Philippians 1:12-26 *No Turning Back: They Can’t Imprison the Message*

***Paul’s Chains***Last week we started a new series of sermons on Paul’s letter to the Philippians. I’m calling the series *No Turning Back* and my intention is to pay attention to the ways that Paul is encouraging this very good church to keep pressing forward in their relationships with Jesus.

And, as we got started with the opening of the letter, we talked a bit about the circumstances of the Philippians at the time the letter was written. We talked about their strong commitment to Paul and to each other because of Jesus; and we talked about Paul’s confidence that the unstoppable God was going to finish what he started in them and in us. I even had the opportunity to tell you a little bit about some of the people who belonged to the Philippian church: people like the fashionista Lydia; the down-and-out formerly demon-possessed slave girl; and the blue-collar ex-solider Philippian jailer.

This week, we need to talk a bit about Paul’s circumstances at the time the letter was written. Because, as we saw briefly last week, and as he is going to mention several times in our text for today, when Paul wrote this letter he was in chains. In other words, he wrote this letter from a jail cell.

There is some debate over which imprisonment Paul is referring to—because it is a fact of Paul’s life that he was arrested and thrown in jail on more than one occasion, including his first trip to Philippi—but it is most commonly believed that Paul is writing while under house arrest in Rome. This is the story that ends Acts, usually dated to the years 60 to 62, and after which the historical record on Paul ends. He may have been released and had the opportunity to pursue his dream of preaching Jesus in Spain; or, more likely, his imprisonment ended when he was martyred in Rome by the wicked emperor Nero.

In fact, the circumstances of Paul’s arrest by the Romans is an interesting story and takes up most of the final 7 or 8 chapters of Acts. It begins in Acts 20 with Paul travelling to Jerusalem in spite of many warnings that the people there are looking to have him arrested or killed. There’s even a prophet along the way who takes Paul’s belt off, binds his own hands with it, and declares: “This is what awaits Paul in Jerusalem.” But Paul is determined—he feels compelled by the Holy Spirit—to make this journey.

And, sure enough, when he gets to Jerusalem the people riot and the Romans arrest him for his own protection. When the commander in charge decides to have Paul flogged for disturbing the peace and then set him free; Paul announces his Roman citizenship and demands—as is the right of every citizen—a hearing before the Caesar. Thus begins a journey that sees Paul preaching the good news of Jesus before governors and royalty, enduring a shipwreck and snakes on the island of Malta, before being stuck in an apartment in Rome under 24 hour surveillance awaiting his audience with Nero.

It is during this period, again, that most believe the letter to Philippians was written. Clearly, Paul is not in the best of circumstances, and he is going to reflect on that in our passage for today. And yet, in spite of all that, Paul is so encouraged about what Jesus is doing and what is being done for Jesus. In fact, here’s the phrase I wrote down in my notes as I studied this passage: **No matter what…Jesus!** No matter what is happening, no matter what might happen, Paul is looking for how he can talk about Jesus. Love Jesus. Trust Jesus. Lift up the name of Jesus. No matter what. Jesus!

There are two main sections of our scripture today, two headings we’ll use as we go through it.

***Jesus is Being Proclaimed***The first heading that I’m using, then, is **Jesus is Greater than Circumstances.** Jesus is Greater than Circumstances. This covers verses 12-18. Let’s start with **verse 12:**

**12**Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.

When Paul talks about “what has happened” to him he is clearly talking about his imprisonment. He’ll make that explicit in the next verse. And what is surprising about this verse is Paul saying that what has happened to him—being put in jail—is good for the advance of the gospel.

This is rather wild. Dare I say even weird? Paul is the leading voice of the Christian movement. He’s the Apostle Paul, the one who is travelling the Mediterranean explaining the good news of Jesus and starting churches; and now he’s on the sidelines. He’s stuck in a little prison cell with chains around his ankles and a Roman soldier constantly on watch. And he says it is a good thing.

The use of the word “actually” is a hint that even Paul knows how weird this sounds.

* “Oh no! Paul is in jail! The story of Jesus is going to fade away!” “Well, actually,” Paul says, “I think even more people are going to hear about Jesus now!”
* “Oh no! Paul is in jail! The young Christian movement is going to die!” “Well, actually,” Paul says, “I think it is going to be stronger than ever!”
* “Oh no! Paul is in jail! This is a bad thing!” “Well, actually,” Paul says, “This is really a good thing!”

How can that be? Paul has two reasons. **Verse 13:**

**3**As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.

For one thing, there are people hearing about Jesus who never would have otherwise. Specifically, the palace guard. Those Roman soldiers who are standing watch over Paul—some people think that he may have been handcuffed to a guard all day long—those soldiers are a part of the elite Imperial Guard of some 9,000 soldiers. And Paul is talking to them about Jesus. He’s entering into conversations with them, letting them know his story and why he has made it his life’s mission to travel the world talking about Jesus.

It’s not that all 9000 of them would have rotated through Paul’s cell. But several would have, and maybe some of them have come to trust in Jesus for themselves, and now they’re talking about him with other soldiers, and Paul knows: people are talking. People are talking about Paul and they’re talking about this Jesus that he serves and the story is getting to people who might not have heard it otherwise. And that’s good. That is advancing the gospel.

