

Preacher: Jack Kapinga

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Reading: Philippians 1:12-18a

Title: Deeper Joy: The Unstoppable Advance Of The Gospel

Introduction

If you heard last week's message, then you'll know that Paul's letter to the Philippians is a letter of Joy. It's a letter in which he repeatedly expresses his own gladness and pleasure and delight, and all that despite the fact that his outward physical circumstances were so incredibly grim. But it's also a letter in which he invites the church at Philippi, and at the very same time invites all of us here at Riverbank, to share in his rejoicing, to share in his Deeper Joy. And I ask you this morning, which of us would not want that?

I mean we've all experienced the fleeting happiness of worldly possessions, achievements and experiences. But the gloss so quickly wears off and we find ourselves yearning for more. And we also know there's so many things going on in this world and our society and in our own lives that constantly threaten to bring us down, that leave us feeling sad, frustrated and hopeless.

And so I ask you, who wouldn't want to discover a more permanent, more profound kind of Joy? Who wouldn't want to discover a kind of Joy that sustains us even when we're deep in the dark valleys of life, even when everything's going wrong, even when we're staring death in the face? Who wouldn't want to discover a Deeper Joy that will never ever fade away?

Well that's what this book's all about. And we saw that already last week when we looked at verses 1-11. For there Paul told the Philippians, "I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel". The first thing Paul rejoiced in was the fact that they could work together for the sake of the gospel, that they could encourage each other with the magnificent grace and forgiveness of God revealed in the good news of Jesus Christ, and that they could join in spreading that amazing good news to the lost, a task with eternal implications.

But surely we rejoice in this too? For we too are called to be partners in this same gospel, to put the glorious good news of Jesus first in our minds, first in our lives, first in our relationships, first in our church. We too are called to share together in this awesome task of making and growing disciples, so that people will be forever rescued from their sin, so that the church and kingdom will increase, and so that the Lord will receive all glory and honour and praise. And so if you and I are truly focussed on being gospel partners, if that's our very reason for being and the yearning of our hearts, then we'll experience a Deeper Joy that will uplift us and sustain us and inspire us every single day of our lives.

But that then leads onto the next passage where Paul describes another reason for his Joy. For did you notice in verse 18, right at the end of our reading, that he concludes this section saying, "And because of this I rejoice." And so our aim today is to understand what "this" is? What, in these verses causes Paul to rejoice?

I Rejoice Because - What Has Happened To Me Has Actually Served To Advance The Gospel!

And there's really 2 parts to it. Part A is in verses 12-14 where Paul begins by saying, "Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel." So what Paul's talking about here is his imprisonment. It's the fact that despite his grand plans to travel the world, preaching about Jesus, calling people to repent, growing and equipping the church, despite all of that, he was instead locked up because of the gospel, deprived of his freedom and awaiting trial.

So you can understand that as a result, the believers were disheartened. For Paul was a great evangelist, a great leader and great blessing to many. But now all of that's finished. For the man they needed so much to continue this work was now in chains, his ministry extinguished, his influence quashed. And his imprisonment may even end in his execution. And you can also understand that these believers were frustrated, even angry. They would've wondered why Paul put himself in this situation, why hadn't he been wiser, avoiding the places where trouble was inevitable? And they would've wondered why God allowed all this to happen, why didn't he do something to prevent it? It all seemed so stupid, pointless and futile.

But Paul says, No, you've got it all wrong. He says I want you to know, I want you to grasp and comprehend, that what's happened to me is for a reason, in fact it's for the most important reason there ever could be. For my imprisonment actually serves to advance the gospel. You know it struck me that Paul doesn't say, the gospel advances despite my imprisonment. But he says, the gospel advances because of my imprisonment. His captivity was actually the catalyst for God's work to increase. And so we shouldn't see it as something bad and undesirable, but as something good and positive. For it's the very means by which the Lord is spreading his salvation.

But how could that be? Well Paul describes 2 different ways that the Lord was using his imprisonment. First he says "As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ." You see Paul was probably under house arrest in Rome. And that means he was supervised by, possibly even physically chained to, a Roman guard, with a new one rostered every few hours.

