

We're back in the Book of Philippians this morning—looking at this beautiful letter that Paul has written to the church in Philippi, a church with whom he has a very trusting and—as far as we can see—healthy relationship.

And as I've mentioned in previous weeks, he's writing to them from prison—or really, house-arrest—and he's been put there because of his efforts in preaching the gospel message.

So you would think that this kind of situation would be a discouragement for Paul because he can't do all that he feels called to do. He's limited. He's restricted. It's a hard place to be in.

And yet, he rejoices. Because he sees God moving *regardless*. **Read Philippians 1:12-18.**

Years ago, when I was maybe eight or nine, I remember staying overnight with my cousin at my grandparents place for a few days, and my grandmother took me with her to visit some people at Ebenezer home.

Ebenezer it isn't in existence anymore, but it was a Christian Seniors care home in Abbotsford for many years. And once a week, my grandma would volunteer there. She would donate yarn and National Geographic magazines to the large craft closet, and then would sit with some of the women, making crafts and praying with them.

And I remember listening to a conversation that she was having with an elderly woman who was unable to move without the help of a wheelchair. She said to my grandmother, "What's the point of my life when I can't even walk for myself? What's the point of living anymore?"

It's a common question. Many of us would ask the same question in that predicament. It's why we're so afraid of losing our physical abilities. Because when we lose our physicality, we feel like we've lost a sense of purpose. To be human is—in part—to *do* things, right?

But I remember my grandmother stretching her arm across the table to take this woman's hand in her own, and she said to her in a kind and gentle voice, "You can pray."

I don't remember much from my childhood, but I remember that. Maybe because it spoke to where my grandma found her sense of purpose. And I saw that in her until she died. For her, prayer was a purposeful activity that we could do *regardless* of our situation or any suffering that we might be experiencing. That even with limitations or restrictions, God could still work through us.

And the question that this text seems to be asking of us is: will we allow ourselves to be used and rejoice in what God is doing even within our own limitations? Be they physical limitations, fearful or anxious limitations, emotional limitations, or actual physical barriers, do we believe that we have a role to play in bringing His Kingdom near, in any state?

Paul certainly believed it. And he says something really significant right off the bat here. He's encouraging the Philippians to see his situation in a certain light different than how they would be naturally be inclined to see it.

Evidently they would be inclined to look at his situation and think, "Oh man, poor Paul. He can't do anything anymore. He's not able to fulfill his calling."

But that's not the case. Because he says to them in verse 12: "*Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.*"

From your vantage point, he's saying to them—and he's probably responding here to the letter that they had written and sent to him through Epaphroditus—that yes, this is an unfortunate plight that I am experiencing. I did not wish this upon myself. I'm not particularly fond of where I am.

But he assures them that things are not as they seem. It looks like he's stuck, physically barred off from being able to do the work of evangelism. He's functionally unusable. But that's not the case.

See, Paul was what you could call a "distinguished prisoner." He was a Roman citizen who had exercised his right to have his case heard before the emperor (Acts 28). So as I said earlier, being 'in prison' meant that he was under house arrest.

This meant that every four hours, another Roman guard would come from the palace guard—which was the praetorium, where an elite group of soldiers served as the emperor's bodyguards (think secret service). They would take shifts guarding Paul.

And Paul—in classic Pauline style—was making sure that every single one of them, whether they wanted to hear it or not, knew that he was housebound *because of the gospel*, the gospel of Jesus Christ, not because of any criminal or political activity.

As one commentator put it, although Paul was in chains, the word of God was not.

So Paul assures the Philippians that being put in prison didn't stop anything. It didn't put a pause on God's missional activity. In fact, taking him *out* of the public square opened up new opportunities that he never expected.

They know that *this is why I'm here*, says Paul. They know that this is all for Jesus.

And not just that, but the brothers and sisters—the members of the Roman church—have been inspired by Paul's predicament. Verse 14: "*...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.*"

Notice there: they're confident *in the Lord*. Not in their own talents or usefulness, but in what Jesus can do through them—*despite* their weaknesses and fears. They see that God is using Paul even while He's in prison, and it's boosted their confidence for seeing God move through *them*.