What about you? I know there are not too many direct correlations between Paul’s experience and our experiences; unless you are literally arrested for being a Christian you cannot really say that you are “in chains for Christ.” Dealing with quarantine is not the same thing Paul was dealing with.

And yet, there is a similarity in that we often face circumstances that are less than ideal. Whether it is social distancing or a health crisis or challenges at work or whatever. And in those circumstances, do you see it as an opportunity to talk to people about Jesus? Do you see how your circumstances might bring you into contact with people you might not otherwise interact with, and thus give you an opportunity to share your faith?

For example, if you are dealing with a health situation that has you making regular trips to the hospital for rehab or treatment, do you see that as an opportunity to show how Jesus makes a difference to other patients and staff? Not in an obnoxious way, but just sharing as the opportunity arises how Jesus influences your story? That’s what Paul did.

More than that, Paul also sees himself as an example encouraging other believers to be bold for Jesus. **Verse 14:**

**14**And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

This also sounds sort of strange, or at least counter-intuitive. Paul is saying that because of his arrest, other Christians have become inspired to talk about Jesus even more boldly.

You wouldn’t expect that. You would think, if people are hearing about Paul being thrown in jail because of Jesus, that there would be a tendency to shrink away in fear. “Uh-oh, better cool it with the Jesus talk. Look at what happened to Paul!”

But in fact, Paul says, just the opposite is happening. People are witnessing Paul’s steadfast confidence in Jesus, they are seeing that Paul really means it when he says Jesus is worth it--so much so that Paul is valuing Jesus even more than his own freedom—and they are finding they have less to be afraid of. They too, want to value Jesus like that.

I think what is happening here is similar to what happens when we watch the Olympics. You know how during the Olympics they always run these features about how the athletes train. Getting up at 3 in the morning to do 500 laps in the pool before going on a 3 hour bike ride and then climbing a cliff face without a rope before noon. In truth, what those athletes put themselves through looks just awful, so many sacrifices to compete for their country. And yet, every 4 years, more and more Americans get inspired to start working out again; to pursue a dream; to make sacrifices of their own. It shouldn’t look like something we would want to do, but the passion and the commitment are something we all want, and so thousands get up off the couch and go after it.

That’s what Paul’s example is doing for other Christians. In spite of the risk, they are getting up off the couch and talking about Jesus.

Again, there is a lesson here. When we, as believers, encounter challenges and difficult circumstances in our lives, do we think about the kind of example we are setting as we deal with it? Do we throw up our hands in frustration and bitterly complain about the hand we have been dealt, or so we turn our eyes to Jesus and move through our circumstances in faith? The way we respond is a witness to others.

Paul keeps talking about the way these others are proclaiming the gospel in the next few verses. **15-18:**

**15**It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. **16**The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. **17**The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. **18**But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Again, this sounds strange. Some of the people who have been motivated to talk more boldly about Jesus are doing so out of envy and rivalry. And Paul is O.K. with that.

Apparently, these are true followers of Jesus. If they were preaching a false doctrine, Paul would call them out on that. He goes after false preachers pretty hard in other letters, and even later in Philippians. So these people must be preaching the true gospel, but they are doing so with selfish ambition and in an effort to stir up trouble for Paul.

There’s a reminder here that sometimes even Christians can act like jerks. Probably what is happening is that now that Paul is in prison, some of the other believers are jockeying for position in the leadership void that has been created. Maybe there are some people going around saying “I’m in charge now! I’m the new Apostle!” Word is getting back to Paul, and people who care about Paul are wondering what he’s going to do about it.

And Paul’s response, again, seems kind of strange. He says: “I’m fine with it.” In fact, he says, “I rejoice because of it.”

Because, bottom line, Jesus is being preached. The good news of salvation is being proclaimed. Paul’s mission is to lift Jesus up, and if that is happening, he’s not going to worry about people taking petty swipes at him.

No matter what…Jesus! That’s Paul’s attitude. No matter what… Jesus!

I don’t think Paul is a cock-eyed optimist. I don’t think he is the kind of guy who looks for the sliver lining behind every cloud. I don’t think he is being naïve about how bad his imprisonment is; or how life could be different for him if he were a free man. But, in spite of his circumstances, he is going to look for what honors Jesus. He is looking for what will bring glory to Jesus. And in that way, no matter what comes his way, he’s going to keep the focus on his Lord.

***To Live is Christ, to Die is Gain***Which brings us to the second part of the passage, which I have given the heading **Jesus is greater than life itself.** Jesus is greater than life itself. This is **verses 18-22.**

As much as we can admire Paul for his attitude in jail, and the way he is keeping the focus on Jesus, there is still this question: doesn’t Paul know that this imprisonment could end with his death? There’s a very good possibility—and again, tradition holds that this is what happened—Paul is never walking out of jail a free man. What about if you die, Paul?