But Paul didn't see these guards as vile enemies to be hated but as lost souls to be evangelised. And they were, after all, a captive audience. So you can just imagine Paul enthusiastically telling them about the Lord Jesus and his death and resurrection. And you can imagine that message slowly spreading throughout the whole palace guard, of whom there were thousands, and throughout everyone they knew. That message went out with the power of the Holy Spirit, so the gospel advanced as people heard it, responded in faith and were saved.

But then there was also another aspect to this advance. For Paul adds, "And 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." Friends, we're not the first ones to find evangelism confronting and frightening. We're not the first to shrink back at the thought of standing up for the Lord.

But the Lord used Paul's example, his imprisonment and boldness, to give strength and courage to the other believers in that place. For Paul could still have visitors and they'd have seen and heard and told others what he was doing. And thus the gospel advanced through them as they gained confidence and fearlessly proclaimed the gospel. Paul wanted the Philippians to know, and wanted us to know, that physical and worldly struggles and hardship are no barrier to the gospel. In fact they may well be the very means God is using to spread the message of his Son.

As we think about this, I want to share the story of Jim Elliot, Ed McCully, Roger Youderian, Peter Fleming and Nate Saint. You may have heard of them. These American men in their late 20's were part of a Christian mission to reach Indian tribes in Ecuador. It was the 1950's and they had in mind to reach a particular group. So they built a small base nearby and received what seemed to be a friendly visit from some locals. So on the 8th January 1956 they set out for their very first visit to the village. But as they approached they were met by 10 warriors with spears raised ready to strike. These young men had guns they could've used but they'd vowed never to kill an Indian who didn't know Jesus in order to save their own life. And so they were attacked and all 5 of them were killed. And we may think that was nothing more than a tragic event, a terrible waste of life, an

utterly stupid, pointless and futile exercise. But was it? You see it wasn't long before more missionaries made contact and went to live among this tribe, including Jim Elliot's grieving widow Elizabeth and their 3 year-old daughter. And it was her willingness to love and forgive that opened the door for the gospel message. As a result many of them accepted Jesus as their Saviour and Lord. But more than that, the martyrdom of these 5 went on to inspire many more Christians to go into the mission field. And the Lord continues to use their amazing story to encourage and embolden multitudes of Christians even to this day.

And so this is a prime example of worldly troubles, even the ultimate troubles, being no barrier to the good news, and in fact being the very catalyst used by God to multiply the effect of the gospel. But we can experience this in our own lives as well. How many times has a personal struggle like losing a job or experiencing a tragedy provided unprecedented opportunity to witness to workmates, neighbours or friends? How many times has a stay in hospital provided openings to show the hope and peace Christ provides to family members, other patients and staff? How often has a Christian funeral been the very occasion that moves unbelievers to reconsider their relationship with the Lord? How many times has the criticism, mockery or abuse of a Christian been used by God to stir the hearts of others who see their conviction? And how many times has seeing a faithful believer stand firm in affliction been an encouragement to others to proclaim the gospel without fear?

I know when we run Bibles for the persecuted and read those stories, I always realise that my sacrifice for the sake of Christ is so small compared to others around the world, and I feel convicted to be bolder in my efforts. My friends, struggles in our lives will not get in the way of the good news. And in fact they may even be the very means that God intends to provide us opportunity to witness. And so we need to think very carefully before we label anything as a tragedy, for it may just be the channel God is using to bring about someone else's eternal salvation. And as we increasingly embrace this perspective, then like Paul we're able to experience a Deeper Joy.

I Rejoice Because – Whether From False Motives Or True Christ Is Preached!

But now as we return to our text, we see there's still a second reason why Paul's moved to rejoice. He rejoiced because his chains advanced the gospel, through his witness to the palace guard and his example to fearful believers. But in verses 15 to 18 he mentions something else. For while it's fantastic that so many had "become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel", unfortunately they didn't all do so for the same reasons. Paul says "some preach Christ ... out of goodwill. ... out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel." Those people are not the problem.

But there's others who are. For Paul says, "It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry ... (they) preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains." Paul says that they preach Christ from "false motives".

So what's he talking about here? Well first we need to be clear what he's not talking about. He's not talking about those who preach a false gospel or a false Christ. In Galatians 1 Paul says, "If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!" Paul's not talking about those who deny that God created the world, or that the Bible is his Word, or that he's revealed himself in 3 persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He's not talking about those who deny the divinity of Jesus, or his death, resurrection or ascension, or the reality of heaven and hell. He's not talking about those who preach a salvation by works, or a prosperity gospel, or any other non-Biblical idea.

