

Making the Most of Opportunities

Philippians 1:12-18

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I appreciated John Stonestreet's recent Breakpoint Commentary called, "Everybody Was Talking About Jesus Monday Night, Even Scott Van Pelt." Here's an excerpt.

Outspoken faith has been part of the story line in college football this season. This is especially the case with Notre Dame and Ohio State, two teams who put together incredible runs of victories to advance to Monday's College Football Playoff National Championship game...though it's not unusual for athletes and coaches to thank God after big games, faith in Christ was consistently and specifically credited for the culture of both programs. So much so in fact, that, ESPN's Scott Van Pelt and Rece Davis made it a point of emphasis in their post-game analysis.

As Davis said, "We hear a lot of times people talk about their faith and people sort of dismiss it. These guys were sharing their faith and reaching out and baptizing guys on campus...not just football teammates. And it became something powerful, not because they thought it was going to be handed to them to win a game, but it changed their relationships. It changed selfishness and made it go away...it didn't guarantee they were going to win. And Notre Dame had a lot of that going on as well."

The quarterbacks from both sides confirmed this analysis. Ohio State's Will Howard, accepting the Offensive Player of the Game, gave this strong testimony, *"First and foremost, I gotta give the glory and the praise to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."*

Emotionally wrecked from the loss, Notre Dame's Riley Leonard spent his press conference also describing how much he loved and respected his teammates. He then added, *"Us and Ohio State were the two teams who praised Jesus Christ the most, and I think we strengthened each other in our faith...I'm happy to see Godly men come out on top no*

matter what the circumstance is. I'm happy to praise Jesus in the lowest of lows.

In addition to the time given to the role faith played for both teams by players, coaches, and the media, this was the other unusual part of the post-game praise reports Monday night. Athletes and coaches often thank God for wins, but acknowledging God's sovereignty and goodness after a tough loss is far rarer.

Thus, I believe we can finally answer that annual question that plagues us...does God really care who wins the Super Bowl (or the College Football Championship or March Madness)? The answer is yes, because He not only cares for *those* who win but also for *those* who lose.

Speaking of God's goodness, we had a business meeting last Sunday afternoon and a worship service broke out as we celebrated God's provision and the progress of the gospel this past year. We're seeing more and more salvations and many surrendering to Christ.

I believe God is answering our prayer from Psalm 85:6: ***"Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?"*** I see the Holy Spirit reviving my own heart, which is an answer to another prayer I've prayed: *"Lord, bring revival...and let it begin with me."*

We spent time explaining and illustrating our updated mission statement: *Living on mission by glorifying God and making disciples of Jesus among our neighbors and the nations.* We're asking God to help us "Thrive in 2025" by revitalizing and mobilizing us for greater kingdom impact as we gather, grow, give, and go with the gospel. All the proposals were overwhelmingly approved, including our recommendation to expand the restrooms in our EdgeKids area, which passed unanimously.

Recently, the Great Commission Research Network surveyed thousands of pastors to identify what they believed to be the greatest challenges for the church today. The top two were mobilizing for evangelism and concern for evangelism. Related to this, community outreach was also in the top ten. Interestingly, member indifference and lack of member mobilization keep many of us from fully engaging in outreach.

Previous research has shown 79% of unchurched Americans are open to conversations about the gospel, but 40% indicate a Christian has never shared the gospel with them. Pew Research predicts if current trends continue, Christianity will be in the minority in the United States by 2070.

As we continue in our *Journey to Joy* series from Philippians, we'll be challenged with this truth: *Since the gospel changes everything, it must change everything about us.*

Please turn to 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 defense of the gospel.¹⁷ The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.¹⁸ What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice.”***

This passage gives us three ways for us to find joy, so we can say with Paul, *“Yes, and I will rejoice.”*

1. See your problems as a platform for the gospel. The believers in Philippi were eager to get an update from Paul because they were wondering how he was doing. It's striking how Paul does not focus on his problems; instead, he celebrates God's purposes. We see this in verse 12: ***“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.”***

Paul begins this section by referring to them as ***“brothers,”*** which is a term of endearment, used four times in this letter. The word means, *“from the same womb,”* reminding believers that we are part of the same spiritual family and we've all been born again the same way. Instead of listing all his woes, as most of us are experts at doing, Paul simply summarized all he had been through with this phrase: ***“what has happened to me.”*** This could be translated literally as, *“the things against me.”*

Let's refresh our memory from the Book of Acts, beginning in chapter 21. Enemies of the gospel stirred up some rumors that Paul had taken a Gentile into the holy part of the Temple, which led to Paul being beaten and almost killed. The authorities stepped in and arrested Paul, thus saving his life. Paul was transported to Caesarea, where he was held in prison for two years, awaiting trial.

