

Philippians

Part 4 – Christ-Honoring Calamity

Philippians 1:12-14

The main body of the letter begins with a note of solemnity: “I want you to know brothers that what has happened to me...” (vs. 12). Paul is sensitive to the fact that his brothers and sisters in Philippi desired to know how he was doing in captivity. They no doubt had great concerns about his health and safety.



What happened to Paul, of course, had been going on for over two years. His life was under constant threat from Jewish conspirators who sought to kill him. He had been in Roman chains in Judea. Now in Rome, still in chains, he awaited his appeal before Caesar. It would have no doubt been a great source of sadness for Paul that he was required to appeal to a pagan Emperor against the false testimony of his fellow Jews.

Nevertheless Paul assured them that his captivity and transport to Rome had “really served to advance the gospel” (vs. 12). These words communicate design. Paul was confident that his chains were serving a particular purpose that accorded to the plans of God. That purpose was the advance of the gospel. The Sovereign God who works all things according to the counsel of his will (Eph 1:11) had designed Paul’s captivity to spread the gospel among the Palace guard and even, as we will see, members of Caesar’s household.

Suffering and calamity are part of God’s design to advance the gospel. Certainly there are categories of suffering such as that which results from our own sin and foolishness in which we ought never to boast. But Paul was able to lift up his chains, so to speak, and see something far beyond Roman cruelty. He was able to see the glorious purpose of God.

Main Idea: God uses Paul’s imprisonment for the advance of the gospel.

Vs. 12 – “Now I want you to know brothers” is Paul’s transition into the main body of the letter. Because the Philippians had been concerned about his welfare, Paul begins by assuring them not only that he is well, but that the gospel has been flourishing *because* his imprisonment. Though he is in chains “the word of God is not impoverished” (2 Tim 2:9). The clause *prokopane tou euangelliou* (“progress of the gospel”) is the keynote of verses 12-17.

Vs. 13 – Literally, “so that my chains may become manifest in Christ,” is an unusual construction indicating Paul’s solidarity with the sufferings of Jesus. The praetorians (“imperial guard”) were an elite force of soldiers, serving as the emperor’s bodyguard, who would have come into contact with Paul as supervisors of various criminal justice functions in Rome. As Paul met one after another of these elite soldiers, the knowledge of the gospel began to spread among them. A number of them became Christians as a result. And, as Christians, they began to speak to their fellows of Christ and salvation. The gospel was advancing geometrically as each convert became an evangelist in turn.

Vs.14 – Having Paul in the city and being encouraged by his example and his success, Christians in Rome became more bold and fearless in their witness for Christ. If Paul could be such an effective evangelist as a prisoner, and among the fierce praetorians, surely we who are free should be at work sharing our faith and be bold even with those who seem to have no interest in or even active hostility to the gospel.

1. Paul's calamity was designed by God.

Vs. 12 – “I want you to know brothers that what has happened to me...”

- Paul did not believe in coincidence. He rejected any notion that God's universe was given over to the impersonal forces of fate or random accident.
- The word “really” is interesting. A strictly human assessment of Paul's situation would conclude that his imprisonment would be an impediment to the work of the gospel. But Paul assures that his circumstances “really” have accomplished a grand purpose. It would be inconceivable to Paul to credit happenstance for such purposefulness. No, as in all things, Paul's calamity was part of the design of the God who “works all things according to the council of his will” (Eph 1:11).

2. Paul's calamity served to advance the gospel.

Vs. 12 – “...what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.”

- The later clause of verse 12 is the central assertion of the section (vv. 12-17). As was seen so often in the ministry of the apostles, efforts to stamp out the gospel served only to spread the good news all the more. What man intended for evil God intended for good.

Paul points to two pieces of evidence to support his claim that his imprisonment is serving to advance the gospel:

a) Paul's captors were hearing the gospel.

Vs. 13 – “So that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.”

- Paul's imprisonment had a direct impact upon his captors. In this way they became captive to Paul the evangelist. It was not so much that Paul was tethered to the guard but that they were tethered to him! Later we will learn that members of Caesar's household had heard and believed the gospel.

b) The churches were being strengthened.

Vs. 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.”

- The “brothers” Paul references are members of the church of Rome. Being well aware of his imprisonment and his faithfulness to the gospel many of the Roman Christians themselves became “much more bold” to give witness to Christ.
- We can assume that this same boldness was spreading to the Philippian church as well as they too heard the good report from Paul.
- The boldness to which Paul refers is not the product of manipulation or mere effort. This sort of boldness which stands against the threats of Rome is the fruit of the gospel.