

Philippians 1:12-26

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[0 : 00] If you've got a Bible, turn to page 980 in the Black Church Bibles, Philippians chapter 1.! If you like one again, they're just on the table as you come in. And we started last week going through Philippians.

If you missed that, it might be good to catch up online. You can go to YouTube and see it there. The letter to the Philippians written by the Apostle Paul is such an encouraging book.

It's a beautiful book. It's written really to remind us why we're here, what the church is about, that the church is all about making Jesus Christ known.

And I want to speak to you from verses 1, verse 12, kind of to verse 26. And I want to speak about the advance of the gospel. In the 10th of May, 1940, Winston Churchill was invited by King George to form a government.

You might have seen the film *The Darkest Hour*. And looking back on that moment, Churchill said, I felt like I was walking with destiny. All my past life had been but a preparation for that hour.

[1 : 12] If you know anything, Winston Churchill was a pretty unique character in every way. Certainly wasn't easy to live with. He could be quite difficult, a man, couldn't he? He was quite cantankerous. And there's a story told about when he was on holiday in France.

He's in the south of France. He came into a house where he was staying. He'd been out for a walk. And it was a pretty chilly evening. And somebody had lit a fire. And Churchill sat down.

It's described like this. Churchill sat down and he stared silently into the flames. Resin filled pine logs for crackling, hissing and spitting as they burned.

Suddenly Winston's familiar voice growled, I know why logs spit. I know what it is to be consumed. Winston Churchill was a man who was consumed, wasn't he?

With a passion to change the world. But here in the passage that was read to you earlier is another man who was consumed also. With a passion to change the world.

[2 : 20] And the Apostle Paul, he felt too that his whole life had been one long preparation for this. He talks in another letter he wrote to Galatians about being separated from his mother's womb for this very task of making Christ known.

He had this sense of destiny. That he'd been called and prepared for. Not to free people from Nazi Germany, but from an opposition.

From a tyranny that's far, far worse than that. The tyranny of sin and death and Satan. And that one passion consumed the Apostle Paul. It occupied his every waking thought.

It was his food and his drink. It occupied his dreams. And so for this one thing of making Christ known, Paul was willing to be beaten and ridiculed. To be thrown in prison and even to die for it.

And the one thing that consumed him was the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was possessed. And this consuming passion was to see the message of the Lord Jesus Christ go around the world.

[3 : 25] So look what he says in verse 12. Can you look there with me? He says, I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. I want you to know what has happened to me has really served to cause the gospel to go forward.

When he uses the word advance, it's a military term. It's a word that describes what army engineers would do. They would go ahead of the troops to open up the way, a new territory.

And Paul is saying, I want you to know that the things that happened to me, through that, God has opened up new territories for the gospel and for the church. And I think that's exciting.

And Paul says, there are three things that cause the gospel to advance. The gospel has gone forward through my chains. Verses 12 to 14. Through my critics, verses 15 to 19.

And through crisis, verses 20 to 26. So chains, first of all. I want you to see how God uses Paul's chains, his imprisonment, to advance the gospel.

[4 : 33] Paul was chained up day and night to a couple of soldiers. Roman soldiers. It's a completely captive audience. You can imagine it, can't you?

The shift changes every six to eight hours, depending on which commentaries you read. And Paul says in verse 13, it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

Do you realize what an extraordinary statement that is? Imagine we were setting goals. Imagine you were setting a goal.

2023. 2023. If we saw 50, 5-0, new people become Christians. What about that? Or let's say 200. Or what about 500? What would happen if that happened? 500 became Christians in this church. Well, we'd need a new building, wouldn't we? There would be huge logistical problems if that was to happen.

[5 : 35] Let's say half of this road, Drayton Green, became Christians this year. It caused chaos. Do you realize when Paul says in verse 13, the whole praetorian guard, the palace guard at full strength was 9,000 people.

