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Bread of Life, Plattsburgh, NY
September 13th, 2020

Philippians 1:12-18a

Intro

A couple of weeks ago, I came across a news report that was very eye-opening. In 2016, a young college student, named Chike Uzuegbunam, stood on a stool outside of the cafeteria on his college campus, a state university in Georgia. He was publicly sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ, sharing his faith with his fellow students. But this was a problem for the college, and officials told him to stop or he would face discipline. Officials later admitted they viewed the gospel of Christ as “fighting words,” claiming that the Christian faith makes others uncomfortable and feel unsafe. He was told that if he wanted to exercise his freedom of speech, he could only do so in the two small “*Free Speech*” zones that the college has on its campus. Not only that, but you have to reserve a slot, can only do so between certain hours of certain days, and can only reserve it once every 30. But, Uuegbunam jumped through the hoops, reserved the spot, and began proclaiming the gospel publicly once more. That is, until he was told to stop *again*. He was told he could not share the Christian faith *even inside the designated “Free Speech” Zones!*¹

They forced him to stop sharing the gospel, even when he tried to do so according to unfair rules, because the gospel message is offensive to the secular, non-believing world; the Christian faith is too exclusive, narrow-minded, and too committed to views of truth and morality now seen as outdated to our current culture. This story is, quite frankly, shocking. My point in bringing it up is not necessarily to point out the infringements of constitutional rights (though that is concerning!) but to **remind us all of our current cultural reality:** *We are living through times of tremendous culture change, and our society is becoming increasingly secular, increasingly opposed to the Biblical worldview, Christian morality, objective truth claim, and therefore, fundamentally opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ and those who dare to believe in,*

¹ Albert Mohler, “The Briefing,” Wednesday, August 19th, 2020. <https://albertmohler.com/2020/08/19/briefing-8-19-20>. See also Adam Liptak, “A College’s ‘Free Speech Areas’ Face Supreme Court Review,” The New York Times, August 17th, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/17/us/supreme-court-college-free-speech.html>.

proclaim, and live by it. None of us need to be fooled; it seems very apparent that living out the Christian faith means we are going to face more and more opposition to the gospel and the Christian life in the coming months and years.

Stories like the one I shared aren't an anomaly. It is becoming increasingly harder to believe in and live out Christian values in our society, in our schools, in the workplace. Our friends, family members, and coworkers might even be increasingly *hostile* and opposed to the gospel and our ways of life. We might even face social and legal persecution for our faith. I have shared the gospel with someone in a coffee shop before only to be insulted and called a narrow-minded bigot. I've already heard some of your own stories of opposition to the gospel: having family members reject the Christian faith, calling biblical truths unloving and discriminatory; or being told you can't have a nativity scene on your desk at work, because it's too explicitly Christian. No, we don't live in a country where we have to worry about being imprisoned or killed for being a Christian, thank the Lord! But there is legitimate opposition to the gospel in the unbelieving world all around us, and we will face it as we seek to live the Christian life.

So how do we respond when such opposition comes? Do we cower in fear, giving in and laying low, not daring to share our faith or live out the Christian life publicly? Do we despair and grow hopeless, being so discouraged by the circumstances that all we can do is angrily grumble and complain about how things are going? Or is there a better way - **a Christlike way** - to respond?

Phil. 1:12-18a

In verses 12-18, Paul gives us a glimpse of what his life looked like when he wrote this letter: he was in chains, literally chained to a guard 24/7, in Rome, because of his missionary efforts throughout the Roman empire; he is unable to carry on in his mission of sharing the gospel with everyone freely, making disciples, planting and building up churches, and training leaders; he is unable to keep heading towards Spain, the outskirts of the Empire, to proclaim Christ where no one had yet heard the gospel; and to top it all off, he tells us in verses 15-17 that there are even believers, fellow Christians, in Rome that are *opposed* to him, trying to build up