But what he's talking about is those who were not anti-Christ but anti-Paul. He's talking about those who believe the true gospel but yet preach it out of envy, rivalry and selfishness, somehow using it to stir up trouble for him. Now we don't know exactly what this looked like. Maybe alongside the true gospel they were tarnishing Paul's reputation to enhance their own? Maybe they were making a big deal out of small differences? Maybe they were trying to undermine Paul's authority, or erode his support base, or make people critical of his imprisonment?

But the point is that Paul doesn't actually care. Any personal grievances he may have with other believers are irrelevant and insignificant when compared to what's really at stake, the salvation of lost souls. And so he says, "But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached." And so my sisters and brothers in Christ, in this second part of our passage, Paul wants us to know that not only are worldly hardships no barrier to the gospel but personal rivalries and false motives are no barrier either.

For the gospel is bigger than any of us, and more important than any of us. We will of course answer for our own envy and selfishness and trouble making and so on, Paul's not approving of such actions. But what he's saying is that bad human behaviour will never stand in the way of God's divine plans. One of my RTC lecturers used to say that God can strike a straight blow with a crooked stick. And that's exactly what Paul's saying here. Even when I'm weak and ill prepared and far from God and way too concerned with my own reputation, God can and does still use me. And even when you're feeling inadequate and afraid of what people think of you and jealous and critical and filled with mixed motives, God can and does still use you as well.

So how does this apply in real terms today? Well I think this passage applies wherever there are issues between Christians. We live in an age when there are literally thousands of different churches and denominations and flavours of Christianity. And so there could be rivalries between Pastors or Congregations, between local Christian ministries or outreach events, or between Christian schools or colleges. There could be rivalries between missionary groups or aid organisations and so it goes on.

But in all this we need to remember that the gospel is far more important than we are. So what would we care if another local church is doing better than ours? If they're preaching the truth, if they're promoting Christ, then we should rejoice. What would we care if someone else's Worship is more popular, or Preacher is more popular, or Christmas Carols are more popular, or Mainly Music program is more popular, or fundraising event is more popular or whatever it might be? What does it matter if Jesus is preached and people are saved? For if the Lord is using it, then who are we to complain.

And to be perfectly honest, in this day of increasing pressure, discrimination and persecution, we simply can't afford to waste time on petty rivalries in the Church. If there's a false gospel being taught then we'll most certainly take a stand. But if it's the true gospel, then Paul's message to us is to rejoice!

Conclusion.

So friends, we've seen today 2 very different reasons for Paul's rejoicing. He rejoices because his chains advance the gospel. And he rejoices because even though some speak out of envy and rivalry and selfish ambition, that it really doesn't matter because Christ is being preached. And so if we put all this together, then the overall message is this: Absolutely nothing, including worldly troubles or false human motives, can stop the advance of the gospel or the preaching of Christ! And this should give us Deeper Joy.

And so I want to ask, is this truth real in your life? You see, my friends, our God is all-powerful and all-knowing and all-wise. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords, and he's sovereign over all of creation. And so there's absolutely nothing that happens in this world that's outside of his control. And there's absolutely nothing that happens in your life if it is not his will. And we can trust with absolute certainty that in all things he works for the good of those who love him.

And so even when we go through the hardest times in life, it will not stand in the way of God's plan of salvation. And in fact those hard times might in fact be part of that plan. For the Lord can use imprisonment, and he can use persecution and martyrdom, and he can use whatever struggles you experience right now or in the future for the sake of his gospel. And even when we see others promoting Jesus with false motives, even when we ourselves promote Jesus with false motives, that too will not stand in the way of the Lord's work. For the message is his, and he will use it even when the messengers are weak and corrupt.

So my friends, there's absolutely nothing that can stop the advance of the gospel. Not false religions or atheism, not the power of the media or the pressure of lobby groups, not corrupt governments or a culture that's trying to remove us from the agenda. For our Lord is still seated upon the throne, and nothing and no one will ever restrain him. And so he will continue to carry out his plan of salvation, through the most amazing ways and means, until that day arrives when Jesus returns to make all things new. And you know, when we truly come to understand, believe and depend on this truth, deep within our own hearts, it is then that we will truly begin to experience Deeper Joy. Amen.