While there, he appeared before Governors Felix and Festus, and eventually before King Agrippa, giving gripping testimony about his faith in Christ. Over the course of two years, Felix sent for Paul several times, allowing Paul to make his case for Christ. Because Paul appealed to Caesar, he was sent to Italy by ship. After a horrible shipwreck, he was finally brought in chains to Rome where he was kept under house arrest while waiting for his trial before Nero, the emperor of Rome. This is a fulfillment of Acts 9:15: ***“He is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.”***

Paul experienced a lot of problems and persecution as a follower of Jesus. Listen to what he described in 2 Corinthians 6:4-5: ***“But as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger.”***

As Paul thought about all that had happened to him, he concluded that everything ***“...has really served to advance the gospel.”*** The word ***“advance”*** is a military term, meaning *“to strike forward or make progress into a new territory.”* It referred to engineers who went ahead of the army to cut a road through a forest. In a similar sense, our problems can pave the way for God's purposes to be accomplished.

We don't usually think this way. For many of us, we see our trials and difficulties as impediments. Not so with Paul. His imprisonment, and everything else that happened to him, gave him an audience he would not otherwise have had, and was an avenue for the gospel to advance.

One commentator writes: *“When difficult, even life-threatening circumstances face us, we should take Paul as our example and look for how*

God might be working in such circumstances to advance the gospel either in our lives or in the lives of others.”

Maybe you're in a situation right now where circumstances *“are against you”* and you've been praying, *“God, please get me out of this.”* I understand because that's how I often pray. But this passage is teaching us that when we're in an adverse situation, we should pray, *“God, use this problem as a platform for Your purposes.”* That's a game changer.

God wants us to look at life through the glasses of the gospel. From Paul's perspective, the ultimate purpose was the ***“advance of the gospel.”*** Instead of finding himself confined as a prisoner, Paul discovered that his circumstances opened new areas for the gospel.

Consider the ministry of John Bunyan. When he was in prison he preached to the inmates. In addition, people came from all over the city to stand outside the prison to hear his sermons. To silence him, the guards placed him in an inner cell where he had no contact with anyone. But it was from there he wrote more than 60 books, including Pilgrim's Progress, which is the second most popular book after the Bible, exceeding 250 million copies. Bunyan was following the Apostle Paul's example because he wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon from prison.

When problems come our way, it would be good to ask: *“How will this problem position me to present the gospel to someone?”* When we trust in God's providence, we'll see how He will use our problems for His purposes. God uses all things for our ultimate good and for His untarnished glory.

Our ultimate purpose is to give out the gospel to those around us, no matter what situation we are in. In verse 13, Paul interpreted everything by kingdom priorities and found his purpose at the other end of his chain: ***“So that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.”***

The same God who used Moses' rod, Gideon's jars, and David's sling, used Paul's chains. According to Acts 28:30-31, while Paul was shackled to a guard at all times, he made the most of this opportunity to share the gospel: ***“He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord***

Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.” His goal was to present the gospel to everyone he encountered.

The ***“imperial guard”*** was made up of elite, hand-chosen highly trained soldiers. They were like a cross between Caesar’s Secret Service and the Army Special Forces. They received double pay and special privileges, and only had to serve 16 years before they could retire. They became a powerful political force in Rome, with some serving in the Roman Senate.

Paul was chained to one of these men 24 hours a day. Since they changed guards every six hours, Paul was able to share the gospel with a different soldier four times a day. Imagine yourself as one of those soldiers who listened to Paul pray “without ceasing,” meet with people, write letters, and speak to you about Christ. That’s why Paul could say that it had ***“become clear throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.”*** Some of these guards probably couldn’t wait for their shift to end!

During World War II, the Nazi-controlled police raided Corrie Ten Boom’s family watchmaking business. After a friend named Henry was taken away, she described the scene in her journal, *“Henry kissed his wife. Then he took my hand and shook it solemnly. Tears filled our eyes. For the first time, he spoke and said, ‘I shall use this place — wherever they’re taking us. It will be my witness stand for Jesus.’”*

Let me ask a few questions. To what or to whom do you feel chained to right now? Is it your job? You can chafe under the conditions, or you can see your work as a witness stand for Jesus. Maybe you feel chained to your spouse, and you can’t wait to break free. Instead of running to freedom, find the freedom that comes from forgiveness and servanthood. Perhaps you feel chained to your children and instead of complaining, it’s time to live before your kids in such a way that you make the gospel believable. Do you feel chained to your past as you replay all the bad things you’ve done? It’s time to allow God to use those experiences to help someone else, so He can turn your mess into a message.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let’s look on our circumstances as God-given opportunities for the furtherance of the Gospel and rejoice at *what God is going to do* instead of complaining about *what God did not do*.