their own reputations and ministries at Paul's expense. Needless to say, Paul's circumstances were *far from ideal!* If I were in his shoes, just one of these things would put me in a sour mood, making me grumble and complain! But strikingly, that is *not* what Paul does here. He doesn't complain about the unfairness of suffering persecution for the sake of the gospel. He doesn't complain about the inconvenience and discouragement of thwarted plans to faithfully serve the Lord. He doesn't complain and gossip about those opposing him as rivals. Instead, he does a very surprising thing: *he rejoices!* He recounts all of these difficulties in such a way that gives him great joy, and is meant to encourage us to have that same joy! How does he do this? What is the secret of his joy, even in the midst of suffering, inconvenient frustrations, and adversity? *The secret is that Paul looks at all of these circumstances through the lens of the gospel:* rather than complain and despair, Paul sees how all of these circumstances are being used by God for the advance of the gospel! And Paul loves the gospel so much, making it his lifelong mission to be about the spread and advance of the gospel, that he *rejoices* in the gospel's advance, even when it comes through suffering and opposition, even at his own personal expense!

Paul here is giving us an account of how he is responding to adversity and suffering in his own life, and it serves as an encouragement, a challenge, a model, if you will, of how *we should respond* to opposition ourselves. Instead of acting defeated, fearfully giving in and growing complacent, we should *seize adversity as opportunities to share the gospel and live as a Christian witness before the watching world.* Instead of despairing, giving into a negative spirit of grumbling and complaining, we should respond by *rejoicing in the gospel*, truly believing in and loving the good news of salvation in Jesus *so much* that we *live our lives for the advance of the gospel of Jesus, rejoicing in every opportunity to do so.*

I. Seizing Adversity as Opportunity for the Advance of the Gospel

A. Exegesis

Paul begins telling the Philippians about his circumstances in verse 12, but he casts them in a positive light, emphasizing that he *“wants [them] to know...that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel” (v. 12).* We've already noted he's chained to a guard, held captive and unable to carry on with his mission work. It would be natural to *assume* this

would stifle the spread of the gospel, not advance it; so how exactly is his imprisonment serving to **advance the gospel**? He lists three ways: 1. He tells us in verse 13 this has given him the opportunity to share the gospel with the guards keeping him prisoner, so that **“it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard.”** The guards take shifts in being chained to Paul 24/7. He is still free to have some visitors, to write, and other such things, but he is still restrained, physically being held captive by guards who take turns chaining him to themselves, day and night. But instead of cowering as their captive, Paul sees it the other way around: each guard is **his** captive audience! And so he shares the gospel with them, with these Roman imperial guards, allowing him to share the gospel with people he never would have had access to otherwise. Furthermore, based on a comment Paul makes in chapter 4, I think we can assume that this has allowed the gospel to travel *through* the guards to other members of the imperial palace complex: as Paul mentions in the book’s closing, **“All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar’s household” (4:22)**. Yes, Paul is held captive, but he sees his captivity as an opportunity to keep sharing the gospel, *even with those oppressing him!* So the gospel is advanced first and foremost because his sufferings present unique opportunities for him to share the gospel.

2. Secondly, it is advanced through *other people witnessing Paul’s suffering for the sake of the gospel*. In the rest of verse 13, he says it has also been made know **“to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.”** In other words, everyone that hears of his imprisonment also knows that he is imprisoned *precisely because he has been about the ministry of the gospel*; he has made it clear why he is there - as persecution for sharing about the one true Lord, Jesus Christ - so that *the very fact that he suffers in a Christ-like manner, in the name of Christ*, becomes a gospel witness to all that hear about it. He transforms his imprisonment into an opportunity to *respond* to the persecution and adversity in such a way that displays a life transformed by the grace of Christ.