9,000 soldiers. And Paul was such an extraordinary soldier, such a compelling witness, that news about him spread like wildfire through the ranks of the praetorian guard.

They'd never come across anyone like this before. He was just different. So you can imagine the scene. Play out the scene with me. The shift changes every couple of hours. And another couple of guards come on duty.

And Paul thinks to himself, they're not going anywhere for two hours, are they? And so he says to them, do you know what I'm in for? They groan. And then he begins to tell them.

He says, well, the reason I'm in is because of a Galilean peasant called Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth. He was crucified by the Romans. You might have heard by it. And he died to make you and I write with a holy God.

[6 : 48] And yet he died, but three days later, God raised him from the dead. And I actually met him, the risen Christ, on the road to Damascus. And it totally changed my life. It completely revolutionized how I live.

And he would share with them how this Jesus who was crucified and buried and raised on the third day, he's coming back again very soon. And at the end of the time, you will actually meet him and he will judge the living and the dead.

So every single person who's ever lived will meet this Jesus and be judged by him. And so you want to get ready for that. And it's not only that he's coming back, but right now, this Jesus is the one who sits on the throne and he controls everything.

He controls everything, not Caesar. It's not Caesar who rules the world, but Jesus who rules the world. And that would have been news to those Roman soldiers. There was nothing in the Roman pantheon to compare with that.

Jesus. Oh yes, Caesar. Caesar claimed to be a god. But this Jesus is God. God become man in order to save us.

[8 : 02] And rescue us. It's great news. And at the end of the shift, they'd go off. They'd be replaced by two others. And off he'd go again and again and again and again. Tell me the old, old story.

Surely it's very significant, isn't it, when you look at the end of the book. Look with me at chapter 4 and verse 22. He says this, all the saints, that's all the Christians, greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.

What? The Caesar, the emperor. There were Christians in Caesar's household. How on earth did that happen? Who are they? Well, it's not Caesar's sisters and cousins and his aunts, so that's not impossible.

There could have been members of the royal family that had become Christians in those early years. No, he's talking about the Roman cavalry. He's talking about the Praetorian Guard. Those 9,000 elite hand-picked men.

And it's become evidence to all of them that I'm in chains because of the Lord Jesus. By the way, that's how Christianity came to the UK. How did Christianity come to the UK?

[9 : 09] It came through the Praetorian Guard. It probably came along those Roman roads as the battalion of Roman soldiers were moved around the Roman Empire. And some of them would have heard the gospel from Paul's very mouth and then are sent off.

Paul says it's become evident through my chains. As a Roman citizen, Paul is probably under house arrest. We know from this letter that people were allowed to come in and visit in the house, so he's not under solitary confinement.

He's got a Paphroditus who pops in and Timothy there mentioned as people who would visit him and talk with him. And so imagine being a fly on the wall in that conversation. Imagine being the guard on the other side of the door.

Every conversation listened to intently and reported back to the authorities. Hearing Paul rejoice about the advance of the gospel in the Roman Empire. Hear him praying to his God.

Praying for the conversion of the very guards who were in the cell with him. Just imagine hearing that. It's actually how John Bunyan became a Christian.

[10:20] John Bunyan who wrote Pilgrim's Progress. He was eavesdropping on a conversation. There were women on the doorstep talking in the sun. And they happened to be Christians.

They happened to be talking about who the Lord Jesus was and what he'd done for them. And Bunyan, out of curiosity, just eavesdropped on their conversation. This is what he says in his spiritual biography.

He says, Is that your story for some of you?

That your friends or maybe your family were Christians and they have something that you didn't have? Bunyan said this. He said, I made it my business to go there often, to be in the company of these people.

I wanted to be around them. I couldn't stay away. And something like that must have happened with the Praetorian Guard. Now let me try and apply this to you this morning.

[11:26] You and I need to see the sovereignty of God. What I mean by that is the control of God in the circumstances of our lives. We need to see the sovereignty of God in the circumstances of our lives.

