

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

Sermon: "The Gospel in Chains?"

Scripture: Philippians 1:1-18

Rev. Steve Filyk

May 17, 2026

Opener: Joyful, joyful we adore you 410

Choruses: 10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord), Cornerstone

After sermon: Alleluia, alleluia 260

Closer: Hallelujah! Sing to Jesus 370

Soldiers talk about three types of fun:

Type 1: fun now, and fun when you think of it later.

Type 2: no fun now, but fun when you think of it later.

Type 3: no fun now, and no fun when you think of it later.

No one wants to suffer.

No one wants type 3 fun.

Some of you may be enduring suffering

That feels pointless:

Chronic pain,

Family conflict,

Anxiety about the future,

Grief that still catches you off guard.

The kind of burden you did not choose

and would give anything to escape.

Could it be that suffering is not always a meaningless interruption?

Could it be that even before we understand it,

God may already be using it for good?

PAUSE

Today we continue to follow the story of the Apostle Paul

Interpreted through a letter he wrote

To the church he planted at Philippi.

This Philippi is the same Roman Colony where he

And Silas had been imprisoned

For rescuing a slave-girl from the demon that bound her.

Paul writes this letter to the church at Philippi

While he is imprisoned in Rome.

Earlier in Jerusalem he had faced some trumped-up charges

About bringing a Gentile into the Jerusalem Temple.

He used his rights as a Roman Citizen to appeal these charges

All the way to Caesar, to the Roman Emperor. [see Acts 28:17ff]

Paul was under house arrest in Rome,

Chained to an Imperial Guard.

And this was "just about the time Nero began tossing Christians to ravenous lions

and burning them as torches to illuminate his banquets." [notes from NIV Study Bible 1036]

It is during this detainment that Paul writes

To the church he founded.

This was a church that was close to his heart.

Of all the church he planted, the church at Philippi

Was the only one that provided him with financial support,

And they did this on several occasions. [see Phil 4:14ff]

Like Paul there were also facing opposition

For their faith. [see Phil 1:29-30]

But Paul doesn't write to them to lament his situation.

Instead he celebrates his partnership with them

And explains his situation to encourage them.

What he wants them to know is that the suffering he is enduring

Is advancing the spread of the Gospel.

So how is the Gospel advancing?

The book of Acts tells us that in his detainment

Paul was allowed to visitors from the Jewish community in Rome,

Who were no doubt curious why this learned Jew was being detained.
 In today's letter Paul notes that he has been able to share his story
 With the whole palace guard.
 Imagine being assigned the Apostle Paul for an eight-hour shift.
 By the end of it, the guard probably knew the Gospel presentation
 better than most churches.
 Paul also notes that other Christians,
 Who have heard about his imprisonment are being inspired to
 'proclaim the Gospel without fear'. [Phil 1:14]
 Courage is contagious.

Finally Paul notes that in all of this he is tracing Jesus' footsteps.
 Paul says later in the third chapter of this letter
 That he "wants to know Christ... the power of his resurrection
 And participate in his sufferings... attaining to the resurrection of the dead."
 [Phil 3:10]

Some people might have understood Paul's detainment
 With all its suffering,
 as evidence that God has abandoned him,
 And that his efforts have been a failure.
 Paul is able to interpret his situation as an opportunity
 For God to bring the Gospel to many others,
 Which makes all the suffering meaningful and purposeful.

Most of us will never sit chained to a Roman guard.
 But we do know disappointment.
 We know unanswered prayers.
 We know weakness and loss.
 So the question becomes:
 how might God be at work in our own situations?

Suffering can deepen dependence.
 It strips away the illusion that we are self-sufficient.
 Suffering can open relational doors.
 People often listen differently when faith survives hardship.
 Suffering can also strengthen other believers.

As Paul discovered, courage is contagious.

We might not always be able to discern
 How God is making use of our suffering.
 But what we see in the life of Paul teaches us
 that even suffering is not beyond God's redeeming reach
 that God uses suffering not merely to shape us,
 but also to advance the Gospel through us.

"[Richard Wurmbrand was pastor] who endured 14 years
 of Communist imprisonment and torture in his homeland of Romania.
 He is widely recognized there as one of the country's
 greatest Christian leaders, authors and educators..."

[Pastor Wurmbrand wrote numerous books, which have been translated into more than 70 languages. He has been labeled at various times by Christian leaders as "The Voice of the Underground Church" and "The Iron Curtain Paul." Our Founders - The Voice of the Martyrs. (2026). Retrieved May 15, 2026, from The Voice of the Martyrs website: <https://www.persecution.com/founders/>]

Wurmbrand has been called the Iron Curtain Paul.
 I could share various stories of how God
 Redeemed Wurmbrand's suffering and used
 Him to share the Gospel of Christ.
 But instead I'd like to tell you a story about what he witnessed
 In a conversation between an Orthodox Priest
 And the man who had tortured that priest,
 One Christmas Eve.

[Sometimes the clearest evidence
 that suffering has not defeated the Gospel
 is when suffering produces Christlike love instead of bitterness.]

In Wurmbrand's own words:
 "When I was in jail I felt very, very ill... I was near to death.

At my right hand was a priest by the name of Iscu.
 He was abbot of a monastery.
 This man, perhaps in his forties,
 had been so tortured he was near to death.
 But his face was serene.

He spoke about his hope of heaven,
about his love of Christ, about his faith.
He radiated joy.

On my left side was the Communist torturer
who had tortured this priest almost to death.

He had been arrested by his own comrades.
Don't believe the newspapers when they say that the Communists
only hate Christians or Jews—it's not true...
They quarrel among themselves,
and when they quarrel one Communist with the other,
they put the other one in jail
and torture him just like a Christian, and they beat him.

And so it happened that the Communist torturer
who had tortured this priest nearly to death
had been tortured nearly to death by his comrades.
And he was dying near me.

His soul was in agony.
During the night he would awaken me, saying,
"Pastor, please pray for me.
I can't die, I have committed such terrible crimes."

Then I saw a miracle.

I saw the agonized priest calling two other prisoners.
And leaning on their shoulders, slowly, slowly
he walked past my bed, sat on the bedside of this murderer,
and caressed his head—
I will never forget this gesture...

The priest said to the man,
"You are young; you did not know what you were doing.
I love you with all my heart."...
Then he went on, "If I who am a sinner

can love you so much, imagine Christ, who is Love Incarnate,
how much He loves you!

And all the Christians whom you have tortured,
know that they forgive you, they love you,
and Christ loves you.
He wishes you to be saved much more than you wish to be saved.
You wonder if your sins can be forgiven.
He wishes to forgive your sins more than you wish your sins to be forgiven.
He desires for you to be with Him in heaven
much more than you wish to be in heaven with Him.

He is Love. You only need to turn to Him and repent."

In this prison cell in which there was no possibility of privacy,
I overheard the confession of the murderer to the murdered...
They prayed together, embraced each other,
and the priest went back to his bed.

Both men died that same night." Wumbrand, R. (2025, July 11). Richard Wumbrand - Forgiveness, Love and Death. Retrieved May 16, 2026, from Crossroads Initiative website: <https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/forgiveness-love-and-death/>

I think it is highly unlikely that any of us
Will spend any time in prison for the Gospel.
But everyone will suffer.

So know this, all you who suffer.
For those who are in Christ, our suffering is never wasted.
God may use it to deepen your faith.
God may use it to strengthen someone else.
God may use it to open doors for the Gospel.
Those chains in your life may not be pointless after all.

God is busy and active redeeming our suffering.
And God is already advancing his purposes
in places you cannot yet see.
Thanks be to God. Amen