Philippians 1:12–18 A Joyful Perspective

1. Introduction

a. "Cultivating a joyful heart" is the principle theme of Paul's letter to the Philippians. Today we gain insight into how this was outworked in Paul's life. This whole letter is a revelation of Paul's triumph over circumstances that would have defeated many people. Paul tells us how he manages to maintain a joyful perspective even in the midst of the most adverse circumstances. There are some very valuable lessons for us to learn in this letter.

Philippians 1:12-18 *I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, [13] so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. [14] And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. [15] Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. [16] The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel. [17] The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. [18] What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.*

b. Paul is writing in response to a letter that the Philippian church had sent to him. Hearing that Paul was being held captive, they had sent a message to him by their pastor, Epaphroditus, expressing their sorrow at the news of Paul's imprisonment. They saw Paul's imprisonment as a setback for the advance of the gospel. Paul writes back to counter their fears and to explain how he saw things from his perspective.

   i Instead of focusing on his circumstances, Paul instead chose to view them through the lens of their temporary nature compared to the eternal weight of glory that they were gaining for him.

c. Paul understood that true happiness, or true joy, doesn't come through having good circumstances. Many people make this mistake, so they set out to improve their circumstances. For Paul there was a different direction of pursuit: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." That was the key to Paul's joyful outlook on his life.

d. Paul's response to his situation shows us his basic principles for overcoming circumstances. Paul focuses on what God is achieving through his circumstances. When we are facing adversity of any kind, is there a purpose in it that God wants to highlight? What are the positives arising as a result of these circumstances?

2. The Sovereignty of God

a. Paul's original plan (cf. Romans 15) had been to go to Jerusalem, then from there to proceed to Rome to spend some time with the church there, before heading off to take the gospel to Spain. In Jerusalem a series of events led to his life being threatened by a group of Jewish religious leaders, and he was placed in the custody of the Roman authorities. Rather than facing trial in Jerusalem, Paul made an appeal to Caesar, which meant his journey to Rome was under very different circumstances than he had originally intended.

b. Paul writes to the Philippians to reassure them that what has happened to him is not a cause for any kind of negative thinking because God is in those circumstances. Paul sees this as God acting sovereignly.

c. God's sovereignty is predicated upon his wisdom, his omniscience and his foreknowledge. So whenever God acts, he does so in a way that pleases him. He is never constrained by anything and there are no limits to anything he does. He neither needs our permission or our co-operation in order to achieve his purposes, unless, by covenant, he chooses to do so.

d. Sometimes we need to plunge our minds into the ocean of God's sovereignty. We need to feel the weight of it, like deep and heavy water pressing in against every pore, the deeper we go. A billion rivers of providence pour into this ocean. And God himself gathers up all his countless deeds — from eternity to eternity — and pours them into the currents of his infallible revelation. He speaks, and explains, and promises, and makes his awesome, sovereign providence the place we feel most reverent, most secure, most free. [John Piper]

e. What we often perceive as adverse circumstances in our lives are actually placed there by God in order to achieve his purposes. The problem is not in what God chooses to do, but in our interpretation of God's sovereign activity. God has a plan that he is pursuing:

Ephesians 1:9-10 *making known to us the mystery of his will, <u>according to his purpose</u>, which he set forth in Christ [10] as <u>a plan for the fullness of time</u>, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*

f. God orchestrates history and acts sovereignly, moving us towards this objective in order to achieve his purposes. Sometimes what God does is a mystery to us because we can't seem to fathom his purpose in it, especially if it appears to be negative or painful. God's heart for us is to be conformed to the image of his son (Romans 8:29), how does he do that?

Hebrews 2:10 *For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist<u>, in bringing many sons to glory</u>, should make the founder of their salvation <u>perfect through suffering</u>.*

i Jesus was made perfect through suffering. If it was necessary for adversity and affliction to be included in his being made perfect, how much more do we need some negative experiences if we are to be conformed to his image?

g. The Philippians assumed that Paul's imprisonment had curtailed his gospel activity, but Paul corrects them, he says "No – God is in this, the gospel is prospering. Don't fall into the trap of diminishing God because you don't understand his purposes." Despite all the opposition, says Paul, I can see the hand of God in this, all of this is his doing, and the gospel is going forward.