3. And finally, his imprisonment not only has an effect on non-believers who hear of it, but also on fellow *believers in the city*; but rather than discouraging them, it actually serves to *strengthen and encourage* other Christians to **“become confident in the Lord”** by Pauls’ example, being **“much more bold to speak the word without fear,”** as we see in verse 14. The

natural response for other Christians who hear about Paul being persecuted would be **fear**; it would be expected that they would cower in fear, that they would lay low so that they don't suffer the same fate as Paul. But the *exact opposite happens!* They actually become even more bold to proclaim the gospel, doing so **without fear!** Why? Because they are strengthened by the same grace of Christ that strengthens Paul in his imprisonment. Paul's example encourages Christians to press on even more boldly in evangelism, in the face of opposition, because they find their confidence not in themselves, not even in Paul, but in Jesus Christ the Lord, whose gospel they proclaim. And so the gospel advances not only through Paul, but also through other believers in the city, *as a direct result of his imprisonment!*

The implication seems clear: this isn't unique to Paul; Paul's Lord is our Lord; Paul's gospel is our gospel; the grace of God that strengthens Paul in the midst of adversity is for us too! Just as other believers were strengthened in Christ to follow suit, sharing the gospel even more boldly in the face of persecution, the Philippians were being encouraged to do likewise; therefore, **we too are being challenged to follow Paul's example, being confident in Christ to boldly share the gospel without fear, no matter what the circumstances or cost!** When difficulty, inconvenience, opposition, suffering, or even persecution comes our way, *our response should not be fear, but should be to seize these as opportunities for the advance of the gospel!*

B. Application - Seizing Life's Difficulties as Opportunities for the Gospel

The way we respond to life's frustrations and difficulties can either **reflect** a *sinful, selfish heart, preoccupied with our own comfort*, **or** it can reflect the *powerful realities of the gospel of Jesus*.

Paul's faithfulness, and the faithful believers in Rome, are a model for us: we, too, should constantly live our lives on mission, bearing witness to the gospel in all that we do: suffering in such a way so that Christ's love and grace are evidenced in our lives; intentionally making every effort to proclaim the gospel of Christ to the lost, unbelieving world around us, even when it is difficult and often bears the costs of cultural opposition, social hostility, and possibly even legal persecution. We are called to making **personal evangelism** a regular, habitual part of our

everyday lives. We are to weave the gospel into our conversations and relationships, seizing every opportunity to proclaim Christ and live out the implications of the gospel before others.

We should strive to share the gospel regularly, with our unbelieving friends, family members, neighbors, coworkers, teachers, students, and classmates. Even when it's difficult. Even when there is a social or relational cost. Even when it involves conflict and opposition. Even when it might involve persecution. Does this mean we become aggressive and provocation, sharing the gospel in an unloving and contentious way? Of course not; we seek to do so with love and wisdom, weaving the gospel into our relationships and conversations. Even the way we *respond* to adversity should be a part of our witness! And yet we also must make sure to boldly make the demands of Christ clear: **everyone is a sinner, and everyone must repent and believe in Christ, or else they will not be saved.** We must share that the only hope of salvation is trusting in Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection as the true sacrifice for our sins, calling everyone to turn from sin and trust in Jesus alone! And this will not always be easy. Evangelism is difficult, and often bears a personal cost.

[**Transition**] How, then, can we respond to opposition to our faithfulness, even to life's frustrations and inconvenient set-backs, in a Christ-like manner, the way Paul does?

II. Rejoicing in the Advance of the Gospel

A. Exegesis

Paul's adversity doesn't just come from outside the church, but also from within. Just as he is an encouragement to believers, who proclaim Christ out of "*good will*" and "*love*" (vv.15-16), there are also Christians in the city who are preaching the gospel of Christ out of "*envy,*" "*rivalry,*" and "*selfish ambition, not sincerely*" but intending to "*afflict [Paul] in his imprisonment*" (vv.15, 17). Paul views both of these groups as *fellow believers*, calling them "*brothers*" in Christ and maintaining that they are both, indeed, proclaiming the true gospel of Christ. They are not heretics or false teachers, but fellow Christians still opposing Paul and causing him grief, acting not out of love but out of sinful pride. They seem to be trying to build up their own glory, wanting their own ministry to outshine Paul's and give themselves a greater reputation. Again, we might expect Paul to call them out by name, to defend himself, to act

