

Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.

—Philippians 1:12

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

—Philippians 1:21

LEARNING GOALS

1. To realize the power of sharing your struggles with other Christians within a church.
2. To know that even our small struggles for the sake of Christ accomplish extraordinary things.
3. To realize that we all have a responsibility to the church and to other Christians, to encourage, and to strengthen each other.

REFLECTION

In Philippians 1:12–26, Paul invites readers into his life, which is one of struggle, perseverance and optimism. Paul wants the church in Philippi to share in his victories, and he wants to share in theirs. Their mission is the same as Paul's, and their lives should be virtually interchangeable. As Paul sees it, the church is a dynamic group of believers dancing and weaving through life trying to live lives that proclaim Jesus as King and God, Lord of all.

The first few verses in this passage (1:12–18a) describe Paul's present circumstances. Things look bleak from a worldly perspective. Paul is either shackled in prison or in

house arrest being watched all the time. Most likely Paul is in Rome while writing this letter (although that is not conclusive). However, from Paul's perspective, the work of God is being done even when he is in chains (literally). The palace guard became aware of Jesus and His message simply from Paul being in prison—of course, they were with him 24/7. In verse 14, "brothers in the Lord have been encouraged" and people are speaking "more courageously and fearlessly" because of Paul's circumstances. Why does Paul describe his life in prison to his friends in Philippi? The answer is that Paul wants to share his experiences and his perspective on life. The Christian life is not easy, but it is always productive—even when it doesn't seem possible. How could a Christ-follower expect to be productive in prison?

The sharing of Paul's circumstances also strengthens the believers in Philippi. Maybe Paul is saying that sharing of trials is what a church is supposed to do. Just imagine yourself reading these verses sitting in Philippi. What would you be thinking? Maybe you think, "This guy seems like an ordinary guy; full of gusto, but still ordinary. Now he is doing extraordinary things in the worst of circumstances." Don't you think the words of Paul just made the Philippians more courageous and willing to take risks for the sake of Christ. If Paul can do it, I can do it. Sometimes we need to climb upon others' shoulders.

In the latter part of this section (1:18b–26), Paul's attitude and perspective on life again shines through with what he thinks Christ will do through him in the future. His wording is positive and expectant: "I will continue to rejoice" (v. 18b), "this will turn out for my deliverance" (v. 19), "I eagerly expect and hope" (v. 20), and "Christ will be exalted in my body" (v. 20). Paul knew that God had a mission for him, and it will be carried out one way or the other. That's what Paul wanted the church in Philippi to see. Life will not always look the way you think it should, but the mission of Christ will not be stopped. Jesus referred to the kingdom of God numerous times in His ministry. In Mark, he tells two "kingdom" parables (Mark 4:26–29, 30–32): the parable of the growing seed and the parable of the mustard seed. Both of these point to the fact that God chose to build this kingdom, and nothing will stop Him. It will continue to grow, like it or not (Mark 4:27).

Further, Paul's life was dedicated to the Kingdom. Paul did not think that death was final—it is simply part of the journey. "To live is Christ and to die is gain" (v. 21). Paul chose both. While I live on earth, let Christ work through me. Death will happen, but it is not the end. Rather it is simply part of the journey in the new kingdom. Paul wants the church in Philippi to grasp the significance of this new kingdom. How does changing your perspective on life end up changing how you live it? It takes work and responsibility to be a Christ-follower. Paul hopes the Philippians will comprehend this more fully.

The positive message of Paul is truly inspiring. Then again, he is only reflecting the mission of Jesus, which is to redeem a lost world. Paul wants the church in Philippi to be inspired, to see that God is working all the time, whether through good or bad circumstances. God will not be stopped on His mission and he wants everyone to be a part of it.

Maybe sharing our struggles and experiences helps to build others up. Maybe we should do more of that in our churches. Maybe we should be changing our perspective on life so that we change how we live our lives. That's what Paul wanted for the Philippians and what God wants for us.

LESSON PLAN

1. Engage

- a. Philippians is a letter written from prison.
- b. If you got a letter from a prisoner, what do you imagine it would say? (They might describe how they are being treated, how the food is, how their living conditions are, and so forth.)

2. Involve

- a. How does Paul explain his imprisonment in positive terms? (The gospel is advanced, the whole palace guard knows him and his mission, more people are encouraged to speak out on behalf of Christ and His mission.)

- b. What is Paul's purpose in putting such a positive spin on things? (He is showing the Philippians that they are sharing in his victories, and he will share in theirs. Their mission is the same.)
- c. How is Paul's perseverance in Philippians 1:12–18 and the parable of the growing seed in Mark 4:26–29 related? (The Roman authorities can try to slow down Paul, they can shackle him and throw him in prison, but the kingdom of God is not in trouble. Paul talked to the palace guard, and he is convinced that even more people know the gospel because of his imprisonment. God set things in motion, and the kingdom will not be stopped.)
- d. It seems as though Paul wants the Philippians to see themselves as part of an unstoppable force. Do you feel like you are a part of an unstoppable force? Why or why not? (Participating in the mission of God requires action and movement. Christ-followers act on what they hear the Spirit of Christ calling them to do.)
- e. Are you ever afraid that if there is too much kingdom-centered action in your life, your life might turn out like Paul's?

3. Challenge

- a. How do you think Paul's stories of suffering for the mission of God affect the church community in Philippi? (It unites, strengthens and encourages them.)
- b. How might we do a better job of sharing our struggles with this church community?
- c. To be clicking on all cylinders, a church needs to be a group of committed Jesus-followers who share life—the good and the bad—with one another. Paul is a master at encouraging others and pulling them into the struggles of his life. God works through the courageous acts of His followers. He worked through Paul and will work through you.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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