Ephesians 1:11 *In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined <u>according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will</u>…*

3. Paul's joy at the advance of the gospel

a. Paul's situation in Rome might have shaken the faith of some who had become believers through his preaching, or who had been taught by the apostle. Some who were jealous of Paul had used his imprisonment to discredit him and to enhance their own status. He sets the record straight, telling them in detail how the things that had happened to him, instead of hindering had

enhanced the cause of the gospel. And he gives us some insight into how he responded to adversity and abuse, even when it came from fellow believers.

b. He overcomes his circumstances by focusing on what God is doing in the midst of them. He encapsulates his thoughts on this in his letter to the Romans:

Romans 5:3-6 *More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, [4] and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, [5] and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. [6] For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.*

i James says something similar

James 1:2-4 *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, [3] for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. [4] And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

c. Paul was a prisoner under house arrest, he was chained to a Roman guard the whole time. But that same chain that kept Paul from going anywhere also linked the guard to Paul. The guards had a rotation system, each one fulfilling the hours of his shift. To Paul this was a captive audience – literally!

i Paul couldn't leave, but he was free to have people visit him, and Paul was preaching the kingdom of God to them, and the guards heard what Paul was saying. They would also hear him praying, and see how he conducted his life. They would see the gospel lived out in Paul's life.

ii These were rough, worldly Roman soldiers, used to guarding tough, accused criminals. Imagine the difference they saw in this prisoner! His attitude was different: not complaining or criticising the system, always singing and praying and praising God. They heard him dictate letters to churches, answering their questions with wisdom. They heard him talk about God and how God wants us to live.

iii They were from the imperial guard – aka the Praetorian guard – the elite unit of the Roman army. Paul took an interest in these guards, asking about their families, their backgrounds, and their thoughts about various issues. He told them how they could know the living God and have their sins forgiven through faith in Jesus. Many responded to the gospel message.

iv The duties of the Praetorian guard included the protection of the Emperor and his household, through these soldiers some in Caesar's household also responded to the gospel – those who Paul refers to as "all the rest" in v13. Paul refers to them again at the end of this letter:

Philippians 4:22 *All the saints greet you, <u>especially those of Caesar's household</u>.*

d. In Romans 1 we read of Paul's desire to go to Rome to minister and preach the gospel. No doubt Paul hadn't anticipated the circumstances by which God would enable him to do exactly what he had wanted to do! God's wisdom in the execution of his purposes may surprise us, but they always far exceed our expectations.

e. The second positive impact of Paul's imprisonment came from the encouragement that it gave to others who were preaching the gospel.

Philippians 1:14 *And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.*

f. Paul's attitude to his imprisonment gave the impetus to his fellow labourers in the gospel. He could have allowed his situation to shut down his ministry, but there was no way that being under house arrest and chained to a guard all the time was going to shut him down. So Paul making the most of his circumstances and even triumphing in them gave them greater boldness to speak fearlessly about the things of God.

   i This was Rome under Nero in the early 60s at the beginning of his persecution of Christians. This had led to a more muted form of evangelism by the church in Rome than was usual for the church at that time.

   ii But Paul's attitude to imprisonment increased their confidence in the Lord. That was what gave them greater boldness to speak out. Sharing our own testimonies of God's involvement in our lives is so valuable – they increase our confidence in the Lord, and confidence leads to boldness, and boldness leads to action.

4. Envy or Goodwill

Philippians 1:15-17 *Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. [16] The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel. [17] The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.*

a. Paul has a good grasp of what was happening outside of the walls of his house. Paul is not being critical, but he's exposing something that explains his final response in verse 18.

b. Those preaching from good will are people who genuinely love and appreciate Paul. Probably many of them had come to faith through Paul's ministry to them, warmly embracing and endorsing Paul because he was a prisoner for Jesus' sake. They understood that the charges brought against Paul that resulted in him being where he was, had come from unbelieving Jews who hated the gospel and Paul.

   i They understood that Paul's appeal to Caesar was to defend the gospel. Not the content or the purity of the gospel, but rather he was defending the freedom to proclaim the gospel.

c. Their preaching from goodwill came from a heart of love knowing that Paul's imprisonment was for the defence of the gospel. There was a heart-connect here that bound them together with Paul. The context here is that their personal love for Paul and all that he was going through became a catalyst that encouraged them to proclaim God's word all the more.