resentfully towards them. But what does he do? *He rejoices*. Why? **Because the gospel of Christ is still being proclaimed through them, even though they are his rivals!** As he says in verse 18, *“What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.”* Paul is not justifying their wrong motives in proclaiming the gospel; he is not saying what they are doing is right. But he *is saying* that, even though their motives are impure, they are still preaching the pure gospel; and so Paul rejoices! Why? **Because this gospel is the power of God to save!** His mission is the advance of the gospel, as we have seen, and he longs for it to be proclaimed, even if he doesn’t get any of the credit for its fruit! He rejoices in the advance of the gospel even when it promotes his rivals! Why? **Because his joy is rooted in the gospel itself.** He loves the gospel of Christ and truly believes in it. Therefore, he **truly and sincerely desires for the gospel to be proclaimed everywhere, for the glory of God, the encouragement of other believers, and the salvation of the lost.** *He rejoices everytime this happens, even when it involves his own personal suffering and hardship; that is how much joy he has in the good news of salvation in Christ for everyone who believes!*

B. App

This text is a bit of gut-check, isn’t it? Who do we identify more with: those who do serve Christ from “good will and love” or those who do so out of pride, seeking their own glory and welfare? Do we identify more with a spirit of love, boldness, and joy in the face of adversity? Or a spirit of grumbling, complaining, and fear?

Confession: As I have studied this text this past week, it has been convicting for me personally. When difficulty and inconvenient frustrations come, I can be far too quick to grumble and complain, rather than embrace it as an opportunity for the gospel to advance to the glory of God and the good of others. When I examine my heart, sometimes I find *pride* lurking there, driving my actions, instead of love for God and others. When there is a cost to faithful obedience, I feel the temptation to respond in *fear of man* rather than in *boldness and confidence*. My guess is, you might find this temptation relatable in your own life.

This text hits our lives today by asking and answering this question: **How can we remain faithful in sharing the gospel and living out a gospel-shaped life, even in the face of opposition and adversity?** *We firmly root our joy in the gospel of Jesus Christ.* For starters,

we must remember 2 things: 1. **The point of our lives is not our own glory or comfort, but the glory of the Lord;** 2. **The gospel really is the power of God to save anyone who believes!**

When we firmly hold to these 2 truths, it allows us to see our circumstances through the joyful perspective of the gospel!

C. Illustration - Concrete examples of application

1. Joyfully advancing the gospel amidst opposition

So how will we respond when adversity as we try to live out a gospel-centered life? Maybe you're facing opposition from friends, family members, or coworkers. Maybe you're feeling social, cultural, or even legal opposition to the gospel of Christ. How can we respond with joyful love, boldly and confidently sharing the gospel instead of giving into fear?

When we keep a sober mind about the realities at stake - the *eternal realities* of eternal life and eternal death - then we desperately *yearn* to see the gospel go forth, to see sinners hear, repent, and believe, trusting in Jesus alone for salvation! And if this is our deep longing, then we can ***rejoice in the work of the Lord, no matter how difficult it is, or messy it is, or how much adversity and unfairness seems to be mixed in with the blessing.***

2. God is glorified in our faithfulness despite the results we see

Or we could ask it this way: How do we *rejoice* when we've labored in gospel ministry, enduring hardships for long periods of time? Maybe you've shared the gospel a dozen, maybe even *a hundred* times with a certain family member or friend, yet they've rejected it every time. Maybe you've shown the love of Christ to them, sacrificially serving them in love, and yet they respond to you with hostility, envy, and strife. Maybe you've labored and prayed for the gospel to go forth in our community, for revival to break out and for people to be saved! But you're having a hard time seeing any fruit. Or maybe there is fruit, but other people seem to be reaping the gospel harvest, in other fields, or maybe even other local churches. How do we respond with joy, instead of discouragement and resentment in times like these?

Our greatest desire can't be for our own glory, but must be for ***God's glory!*** Our boast is not in ourselves, but in Christ. As long as he gets all the glory, we can be satisfied. Therefore, it should encourage us, like it did Paul, that we endure this opposition in such a way that all will

know we are doing so *for Christ!* Like Paul, we can seize these difficult circumstances as opportunities for the gospel! We can do so with **boldness and confidence and joy** - how? - by knowing that *God is glorified by our faithfulness even when people reject the gospel, persecute us for it, and don't believe. Even when that happens, God is pleased with you and you are bringing glory to his name! So be encouraged and rejoice! God is not upset with you, but He is graciously allowing you to glorify His name!*