You see, sometimes for the good news of the Lord Jesus and for the church to advance in the world, God puts his people in chains. You should know a little bit about church history.

And if you do, you'll know that this is the case. You'll know actually if you know something about suffering Christians around the world today, that this is literally happening. That there are brothers and sisters of ours who are literally in chains for the sake of the gospel.

And often, that is how the gospel goes forward more rapidly than anywhere else. It's true literally, but it's true metaphorically, isn't it?

There are young mums here. And if you're a young mum, you will know sometimes what it's like to feel chained to the house. And you will feel sometimes chained to these kids.

[12:43] And you love them, but they're hard work. And if you're a young mum, you might feel sometimes, my life is not my own anymore. Let me tell you about Susanna Wesley.

She was the mother to 19 children. You heard that right? One nine, I should say. 19 children. They were different days, weren't they? Before the days of labor-saving devices.

Before the days of disposable nappies. But out of that home, out of that vicarage, came John and Charles Wesley. Whose hymns we sing.

Whose combined ministry converted thousands on both sides of the Atlantic. And not only that, out of that great, out of that home, came the great Methodist revival of the 18th and 19th century, which changed the UK.

So much so that somebody has said, well, the French had a revolution, but the British had a revival. Out of that home, the fruits of that home, what came about?

[13:49] Well, the end of slavery came about. The improvement of working conditions came about. All out of that home directly. While Susanna Wesley was chained to her kids, bringing her up for the Lord.

Or what about Susanna Spurgeon? She was the wife of the great 19th century preacher C.H. Spurgeon. He was a minister in London who had enormous influence. If you go to Elephant and Castle, you can see this.

They'll see the church tab there. And he said this. He said, I couldn't have done it without my wife. His wife suffered from chronic fatigue.

A kind of long COVID. A kind of M.E. Susanna Spurgeon was an invalid nearly the whole of their marriage. And yet she saw her disability, her confinement.

Most days she couldn't even get out of bed. But she saw it not as an opportunity to feel sorry for herself. But as an opportunity to advance the gospel. So she started something called the Book Fund.

[14:55] It provided resources for pastors and teachers all over the world. Good books, good commentaries. So that they could feed God's people with God's word. What about old age?

We all get there in the end, don't we? There's the story of, I don't actually know his name, but Dan Green, who's the minister in Banstead.

His grandfather went into an old people's home about a month before COVID started. And of course, the old people's home was locked down. Nobody could come in.

Nobody could come out. So Dan Green's grandfather went and put a note through every door and said, we're starting a church. And planted a church in the midst of COVID in this old people's home. What about where you live? What about you children? And the opportunities you have? Whatever stage you're at, God can use it to advance the gospel.

[16:04] The play group, the school gate, the boardroom, the sports field, the hydrotherapy pool, the oncology clinic. The university, the third age, the retirement village, even the palliative care ward.

I've told you before, haven't I, about the seven ages of man. Spills, drills, thrills, bills, ills, pills, wills. What about your will?

You can make a contribution when you're gone, can't you? Can't take it with you. The room that you're sitting in has been partly paid for because of gospel people who sat here.

And have died and gave of what they have. Ron Simpson, Hazel, Mangasa. At every stage you see. You see, it all depends on your perspective, isn't it?

What's your perspective on life? How do you view this circumstance of your life? Think about David and Goliath. You know the story? David could have taken one look at Goliath and said, he is massive.

[17:20] I'm out of here. No way. But instead, David saw Goliath looming and he said, didn't he, he's absolutely massive. I can't miss. It all depends on how you look at things.

And I want to encourage you, I think Philippians encourage you to aim big. He is the whole praetorian guard in his sights.

He's ambitious for the gospel. And it's become clear through the whole palace guard and everyone else that I am in chains in Christ. You can imagine what they said when their rotor came out, isn't it? You're with Paul again.

