

Joy in Christ Centered Ministry – Part 1

Philippians 1:12-18

“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.”

Introduction: If you had to define and illustrate how you prioritize life and where Christ fits, what would it look like? There seems to be four different options, at least by observation and talking with people throughout the years:

- 1) **Fire Alarm (Pulled only in extreme crisis)** – I got to check off part of my bucket list when I pulled the fire alarm at our high school campus on Thursday. For a kid who was too afraid not to follow the rules, this came with complete satisfaction. But many see Jesus as someone to call on in emergencies, where there is no one else to turn to or every other option has been exhausted. This clearly falls short of seeing Jesus as our living water (John 4:10), our Lord (1 Corinthians 12:3), and our very life (Col. 3:4)
- 2) **The Juggler** - This is where we believe Jesus has a place in our life, but must be juggled with everything else that is important: family, work, house, sports, service, activities, etc. We spend our life trying to keep each of these in the air, not really differentiating between what is most important. This can be exhausting because it feels like it is up to us to keep everything airborne.
- 3) **The List** - The famed football coach Vince Lombardi used to tell his players, "Men, there are three things that are important in life: your religion, your family, and the Green Bay Packers!" This gets us closer to a sustainable model, since the ranking at least gives greater to lesser importance. However, this leaves us with categories and lends itself to boxing each of these in, where the components never mix or overlap.
- 4) **Solar System** - Perhaps a better picture would be our Solar System, with planets in orbit around the sun (yes, technically the sun is NOT dead center, but close enough for word pictures). The sun is the focal point by which all planets move, with some being closer and those further away, but always moving. This picture displays when Christ is the central, focal point of our life. Everything revolves around Him, because of Him, and with Him.

Why are these so important? How we view life will determine how we view circumstances, and how we view circumstances will determine if we find joy in everything or if we are bound by circumstances. Maturity in Christ is seen when we find our greatest joy in Christ and view the things out of our control (which is most things) not as means of happiness but rather opportunities to trust. The apostle Paul described his view of his life this way:

*But I do not account my life of any **value** nor as **precious** to myself, if only I **may finish my course** and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, **to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.**” Acts 20:24*

He knew who He was: Christ's alone. He knew his mission: testify to the gospel of the grace of God. He knew what drove him: finish what I received from the Lord Jesus. This is why he prayed for the church the way he did (Phil. 1:3-11), why he could say to live is Christ and to die was gain (Phil. 1:21), and why he could view EVERY CIRCUMSTANCE through the lens of who he was in Christ. When Christ is central, everything else can be prioritized, seen with the right perspective, and lead us to rejoice.

Joy Despite Chains: *from obstacles to opportunities*

“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 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.”

Imprisonments Disappointment

After finishing recounting how he prayed for the church, he wanted to get them caught up on his present situation. He was, once again, in prison. However, this time he was presented with much different opportunities under far different circumstances.

Paul longed to go to Rome (Romans 1:10-13) in order to preach the gospel there (Rom. 1:10). This was part of his desire to spread the gospel throughout modern day Europe, including Spain (Rom. 15:24). However, the way God answered his prayerful desire was not the easiest nor most conventional. While in Jerusalem (Acts 21:15-25), the Jews were riled up by his teaching and accused him of bringing Greeks into the Temple, defiling the holy place (Acts 21:27-28). He was arrested to save him from the mob, and upon hearing he was a Roman citizen, the Roman guard protected him and did not flog him (Acts 22:22-29). During this time, the Lord told him to take courage and testify in Rome (Acts 23:11). This led to a **plot against Paul's life**, and him being sent to Caesarea before Felix the governor (Acts 23:23-35), where Paul eventually **appealed to Caesar** (Acts 25:11). Paul sailed for Rome, finally, only to get shipwrecked along the way (Acts 27:13-28:1), and when he finally got to Rome, was able to be under house arrest in a rented house (Acts 28:30-31), chained to a guard. It is here that the narrative in Acts ends. Paul, under house arrest, awaiting the answer to his trial, whether he would continue to live or lose his head to the powers that were. We know Paul was released after 2 years, but he did not have that kind of information at the time.