d. But there was another group of people who, although they were preaching the gospel, were doing so with a different motive. According to Paul these people are not unbelievers, they are those who embrace and preach an authentic gospel – so they are not those who preach "another gospel" a subject that Paul addresses in Galatians and 2 Corinthians.

e. Why is Paul is exposing these people? There's a lesson here for us all to learn. What can we say about these people?

   i Their motivation for preaching Christ is envy and rivalry

   ii This envy and rivalry is directed at Paul

iii It is concerned with Paul's chains

iv It is coming from members of the Roman church

f. They are trying to give Paul grief because he is a prisoner in chains. Paul points out that he has been "placed" by God in prison. But certain Christians in Rome were arguing that if his gospel were really true then he really wouldn't be in prison. They took offence at Paul's insistence that God had strategically placed him in prison there for the defence of the gospel. To their thinking nothing could be more inconsistent than for Paul to speak of a God-ordained message of liberation, on the one hand, while in prison on the other.

g. They were preaching Christ out of envy, strife, selfish ambition and impure motives. Maybe they were in it for what they could get: things like fame and notoriety, respect and honour, authority and control, money and favours. They envied Paul's popularity and the effectiveness of his ministry. They were envious that Paul was held in such high esteem and respected by other Christians.

h. There are many people that have been saved through the ministries of men that were later exposed to be false. But their impurity and insincerity didn't negate the new life that people experienced when they heard of the grace of God and believed it for salvation.

i. Paul says that their preaching is out of rivalry – or self-ambition. The word Paul uses speaks of those who make themselves look better than others while making others look worse than you.

j. There's something we should be wary of that is a consequence of what Paul is highlighting here. Often immature Christians are envious of other believers because of the ministry that God has given them. They don't want others to receive more attention, or fame, or prestige or even spiritual success than themselves. So instead of rejoicing in the good things God is blessing someone with, they look for something negative about them. It's all part of what today is known as the cancel culture and it is something that we must both be aware of and beware that we don't fall into its destructive narrative.

k. It is important to note that these things were coming from those who were preaching the gospel. Paul never hesitated to correct false teachers about the error of their message. These were people who had wrong motives, but were nevertheless proclaiming the truth about Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of sin that comes by God's grace through faith in Him.

5. In that I rejoice

Philippians 1:18 *What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice…*

a. "What then" Paul says – or "What does it matter?" He doesn't try and vindicate himself before those who envied him, but he seizes the opportunity to turn it all to praise and rejoicing. He focuses on the positive outcome not the negative circumstances.

b. Paul did not let his own circumstances or allow adversity to rob him of his joy in the Lord. He didn't let the efforts of others who purposely tried to cause him distress bother him. He rejoiced that Jesus was being proclaimed regardless of the motives of those doing the preaching. Paul was

glad the message of Jesus was going out. He stressed that point by repeating that "yes, and I will rejoice."

c. Paul shows us in this passage how to be overcomers despite both adverse circumstances and being badly treated by fellow believers. Keep looking up, that's how Paul kept going, and it's the same for us. We can do the same with those that might treat us in a similar manner. If Jesus wants us to love our enemies and pray for them, then certainly we can do the same to those who because of their wrong motives seek to be our rivals.

d. Likewise, we don't have to let our circumstances overcome us. We can overcome our circumstances by keeping a godly perspective and looking for what He is doing even in the midst of the difficulties and trials and tribulations we go through. Jesus has promised that he is always with us, and God does work all things for good for those that love Him and are called according to His purpose. These are not Christian cliches, but Biblical truths and they allow us to rejoice in what God is doing regardless of any circumstance we might be in.

6. Conclusion

a. This is Paul's secret to how he lived his life. Keeping your eyes on Jesus and not on the circumstances will turn your mourning into dancing. Instead of complaining you will find yourself rejoicing. It may be that, like Paul, you face a situation you never planned to be in. He planned to go to Rome, but not in chains! Maybe you find yourself in a confining situation where you feel as though you are bound by chains. It could be a personal problem over which you have no control, or a health problem or a situation that you've been thrust into with no choice on your part.

b. So what can you do? Paul's answer is to make your chains a channel for proclaiming Jesus How? First, say no to self, to seeking your own way, your own comfort, your own happiness, your own will. Say no to a grumbling, complaining spirit. And then say yes to loving god as first priority in your life; and then, by exalting Jesus in every situation by your cheerful attitude of trust in Him, others will see him living in you.

Colossians 3:2 *If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. [2] Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.*