Some time ago, I heard Ray Pritchard share a life-changing principle in one sentence: *Be a student, not a victim*. Many people go through life as professional victims, always talking about how unfair life is.

Ray explains the difference between a victim and a student.

- *A victim says, “Why did this happen to me?” A student says, “What can I learn from this?”*
- *A victim blames other people for his problems. A student asks, “How much of this did I bring on myself?”*
- *A victim looks at everyone else and cries out, “Life isn’t fair.” A student looks at life and says, “What happened to me could have happened to anyone.”*
- *A victim would rather complain than find a solution. A student has no time to complain because he is busy making the best of his situation.*
- *A victim feels so sorry for himself that he has no time for others. A student focuses on helping others so that he has no time to feel sorry for himself.*
- *A victim begs God to remove the problems of life so that he might be happy. A student has learned through the problems of life that God alone is the source of all true happiness.*

I would add that a victim complains and blames while a student of situations looks for gospel opportunities with people who are having similar problems.

I think of how the brothers of Joseph mistreated him and sold him into slavery. He was thrown in prison and experienced lots of hardships but ultimately his trials led to him becoming Prime Minister in Egypt where he was able to save many lives, including his own brothers. Listen to what he said in Genesis 50:20: ***“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”*** Romans 8:28 says something similar: ***“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”***

After a short time, it became very clear that Paul wasn’t chained to the guards; they were chained to him! His incarceration gave him opportunities for bold evangelism.

While Paul was in chains, he wrote 2 Timothy 2:9, “...***But the word of God is not bound!***” Turn over to Philippians 4:22 where we read how the gospel spread to members of Caesar’s household through the imperial guard: “***All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar’s household.***”

Since the gospel changes everything, it must change everything about us.

2. View your responses to problems as a way to encourage Christians.

When we see our problems as a platform for the gospel, we end up giving courage to others so they can do the same.

Unfortunately, many of us have a hard time thinking of others. I had a root canal this week, which I was not very courageous about. I’m reminded of the woman and her husband who had to interrupt their vacation because of a dental emergency. The wife explained everything to the dentist: “*I want a tooth pulled, and I don’t want Novocain because I’m in a big hurry. Just extract the tooth as quickly as possible, and we’ll be on our way.*” The dentist was very impressed and said, “*You’re certainly a courageous woman. Which tooth is it?*” The woman turned to her husband and said, “*Show him your tooth, dear.*” It’s easy to expect others to be courageous, as long as we don’t have to be.

When the believers in Rome heard how Paul viewed his problems as part of God’s purpose and how he made the sharing of the gospel his goal, they became more courageous according to verse 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.***” Discouragement spreads with deadly swiftness but courage is also contagious, isn’t it? By giving the gospel to the guards, fellow Christians outside the jail became courageous evangelists.

I think of how God has used Joni Eareckson Tada. After a diving accident in 1967 left her a quadriplegic, she emerged from rehabilitation with a determination to minister to others with similar disabilities. Her attitude is amazing: “*Subdue your heart to match your circumstances...this paralysis is my greatest mercy, and my wheelchair was the key to seeing all this happen—especially since God’s power always shows up best in weakness. So here I sit...glad that I have not been healed on the outside, but glad that I have been*

healed on the inside. Healed from my own self-centered wants and wishes...God wants us to be a good example to others who are observing us.”

As I consider the sacrifice our missionaries are making, and the opportunities they take to give out the gospel, I wonder why I hesitate to speak to my friends. Persecuted Christians inspire courage by showing their faith, love, and hope, even in the face of violence and persecution. Their faith helps me not be so fearful. Their courage prompts me to have gospel conversations with people who don't know Jesus yet. To hear more inspiring stories from the Voice of the Martyrs, one of our Go Team partners, go to persecution.com.

The word “*speak*” here is not the word for “preach” but the term for ordinary, regular everyday conversation, where we just converse naturally about what Christ has done in our lives. I've always liked this paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 9:22: “*Yes, whatever a person is like, I try to find common ground with him so that he will let me tell him about Christ and let Christ save him.*” Because Paul took advantage of the opportunities he had, the gospel penetrated the palace guard, and it also was proclaimed to ordinary people throughout Rome by emboldened Christians.

Since the gospel changes everything, it must change everything about us.

3. Rejoice anytime the gospel is preached. Paul was so focused on the gospel that he was able to look past another preacher's motives, as long as the message of Christ was getting out. We see this in verse 15: “*Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will.*” By the end of his life, Paul had planted ten churches, equipped and encouraged thousands of believers, and wrote 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament. That led to some other preachers becoming jealous of him, so they looked for ways to discredit Paul. Maybe they were saying things like, “*If Paul really had God's favor on his life, do you think he would be in prison?*”

Paul continues: “*The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.*” Most believers were motivated by love and knew that Paul was proclaiming the good news. In verse 17, he describes those who were against him, “*The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.*” The phrase “*selfish ambition*” was used of those who work for hire.

