhere where we are not “with Christ.” Paul’s conviction is simply that

death will mean being with Christ and sharing His resurrection life.

Verses 27-30 are one long, convoluted sentence in Greek. However, Paul's central concern is clear: "There is just one thing! Live in the Roman colony of Philippi as worthy citizens of your heavenly homeland." The Philippian Christians in their believing, behaving, and bearing persecution are an embodiment of the gospel. As the church, we are not only the body of Christ, we are also an embodiment of the gospel. Notice that Paul spells out what it means to live a life worthy of the gospel: we are, as a community of Christians, to be steadfast, united, and fearless, even in the face of opposition.

Permit me to make several observations. First, Paul's words warn us of how easy it is to delude ourselves about our motives in undertaking a Christian service. The battle against envy, rivalry, selfish ambition, and insincerity is a constant one.

Second, Paul's spirituality, though intensely personal, is never an individual matter. He is a member of a community, the body of Christ, and the well-being of that community and the progress of the gospel are all-important. We, on the other hand, tend to be individualistic in our spirituality, viewing religion as a private matter and thinking of the gospel as primarily an offer of personal salvation. Paul helps us to see "the big picture." The gospel is for everyone, and we are called to preach it with our lips and practice it in our lives. A gospel that cannot save everyone cannot save anyone.

Third, Paul prays for a stronger back rather than a lighter burden. What he hopes for is that he will be given the courage to stand firm at his earthly trial and so be vindicated by the heavenly court. Perhaps we are inclined to pray too much for deliverance from sickness and sorrow, pain and death, rather than for courage to endure these things. The real danger is to succumb to their power instead of trusting in God—as Jesus did—to bring us through them. Paul believes that God can be glorified not only by the way a Christian lives, but also by the way he or she dies. As a Christian, whatever burdens we are called to bear, we can be assured that God will not abandon us nor will He allow us to be put to shame in His sight. Whatever experiences we undergo, we may confidently expect to find Christ sharing them with us, and so we discover that disaster leads to opportunity, sorrow to joy, and death to resurrection life. Furthermore, through "death on a cross" Jesus not only "saved us," He showed us how God deals with opposition and,

therefore, how we are to deal with our opponents—we are to love them to death.

For Paul, “to depart and be with Christ” was a yearning; for us, too often it is an afterthought. But it is such a focus that gives us purpose and perspective in a world gone mad.

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