And Paul is very much aware of it. In this next set of verses he goes on a sort of meditation—like a Shakespearean soliloquy—about the possibility of dying. Paul most likely wrote this letter by dictating it to Timothy, so it isn’t too hard to imagine him thinking out loud here, almost talking to himself. **Verse 18 and 19:**

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, **19**for I know that through your prayers and God’s provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.

Paul is going to continue to rejoice because he knows that, no matter what, he cannot lose. Whether he lives, or whether he dies, he cannot lose.

He introduces the idea about acknowledging that the Philippians are praying for him. And he’s glad, I’m sure. And he’s thanking them. And he knows that the thing they are praying about is his imprisonment, and specifically that he will get out of jail.

He says that he is certain that it will result in his “deliverance.” That’s sort of coy, by Paul. It’s not entirely clear what he means by that word. It could mean that he is confident that he will be delivered out of jail and become a free man again. Surely that’s what his friends are hoping and praying for. But it could also mean that he is confident that he will be delivered in a spiritual sense—delivered from sin, self, and Satan. He is probably being intentionally vague, because Paul believes that no matter what, it will turn out O.K. No matter what, Jesus is at work. **Verse 20:**

**20**I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

Here’s what Paul is most concerned about—not whether he lives or dies—but whether Jesus is glorified. Paul wants to be found faithful. Whatever happens to him, he wants to exalt—honor, lift up—Jesus.

Again, such a powerful example. No matter what…Jesus! This is how Paul lives his life. This is what Paul prays for.

Is that how we pray? Is that how we pray in the middle of a pandemic?

Don’t just pray for health and safety. Don’t just pray for health care providers and front-line workers. But pray that our conduct and our behavior would bring glory to Christ. Pray that whatever happens, Jesus will be glorified.We have a tendency to worry about ourselves and our lives and our wants and our needs and our rights. But what we need to be most concerned about is whether or not our lives bring glory to Christ.

Paul did worry about himself. But what he worried about himself was whether or not he would be faithful to the name of Jesus and bring glory to Him. And he was confident that he would not be ashamed because he knew, **verse 21**, one of the great coffee mug verses of the Bible:

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

Paul has two possible outcomes in front of him, and they are both good; because they both involve Jesus. **Verse 22** explains what he means when he says “to live is Christ”:

22If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!

This is a good option, and I think this is the one Paul believes will happen. If he survives his imprisonment—or even if it drags on—then he will be able to fruitfully serve Jesus. He will be able to continue telling his jailers about Jesus. He will be able to continue to receive visitors and write letters and find ways to communicate to the world what a treasure Jesus is.

But, on the other hand, **verse 23** explains what he means by “to die is gain”:

23I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;

Paul says this a good option also! You can almost picture him working it out as he talks, mentally weighing the options. If Paul doesn’t survive this, if he dies, then he will depart and be with Christ and, frankly, that’s better by far! If you pushed Paul, he’d tell you this is his actual preference. Because he knows Jesus well enough and deep enough that he knows there could be nothing better than being with his Savior eternally.

This is Paul’s mindset. This is Paul’s attitude. No matter what…Jesus!

And by the way, can you imagine how frustrating it must have been to be on the side of the people who were trying to shut Paul up? What do you do with a guy like this? How do you threaten him? How do you frighten him? Put me in jail? Cool, I’ll tell the guards about Jesus. Set me free? Awesome, that will mean more fruitful for labor for Jesus! Kill me? Better by far. I’ll depart and be with Jesus forever.

This is such a deep appreciation for who Jesus is. And if you have loved ones who have died as believers in Christ, it should be a huge encouragement to you. Because it might not be better for you that they are gone; but these verses assure us that being with Jesus is a very, very, very good thing.

And that should influence how we think about our own deaths as well. Unless Jesus comes again first, we are all going to die. But we don’t need to be scared of that. Not if we are trusting in Jesus. Not if Jesus is our Lord. In fact, for the believer, death is gain.

This doesn’t mean Paul had a death-wish. He’s not suicidal. He’s just talking it through. And, in fact, death isn’t how Paul thinks this is going to end. **Verses 24-26:**

**24**but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. **25**Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, **26**so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

Paul isn’t just thinking about himself. He has a servant’s heart. He’s thinking about others. And if continuing alive means continuing fruitful ministry for the sake of the Philippians’ progress and joy in the faith, then that’s what he is praying for. Paul’s priority, again, is what will bring glory to Christ and so, for as long as God grants him to continue to live, he is going to seek that for others.

I think that’s instructive for us, too. While life remains, we need to be focused on loving other people for Jesus’ sake.

If we cannot lose, then we have nothing to lose. We can give up our own rights to serve others. We can forget about ourselves and pour ourselves out for the good of other people.

*Who are you here for right now?* Do you see what I’m asking?

If you are not dead yet, then you have a mission.

If you are not dead yet, then you are here for someone else.

You are here to see that Jesus is exalted. That the good news of the gospel of Jesus is proclaimed by word and action; in the way you face your trials and the way come alongside of others for their progress and joy in the faith.

Above all, we must think about Jesus. How to love Him, trust Him, honor Him, and share Him with the others.

No. Matter. What.

Jesus.