He had a strong desire, a prayerful consideration, and even a direct command from Jesus Himself to go to Rome and preach the gospel. God wanted Paul in Rome, and there was no doubt. If that were us and we were given that kind of clarity, it would be safe to say we would expect some amount of open doors, logistical groundwork, and divine help along the way. What Paul got was prison, shipwreck, and chains. Its important that we feel this on a human level, since this is NOT what Paul had in mind. This would have been a tough pill to swallow, not only in the **waiting** to get there, but in the **method** by which God got him there. So often we have these kind of disappointments when we were so sure of what God would have for us, and it simply did not turn out that way. Our jobs, lives, kids, marriages, ministries, friendships, and accomplishments seem null and void compared to what we hoped and prayed for. Paul even uttered the words we feel, "I want you to know, brothers, **what has happened TO ME.**" Not someone else, but me. That is the toughest kind of news, the hardest kind of circumstance, the kind that affects us personally, the kind we never expected or anticipated. But this is where Paul's mindset governed by his clarity about life led him **not to complain, but reassure the church** that all that had happened was not bondage but freedom.

Imprisonments Freedom

There are **two poignant reasons Paul saw his imprisonment as freedom**, which caused him to rejoice rather than mourn:

1) **His imprisonment was truly an ADVANCEMENT of the gospel** - The word he chose was a military one, where an armies engineers would go ahead of the advancing troops and cut down trees, getting the field ready for battle. The word was used when *advancement had to overcome obstacles*, which is what modern day Recon troops do today, going ahead and gathering intelligence, enemy movement, and

strength of force. He viewed his imprisonment not as a punishment or throwing him off his mission, but simply how the mission would take place, and seeing this role as a most important, yet none glamorous role.

2) He became known throughout the imperial (or praetorian guard) - Notice the tremendous perspective here. While under house arrest, Paul would have been in chains (Eph. 6:20 - an ambassador in chains; Acts 28:20 - wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel). Not the type of stocks he was in while in Philippi, where they would have stretched his legs. These would have been more like modern day handcuffs, about 18 inches long. Every 6 hours, a different guard would be chained to Paul's wrist, which nullified any chance of escape (which he would not have tried), nor of any opportunity to be alone. **How would you have responded to this? Fear? Shame? Complaint? Why me?** Paul did not view it this way. He viewed **the OBSTACLE as an OPPORTUNITY**. He had a captive audience every day, 4 different men that got to hear his story, observe his life, see his attitude, and know that he was imprisoned not for a violation of Roman law, but for the sake of Christ. These men knew that his life hung in the balance, yet he was not anxious of impending death, and was joyful in the midst of these circumstances.

Sometimes we can feel trapped in our life, imprisoned by circumstances outside of our control. It can be a marriage, a disease, or a cubicle where we feel like there is no way out, nor does it feel like there is any way to be fruitful, and that this **could not possibly be God's plan for us**. But in every situation, through every obstacle, there are opportunities. This is not some pithy statement. This is what Paul believed **his very life was about**. God always arranges circumstances, no matter how crazy they seem, to accomplish His glory. Perhaps we are on the advance team in someone's life rather than in regular force, but He has us at home with our kids, in our particular job, or walking through a certain disease so that He can get done what He desires.

For Paul, this meant infiltrating the imperial guard, and eventually Caesar's own house (notice Philippians 4:22!!!). This guard was made up of around 10,000 handpicked soldiers dispersed strategically through the city to keep the peace and protect the emperor. They would for 12-16 years after which they would be granted honorary title and a generous severance. They eventually would be a powerful group, known as "king makers", who not only protected but even *chose future emperors*. This was a group that would have made a huge impact on the city when they followed Jesus, even infiltrating the highest level of government. There would have been no way for Paul to have had access to these men IF NOT FOR HIS IMPRISONMENT! **Never underestimate what God is doing in and through you in any and every circumstance!**