We cannot make anyone believe; we cannot save or convert anyone, only God can! All we can do is strive to be faithful in proclaiming the gospel and living it out! And thankfully, we believe what we're saying: *God really does save people through this gospel! The gospel is the power of God to save anyone who believes!* So we proclaim Christ, knowing God is glorified in our faithfulness! And we proclaim Christ because we firmly believe that *anyone who hears and believes this glorious good news will be saved! Keep faithfully sharing the gospel, no matter how hard it is, from a sincere desire to see sinners saved, to go from death to live, to be forgiven and righteous in Jesus Christ!* This is what drives us to faithfulness, to proclaim Christ sincerely, out of love and good will!

D. Rooting our joy in the gospel

In other words, **we respond to adversity with joyful boldness and confidence in Christ when we truly rejoice in the advance of the gospel! Therefore, we must remind ourselves constantly of what the gospel actually says! We must remind ourselves daily of why this is good news for us and for the people we need to share it with!**

Preach the gospel to yourself over and over again, every day. Let us regularly remind each other of how glorious it is! We need to be reminded how holy God is, and how sinful we are; if you forget, read the word, pray the Spirit would expose and convict you of your sin, and confess it to Him in prayer! This reminds us of how much we need a savior - of how much we need Christ! And so don't stop there! Remind yourself, remind your brother and sister, that all of your sins, every single one you feel guilt, and shame, and conviction for - *they were all laid on the cross of Christ!* Jesus died so that His blood could wash away every guilty stain from our

messed up lives! He died in your place, and in my place, bearing God's eternal wrath against all of our sin, bearing all our guilt and condemnation, so that there's none left for us!

And he didn't just die: he was raised! And his perfect life, his perfect righteousness, has been declared yours: when God looks at you, He sees the perfection of Jesus! And just as He raised Christ, He will you raise you and me! For Christ is coming again, and on that day, it will be a day of judgment: ***we deserve to face God's wrath*** on that day, because ***we have all rebelled against him, in our sin, as blasphemous traitors and rebels, enemies of God!*** And yet, if we're trusting in Jesus, His blood as paid for all of our sins! On that day, our plea will be only this: ***yes, I deserve condemnation and eternal damnation in Hell; and yet, Jesus took my place on the cross, and I have been declared righteous because of what He alone has done!*** This is why we love the gospel: because God will accept Jesus's finished work and sacrifice in our place! On that day, ***we will be saved!*** Not because anything we have done, but purely by grace through faith, purely because of what Jesus has done for us. ***The gospel is the power of God to save!***

But we can't stop there. We have to go back to that judgment day: there will be many who do not trust in Christ to save them; whatever they plea, it won't be enough. No one is good, not one. We all deserve death; we all deserve God's wrath; we all deserve eternal damnation in Hell. And there are *billions of sinners* in this world who do not trust and believe in Jesus! Billions that are on their way to Hell! Some have never heard! Some think they have heard but actually have no idea what the gospel really is, or what the Christian faith is all about! And some have heard, and yet walk away from the Lord, outright rejecting Him. Brothers and Sisters, this should move us to tears! This should wrench our hearts and grip our souls! There is hope for every sinner: the same hope we have! If we truly believe these things, then our only response can be to desperately ***yearn, to longingly desire, pray, give, and work towards the advance of the gospel!*** No matter the messiness, difficulty, opposition, or inconvenience! This is why we pray and give and send missionaries around the world! And this is why we labor, in prayer, in word, in deed, to share the gospel with our friends, family, and neighborhoods, here in our own town! Why? ***Because the gospel is the power of God to save!*** Do you believe this? If so, let us rejoice in every opportunity for the Word of God to go forth in our lives!

Non-Believers

And if you haven't believed in this yet, then know my *sincere desire and prayer for you is that you would hear and believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ today!* You deserve God's wrath, just like me! But you don't have to face it! The cross of Jesus Christ is sufficient to save you! The gospel really is the power of God to save, ***anyone who believes***, even you and me! So turn to Jesus, trust and believe in Him, and be saved!