You know what you're going to get. His chains gave him contact with the lost and it gave him courage. Look at verse 14. And most of the brothers, most of the people in church life, they've become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment.

And they're much more bold to speak the word without fear. I saw a cartoon once, two skeletons in a museum. And the one skeleton said to the other, if only we had the guts to get out of here.

[18:31] And I think there's lots of churches that are like that, aren't they? They're like their skeletons. They've got a kind of antiquarian interest in the gospel. But they lack the guts to get the gospel out. They're too afraid. To get it out into the world and to pass it along to others.

There's great encouragement for you and I, isn't there, this week, to speak when the opportunity comes. In whatever circumstances God brings to us. So God uses Paul's chains, but he also uses Paul's critics.

Look at verse 15 to 18. It's quite key, this section in the book. Like every faithful gospel minister, Paul has got his critics. People that don't like him. People that get offended by him.

There are politics in church just like there are everywhere else. And it was like that in the early church. There were people who wanted to lift themselves up by putting Paul down. And he describes that. He says, some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry.

They preach Christ. They're not preaching another message. They're not preaching another gospel. There's nothing wrong with what they're saying. To if that's the problem.

[19:38] And they're preaching Christ. Not sincerely. They've done it. Verse 17. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition.

Not sincerely, but thinking to afflict me. To cause me trouble in my imprisonment. And so, with me out of the way, these people can step into the limelight.

And they're trying to make Paul out to be a failure. They're trying to rub salt into an already open wound. Suggesting perhaps that if only Paul had taken a different approach. If only he'd been a little bit more softly, softly.

If only he hadn't said it in the way that he said it, he wouldn't have wound up in prison. And he would have been more successful. People would have liked it.

If he was just a little bit more amiable. I want to say to you, when that happens, that is very, very difficult to handle. You will know, won't you, some of you, what it's like when people speak about you behind closed doors.

[20 : 44] That's very hard. When they whisper about you. How does Paul handle it? Look what he says. He says, whatever. Whatever.

What does it mean? He says, the only thing that matters, verse 18. Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed. That's what I rejoice about.

I can't read their hearts. I can't read their motives. Whether they're speaking about the Lord Jesus from false motives or true. The only thing that matters is that Christ is preached. And because of that, I rejoice.

Note again, it's not the message. The message is absolutely clear. It's their motives. And Paul says, as long as the message is clear, my feelings don't really matter.

And Paul would have been hurt, wouldn't he? He would have been hurt by this sort of criticism and behavior. And so we need to recognize, don't we, how easily hurt as Christians we can be.

[21 : 46] Churches are full of prickly hedgehogs. And so somebody looks at you sideways. Or they say the wrong thing. Or they miss you as they're walking past you.

Little ball with all these needles sticking out into the outside world. And I think the gospel is often hindered by this sort of thing in church life.

By our preciousness. And churches, the advance of the gospel is held back because of the fear of offending someone.

That person won't like it. Don't misunderstand me. We don't want to be bulls in a china shop. I'm often like that. We need to be... To our fellow Christians.

We certainly need to celebrate what's happened in the past. Those who served the Lord in their own day. We need to be thankful for all of God's people. But what matters more than anything else, as we look forward to the future, is not our preferences.

[22 : 51] And it's not how you feel. It's not what so-and-so said or what so-and-so did. But the only thing that matters is that Christ is preached. And so that's the only question we should be asking.

Not, have we ever done this before? But will this promote the gospel of Jesus Christ? And so because of his chains, Christ is known in the world.

And because of his critics, Christ is preached in the church. But lastly, in his crisis, Christ is magnified. Look at verse 20. He says this, It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not at all be ashamed, but that with full courage, now as always, Christ will be honoured in my body, whether by life or by death.

I think the King James Version, I think it's a little bit more helpful. It speaks about Christ being magnified in me.

So a telescope, you know, you look through a telescope, it brings things closer. A microscope, when you look through it, makes tiny things bigger.