In the late 1600's, Jon Bunyan had started drawing crowds through his preaching, which happened to coincide with the Restoration of Charles II, which meant unless someone was licensed by the Church of England, they could not preach openly. Bunyan refused to stop, so he was thrown into prison, being separated from his wife and four children. All he had to do was stop proclaiming the gospel of Jesus and come under the Church, and he would be set free. While in prison, he still had hundreds from around Bedford come to listen to his explanation of Scripture. When he was moved and unable to preach in the courtyard, he used his years of confinement to write, penning at least 9 books from 1660-1672, the greatest of which we know as *The Pilgrims Progress*, a book that during Bunyan's life and since his death, had become the best selling book (apart from the English Bible), taking the gospel to millions of homes. Bunyan's circumstances and imprisonment could not stop his mission, nor could it stop God's plan of spreading the gospel.

“Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, **bound with chains as a criminal. But the Word of God is not bound!**” 2 Timothy 2:8-9

Imprisonments Emboldening

Not only had Paul's imprisonment give freedom to reach a group he never would have had the opportunity without chains, his **example emboldened believers to speak the word without fear.** It is not difficult to imagine why the believers in Rome would have operated out of fear. They faced growing opposition from a Roman government that valued peace and put down insurrection of any kind without pity. This was the same government that put Jesus to death, so their fears were valid. Imprisonment was a real possibility. Loss of job, position, and prestige were real things. Though the fear was valid (as are ours today), the boldness was greater. Notice two principles here:

1) **Leaders are those that set the example for others to follow** - Sometimes all it takes is for someone to take initiative for others to not only follow, but realize they could do the same thing. Leading by example is a powerful tool, one that separates those who lead by *position vs. influence*. Paul **showed the church** that not only was prison NOT THE END, his circumstances were what God used to advance. **This is what is needed in our marriages.** We need leaders to take the initiative to model what it looks like to obey the Lord, to resolve conflict, and seek forgiveness. **This is what is needed in our church.** We do not need more nice people, we need leaders who are willing to risk, willing to sacrifice, and be the first ones to serve. We need young people to take responsibility of their own lives so that they can help others outside, leading not by word but daily action.

2) **They were emboldened to speak, not preach** - We need preachers, man do we need preachers. We need those that can unpack the Word of God, proclaiming the truth to the church, equipping us to reach the world. But we need those who can speak the gospel every day, in every day life. Paul was effective while chained NOT because he preached, but because his life did! Men got 6 hours to see it and hear it. *How do we speak without fear each day?* We view each day as an opportunity to display the truth, goodness, and love of Christ by being **great workers, giving consistent effort, displaying gracious attitudes, not participating in gossip and complaint, and being someone that people can count on.** When the opportunity comes up to explain ourselves, or to tell our story, or to tell our view of politics, or what we think of social justice/injustice, or any reason to give a reason for the hope that we have in Jesus Christ, we take it. In doing this, we can reach students, workers in Hollywood, firemen, our children, someone in the cubicle next to us, and the nurse that attends to us. We need those who seek to speak the word without fear, following Paul's example despite trouble. But what about critics?

Joy Despite Critics: *from contention to proclamation*

“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.

Opponents & Motives

When we follow Christ as the center of all things, and when we engage in gospel ministry, we will not only face trouble, we will absolutely face critics and contention. Paul faced political opposition from Rome, even though he was a citizen who broke no law, found himself in prison over and over. Paul faced religious opposition from the Jews, who knew him to be a traitor who spoke against their Law and who tried to stone him, kill him, and at the very least imprison him. It's important for us to remember

that we will face this kind of opposition if we hold fast to the truth of Scripture and glories of Jesus Christ. But Paul also faced **internal opposition**, some who claimed to be followers of Christ but were not (see Philippians 3:2-4), while some were actually believers who had something against him personally. There were some who were emboldened to preach **because of Paul** and these did it out of love: *love of God, love for Paul*. They understood that Paul was in prison **for Christ, not because he messed up, sinned, or some other duplicitous reason**. It is easy to see that when this group lived out the gospel and taught it, it would bring Paul joy.