Paul was so committed to the gospel going out that he rejoiced when it was preached, even if he didn't care for the preacher according to verse 18: ***“What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice.”*** The phrase, ***“what then”*** means, ***“over and above everything else.”*** The word ***“pretense”*** refers to an outward show, which means people can be saved even when Christ is preached insincerely.

Paul's greatest joy was tied to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, not which pastor or church was doing it. He was able to entrust their motives and methods to God because he was primarily concerned about the message. The disciples had a hard time with this when they saw someone else involved in ministry they didn't approve of. They registered their complaint to Christ in Luke 9:49: ***“...and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.”*** Jesus blew their categories in verse 50: ***“But Jesus said to him, ‘Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you.’”***

One of my favorite things to do is to connect with other gospel-preaching pastors in the Quad Cities. A couple years ago, I reached out to a newer pastor so we could get to know one another over a burger. When our waitress brought our food, I told her we were going to pray before we ate and asked if she had any prayer requests we could include. She told us she was worried about the decisions her teenage children were making, so we prayed for them.

When she brought our check, I gave her a gospel pamphlet and told her I knew of a good church she could attend...and proceeded to give her the name of my pastor friend's church! He didn't see that coming, so when he recovered, he suggested she go to Edgewood. It was fun to recommend each other's church because we were sending a message that we're partners in the gospel.

Recently, Word of Life church in Rock Island sent us a check for \$1,000 for our Celebrate Recovery ministry. This is the second time they've done this. Pastor Tanner and I are good friends, and even though we disagree on some doctrinal matters, we're joint partakers of God's grace and partners in the gospel.

Let me be quick to add that we must never dilute doctrine or water down the gospel. There are some pastors I won't partner with because they preach a "different" gospel, which as Paul says in Galatians is ***"really no gospel at all."*** Galatians 1:9 is quite clear: ***"As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed."***

Paul would say that ultimately what is most important is whether the true gospel message is being preached. You might disagree with someone, or even question their motives, but if Jesus is truly being preached, and people are getting saved, then we need to rejoice.

The two great English evangelists, John Wesley, who was an Arminian, and George Whitefield, a Calvinist, strongly disagreed on doctrinal matters. Both were very fruitful, preaching to hundreds of thousands of people and seeing multitudes come to Christ.

A reporter once asked Wesley if he expected to see Whitefield in heaven, and the evangelist replied, *"No, I do not."* To which the reporter inquired, *"Then you do not think Whitefield is a converted man?"* Wesley replied, *"Of course he is a converted man! But I do not expect to see him in heaven—because he will be so close to the throne of God and I so far away that I will not be able to see him!"* Though he differed with his brother on some doctrinal matters, Wesley did not have any envy in his heart, nor did he see Whitefield as a ministry rival. In fact, Wesley preached at Whitefield's funeral service.

Iaian Murray writes, *"Doctrinal differences between believers should never lead to personal antagonism. Error must be opposed even when held by fellow members of Christ, but if that opposition cannot co-exist with a true love for all saints and a longing for their spiritual prosperity then it does not glorify God nor promote the edification of the Church."*

I often tell our guests, *"I'm glad you came today and if God leads you to Edgewood, we'll help equip you to live on mission by glorifying God as together we make disciples of Jesus among our neighbors and the nations. If Edgewood is not for you, I know most of the gospel-preaching pastors in the Quad Cities and I'd be delighted to help you find a gospel church."* Related to this, I'm in regular contact with a pastor friend about a couple who used to attend Edgewood and are now attending his church. I let him know I'm

delighted they're hearing the gospel and being shepherded by him. I see it as a kingdom win.

One of the keys in the journey to joy is to be positive in life. I'm reminded of the dad who decided to do an experiment with his two sons, one who was an optimist and the other a pessimist. As they came down the stairs on Christmas morning to check their stockings, the dad hid behind the door and watched his optimistic son smile as he pulled out a small piece of a leather horse halter. The other boy's stocking was overflowing with expensive gifts. When he dumped out the contents, he immediately looked sad. The cheerful brother asked, "*What did you get?*" To which the pessimist answered, "*Not much, just the usual games, an iPad, and some gift cards. Nothing I really care about. What did you get?*" The optimistic son replied, "*I got a pony, but it ran away.*"

Paul's attitude of gratitude is refreshing, isn't it? Let's keep the main thing the main thing, and the main thing is the message of the cross.

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- 2. View your responses to problems as a way to encourage Christians.**
- 3. Rejoice anytime the gospel is preached.**