[24 : 00] And so to the majority of people that live in Ealing, Jesus isn't on their horizon. You can talk to people about the Lord Jesus, but they're not interested.

Why talk to me about some dead guy who's been dead 2,000 years ago? I've got a life to live. Jesus doesn't loom very large in their thinking. Other things fill their minds.

But when somebody who is not a Christian sees a Christian going through a life and death crisis, like this one, he or she begins to see just how big Jesus is.

And that's what Paul is saying. Paul is saying, my body is a lens that makes Christ look very big and a distant Christ become very close. And so whether in life or in death, I want to magnify the Lord Jesus.

It's not that we can make Jesus any greater than he is. Of course not. But we want people to see how great he is. And they don't see it just by us talking to them and talking to them and pounding them with the Bible.

[25 : 18] They need to see it. They need to see it in the way that you cope with life and in the way that you cope with pressure and stress and crises that you go through.

And Paul says, whether I live or die, what I want to do is I want to magnify Christ. In fact, he says more than that. He says, I don't know whether to live or to die. And it's a good job that it's not up to me.

Thankfully, I don't have to choose. If your prayers are answered, Philippians, I'll be spared. And indeed, that's what did happen. This isn't his final imprisonment. But he says, even if I do die in prison, Christ will be magnified.

Because for me to live is Jesus Christ and to die is gain. Paul is eager to go, but he's willing to stay for the sake of the gospel.

Paul. His question is, what is best for the advancement of the gospel? You and I, in our better moments, might say, we're eager to stay.

[26 : 24] We might say, we're willing to go, but we're eager to stay. And Paul says, as he thinks about heaven or he thinks about life on earth, I'm torn between the two because for me to live is Christ's die is gain.

For those of us who think about death, maybe you don't think about death very much at all. You might think it's a bit like, I'm a celebrity, get me out of here.

I kind of escape it. Life has got too hard and too difficult. And, okay, so now I want out. I've had enough. But Paul is not saying, I've had enough.

It's too difficult. He says, if God wills it, I'm willing to stay. In fact, I'm eager to stay for the advancement of the gospel. For me to live is Christ, to die is gain. And you can only say that. You can only say that death is gain if life is Christ. Let me try and explain this as I finish. If I could offer you heaven this morning with no sickness, with all the friends and family that you have on earth, all the food you've ever liked, all the leisure activities you've ever enjoyed, all the natural beauty that can be seen, all the physical pleasure that you've ever experienced, no human conflict, no natural disaster, would you be happy with that?

[27 : 55] If Jesus was not there. But you say, well, he would be there, yeah, but he would be somewhere way off in the dim and distant horizon.

And I think the answer for many of us would be, I'd be okay. I feel terrific about that because heaven for me is just a bigger and better world than this one.

But if hell is the absence of Christ, and you are content to go to heaven without Christ, you are opting for a form of hell in heaven, aren't you?

And you need to ask yourself this morning, am I really a Christian at all? Whether you've ever understood the gospel because for me to live is Christ. It's what Thomas Chalmers called the expulsive power of a new affection.

Christ met Paul on the road in Damascus, and he said, for me to live is Christ, and that's why he could say to die is gain. The 19th century bishop, J.C. Ryle, preached a sermon in which he offered this precise challenge.

[29 : 10] Let me read it to you. He says, how many are unfit for heaven who talk of going to heaven when they die, while they manifestly have no saving faith, no real acquaintance with Christ.

You give Christ no honour here, you have no communion with him, you don't love him. Alas, what would you do in heaven? It would be no place for you. Its joys would be no joys for you. Its happiness would be a happiness in which you could not enter.

Its employment would be wearisome and burdensome to your heart. Oh, repent, says Bishop Ryle. Repent and change before it's too late. The Lamb is all the glory in Emmanuel's land.

The centre of heaven is the Lord Jesus. To live is Christ now.