However, there were those **WITHIN** the church who wanted to see Paul stay in prison, to stay afflicted! The intentions of this group were noted by Paul, which is rare since he tended not to imply motives of others (1 Cor. 4:4-7). But there were those who proclaimed Christ out of **envy, rivalry, and selfish ambition**. We do not know exactly who these were, nor what beef they had against Paul. Maybe they thought he had some concealed sin that caused him to be imprisoned. Perhaps they thought he lacked faith, or relevancy to reach the sophisticated people of Rome. Maybe they thought he lacked conviction, since if he did he would have been martyred already. Or maybe it was more base than this, that they did not like his leadership, did not like that he had a following, and while he was in prison it allowed a new voice in leadership. Envy, jealousy, and selfish ambition are alive and well today, where some would rather see others fail to make them feel better about themselves or their ministries. Competition in evangelicalism is alive and well, and it is a killer. This is why we want to pray for rather than compete with other churches, training our minds to hope for the growth of height and depth of churches that proclaim the gospel, rather than wish we had the same number of people.

Opponents & Mission

Paul was not ignorant, nor was he naive. He knew exactly what was going on while he was (wrongly) imprisoned. Instead of defending himself, or taking his opponents to task, he rejoiced. What?!!!! What are we missing, because that is not my response when people take shots at me, misrepresenting and drawing false conclusions. How did Paul rejoice in the midst?

1. **Humility is heroic** - Paul exercised the humility modeled in Christ Himself. "When He was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but **continued entrusting himself to Him who judges justly**." (1 Pet. 2:23). Humility stops trying to justify self, can overcome personal hurt, and moves forward proactively in love. If humility stops putting ourselves on the throne, Christ can be exalted and magnified. If Christ is there, we can see that **even if the motives are wrong, even if we get the shim-shammy along the way, we can rejoice that He is being proclaimed**. If this means we decrease so He increases.

2. **Singlemindedness is hard** - When life is no longer about us, joy is the oxygen we breathe. When Christ is proclaimed by those we disagree with, when the gospel is upheld by those who have different theology or worship music, or when Christ is magnified by those who think we are backward and boring, we rejoice. Why? Because we want to think, pray, and live like Paul. When we can say:

"I do not account my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God."

Questions for Discussion:

- How would you describe the roll Christ plays in your life? Is it like one of the four examples given or something else? What are the implications of this view and how you view circumstances in your life?
- What obstacles are you currently facing in your life, those things that are out of your control? What areas of your life do you feel imprisoned by? What is your response currently to each of these?
- What kind of fear keeps us away from boldly speaking the Word? What real things are we afraid of? What would boldness look like if we were not afraid?
- What kind of critics have you had in your life, or do you currently have? How do you respond? What would humility and singlemindedness look like when there is contention in relationships?

Counseling Thought:

Charles Spurgeon was known as the "Prince of Preachers" a man of world renown and whose legacy still speaks to believers today. He was sought after as a speaker and pastor, which required hours of sacrifice and study. His wife, Susannah, sought to support her husband's vast ministry, even while she suffered from severe medical issues and spend much of her adulthood as an invalid. She often experienced such intense seasons of pain that she could barely move. But Susannah believed God was using her brokenness to refine her character. Her physical agony drew her into closer proximity with a Savior who suffered for her and with her. Even in the most excruciating circumstances, Susannah demonstrated gratitude, joy, peace, and patience.

In 1873, after finishing her husband's "**Lectures to my Students**", Susannah was compelled to get the book into the hands of every minister of England. She organized a charity called "The Book Fund" to provide complimentary copies of *Lectures* to poor ministers throughout England. Starting by purchasing 100 copies herself, the ministry grew and nine years later, she distributed 71,000 copies, spreading gospel influence even though she could not leave the house. She saw her life as not about her, but about using anything at her disposal to leverage for the gospel, in spite of circumstances.

One of the tests of maturity in our lives is what it takes to rob us of Spirit-filled joy. Paul showed that even the worst of circumstances cannot take joy away from a believer who is in Christ. The one sure fire way joy will be quenched is when we sin, whether its bitterness, complaint, dissatisfaction, or fear. If you are lacking joy in your circumstance, is there an area of life that you need to repent of, turn from, and seek forgiveness? David found this in Psalm 51:12, "**Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit**" after he confessed his sin to the Lord..