They trust that even if they now get arrested themselves, God will use whatever situation they're in—no matter *what* happens.

What would it take for us to have that kind of confidence while in the middle of our own situation? What would it have taken for that woman at Ebenezer to see her value not in her limitations—as trying as they might be—but in how she could still partner with Christ *despite* those limitations?

What would it take for us to trust in the goodness of God so confidently that we *know* that He's at work around us and in us *regardless* of how inadequate or 'useless' we feel? Regardless of how grieved or broken we feel? That He can move through and use whatever we can bring no matter how small or insufficient it feels?

Because if our value is in Christ and what *He's* doing, then there is *always* reason to rejoice. And I say that, not to minimize our grief or our pain—which is very real—but to decentralize it.

If my value is in Christ, then no matter what I'm experiencing, no matter how limited I am, God can use it. And then my joy in life is in seeing Him do it.

But in order to live this way, we need to be comfortable with the idea of being confident in the Lord. I think if we're honest with ourselves, most of us struggle to feel confidence because we've actually grown comfortable in the limitations and barriers of our own fears.

Fear of what another person will think of us.

Fear that we'll open up about Jesus but then mess it up and sound ridiculous.

Fear that we won't know how to answer someone's questions.

Fear that we'll be associated with intolerance or hate speech.

Fear that the person will be weirded out and treat us differently.

Fear that we'll be made fun of or laughed at.

Fear that we'll come off as a religious extremist.

Fear that we don't actually know how to talk about our faith or the gospel, and so we don't even try.

Because many of these fears are true for many of us, I want to invite you to consider would it look like—in your own creative way, with your unique personality—what *could* it look like to prescribe for yourself a personalized testimony about the goodness of God through Jesus Christ? In a way that breaks through some of those barriers down and makes you feel comforted rather than afraid?

How would you articulate it, in your own words? In a way that feels natural to you? Have you ever thought about that?

Because what happened with the believers in Rome—and why Paul uses their example to encourage the Philippians—is that once they actually felt confident in what God was doing, once they were *looking* for His Spirit to move regardless of the situation, *then* they were inspired and broke through some of those fears to actually live and breathe in a way that showed what they believed.

It's in actually speaking out what we believe that we realize how much we depend on those beliefs.

Here's what came to mind when I asked myself that question:

"I've always believed in God. But it was only maybe fifteen years ago that I realized that Jesus Christ shows me the face of God. He shows us who God is. And that alone makes Him worthy of being pursued. And the more I sit with His death on the cross—and the fact that he died apparently to give me a life of grace rather than guilt of sin—the more I dwell on that, the more I feel like I'm a part of something that is otherworldly. Because I just don't see it anywhere else. I don't see any other religion or worldview or story that frees me from myself and gives me value that I don't have to earn.

"Honestly, if it wasn't for Jesus, I genuinely don't know what kind of person I would be. How addicted I would be to my own self-image. How selfish I would be. It wasn't for Jesus, I genuinely don't know how I would survive pain, or trauma, or grief.

"If it wasn't for Jesus, I can't fathom how alone I would feel. Because everything I have here could be taken away—and then what's left? It seems that everything in me—logic, emotions, aches, desires—it all points to Him."

I hope that I could share that with someone else. And I trust that God can use it regardless of how articulate or inarticulate I am. But either way, I need to know what it means to me and say it in such a way that's both true *and personal* for me.

So I want to encourage you to do this with a spouse, a friend, with your kids or a niece or nephew. Find someone—or a group of people—with whom you can practice articulating what you believe. Who is Jesus to you? Where do you find value? How would you say it in your own words?

Because you just don't know when God might give you an opportunity to say it—in your own messy and fragile way.

And when He does, don't let fear get in the way. Don't let it limit you. Because based on Paul's experiences, God can use *anything*.

Let's look at the text again. Look at Paul's situation. Verses 15-17: *"It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love.... The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains."*

I mean, Paul really can't catch a break here. He's already housebound, unable to go anywhere, and he hears that some of the other leaders are preaching Christ completely for their own purposes. They're not preaching a rival gospel or heresy. They're teaching *the gospel*. But they are simultaneously dismissing Paul.

So they're preaching out of selfish ambition, Paul says. Now that he's out of the picture, they just want to further their own popularity and gain more followers. It's purely selfish.

Just imagine—and this is a purely hypothetical situation—imagine that I got accused of hate speech. So I have to appear in court, and I'm required to miss a couple of Sundays in order to stand trial.

Say that jolly ol' Pastor Kevin from Immanuel CRC comes to help out and preach while I'm away. And he preaches the gospel, but he twists into his message some subtle jabs at me, trying to persuade you that he's more worthy of being listened to. Things like:

"You really shouldn't listen to Jenna if you want to understand the gospel. Just take my word for it. It seems to be in God's plan that Jenna got pulled out of the game. She's clearly got some issues."

Now, I'm good friend with Kevin. He would never do this. But imagine if he did. Or if I did it to him. Head over to Immanuel and preach Jesus but bash his character at the same time.

This is what Paul has to put up with. Behaviour that is completely antithetical to the gospel.

And yet, look at how he responds. Verse 18—*"But what does it matter?"* What do you mean, 'what does it matter?' C'mon Paul. Of course it matters. This is terrible. They're hypocrites.

'No', he says. *"The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached."*

Hold the phone. Isn't this the same guy who was frustrated with the church at Ephesus for giving in to false teaching? Isn't this the same guy who berated the Corinthians for failing to grow in their faith? Isn't this the same guy who smacked the Galatians around for mixing too much of the old covenant with the new covenant?

Why—here—is he okay with people preaching Christ for selfish reasons? When they're making a bad name for Paul and 'speaking the name of Jesus' while also creating rivalry and disunity?

Yup, they are, says Paul. “*But what does it matter?*” It’s not about me. If they speak well about me, fine. If they discredit me, fine. If they’re more successful in advancing the name of Jesus, fine.

Because if the name of Jesus is spoken, even if it is spoken in envy, God can use it.

Now, that’s not to say that *God* is pleased with the behaviour of these preachers. But remember what Paul had said earlier in v. 12: “*What has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.*” That statement sets the tone for this whole section. He’s not just putting on a face, pushing his emotions down, minimizing his suffering, or trying to make light of a bad situation.

He’s simply recognizing that God is still moving. That the mission hasn’t stopped. God is making it work. And Paul has learned to see *everything* from that vantage point. It’s not about what’s happening to him or what’s been done to him. The focus is still on Christ.

And *that’s* why He can rejoice. Because *this* is what gives his life purpose and value, no matter his limitations. God can still use it.

Some of you might be familiar with the story of Eric Liddell. He was a Scottish Olympian runner in the 1920’s who famously refused to run on Sundays and received a lot of criticism for it. That part of his story was made famous in the 1981 movie *Chariots of fire*.

But less well-known is Liddell’s missionary work in China—where he had grown up in China as a missionary kid and went back after he had won a handful of Olympic medals.

But he went back to a civil war. And when Japan invaded in 1937, he stuck around, even though the UK government had advised all British nationals to leave.

In 1943 he was put into a Japanese internment camp. And you would think that that would have been the end of his missionary work. But there happened to be about 500 orphaned children in that camp. So rather than giving into despair and wishing that he was somewhere else, he spent most of his time teaching and organizing games for these children and became known as ‘Uncle Eric.’

Many people back home, of course, saw his situation as a waste of his talents. But Liddell never gave any indication that he was upset about where he was. Because it was all for Jesus.

That’s what Paul was communicating to the Philippians. Don’t focus on my circumstances. God can use it. Don’t focus on your own fears or limitations. God can use it. See everything from that perspective—on what *He* is doing. Keep Jesus at the center and rejoice.

Because sometimes a closed door on us can be an open door for God.