

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 18, 2008**

THE GOSPEL FIRST!

Philippians 1:12-18

The year was 1741. Fifty-six year old George Frederic Handel seemed ready to throw in the towel. Even though he had achieved minor celebrity as a composer and as a virtuoso organist, he was having trouble. He composed oratorios based on the Bible, but officials in the Church of England opposed them. They felt his music was blasphemous – performed in theaters instead of in churches, where actors sang Bible stories on the stage.

Up to then, he never quite made it in the music business and this caused him financial ruin. He had to compete head-to-head with the well-established English composers and deal with hard-to-please British audiences. By 1741, he was swimming in a sea of debt.

On top of all this, he suffered from rheumatism that gave him daily pain and had a stroke a few years earlier that left him partially paralyzed. Miserably discouraged, he felt forced to retire from composing. If anyone could think life was unfair, it was Handel.

But these troubles forced the composer, already a Christian, to draw closer to the Lord. He focused on the gospel and dedicated his life to composing sacred music that would be played to glorify God. Then one day, his friend Charles Jennens gave him a piece he had written about the life of Christ. The text was completely taken from the Bible. He asked Handel to compose the music.

Intoxicated with excitement, the musician gave all his energy to the task. Often singing at the top of his voice, with tears streaming down his face, Handel composed *The Messiah*, completing 260 pages in less than a month. It debuted in Dublin first, as a charity event and then a year later in London. You may know the tradition: During the grandeur of the Hallelujah Chorus, the king of England was overwhelmed, and rose to his feet to acknowledge the glory of God. Following his lead, the entire audience rose, and started a custom that continues to this day.

Handel put the gospel first and even though things went badly for him, he experienced real joy. *The Messiah* played across England during the great revival of the Eighteenth Century and an ungodly nation repented. Frederic Handel along with preachers like George Whitfield and John Wesley was God's instrument to advance the gospel.

How can you and I have the sense of purpose that Handel experienced? When things go wrong in our lives and we suffer, what we do to capture that joy? Our passage in Philippians will help us answer this question.

PAUL'S SUFFERING AS A MODEL

Paul begins with the extraordinary statement, *Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.* Paul is in prison. Something has happened to Paul. He is suffering. Let's take a moment to review what brought him to his chains in Rome.

Years after his first visit to Philippi, Paul returned to Jerusalem. Recognized as a Christian preacher, he was almost murdered by a Jewish mob in the temple. The Roman commander rescued him from their violence, but he was arrested and conveyed as a prisoner to Caesarea, where, from various causes he was detained a prisoner for two years.

At the end of this period, claiming the privilege of a Roman citizen, he appealed to the emperor and at once was sent on to Rome. After a long and perilous voyage, which included a shipwreck and near drowning, Paul reached the imperial city. Here he was permitted to rent a small house or room at his own expense. This privilege was accorded to him because he was a Roman citizen. He had to be chained to a guard 24/7 to ensure he didn't disappear until his case came before Caesar.

The Roman courts move slowly, and Paul passes another two years under house arrest in Rome. He is able to receive visitors, but the chains never leave his wrists. He can't move unless the guard moves with him. If anyone could think life was unfair, it was Paul.

But as he looked over the past five years of his life, when he writes the Philippians, his concern is not "Is it fair?" but "Is it accomplishing anything for God?" Has his difficulty really served to advance the gospel? He says to them: "Contrary to what you'd expect, my being in prison hasn't hurt the gospel, it's actually helped it to progress. What's happened to me has really accomplished something for God."

If you asked Paul, "Is it fair, what's happened to you?" he'd say, "No." If you asked him, "Has it been fun? Is it something you would have chosen for your life?" he'd say, "Of course not. This stuff hurts. It is painful. I don't like to suffer." But in the midst of all of it, he could stop and ask himself, *Is what's happening to me promoting the good news of Jesus Christ?* And when he saw that the answer was "yes," that mattered more to him than his suffering.

The gospel was advanced. What happened to Paul furthered God's work in two ways.

First, because of his chains, people are being won to the Lord. They are hearing the gospel. That's what matters to Paul. In his case, those people are the palace guards who are chained to him night and day. According to verses 12–13, the whole palace guard is hearing about Christ.

Now the palace guard – Praetorian – was a specialized, handpicked group. They were Caesar's own personal bodyguards serving to protect the emperor and guard the prisoners that had appealed to him. After serving for 12 years, they transitioned into other influential careers in the military or public office. As a group, they were influential, the movers and shakers of the next generation. If you wanted to influence the Roman Empire, you couldn't pick a better group to start with.

Every day for two years Paul wore the other end of his chain. For six hours, that guard had to stay within four feet of him. They would get to listen in on the conversations he had with his friends. It became clear that he was in chains because of someone called Christ. Over the months, as their rotations kept coming around he would talk with them about this Christ.

Guard after guard chained to Paul, guard after guard hearing about Christ, guard after guard talking to other guards about the prisoner who seemed to be in love with Christ. Because of what's happened to him, people all over Rome are hearing about Jesus. Many were being won to the Lord.

That principle still works today. National Football League running back Sherman Smith, the “Sherman Tank,” had a reputation for bowling over defensive linemen when he played for the Seattle Seahawks. He became one of the more popular players. Then, without warning, the Seahawks traded Smith to the San Diego Chargers. Everything changed overnight for this running back, whose Christian faith was rock solid. He wasn't with the Chargers for more than a few weeks when he seriously injured his knee. While in rehabilitation, he wondered, *Lord, why did you ship me to San Diego?*

But while his knee mended, he had the opportunity to lead one of his teammates to the Lord. That converted party-guy, Miles McPherson, has since become an outstanding youth evangelist who reaches tens of thousands of people each year. Even when things went bad, Smith would put the gospel first and have the joy of seeing Christ work in the life of a friend.

There's a second way Paul's chains served to advance the gospel: Other believers in Rome were witnessing more boldly than ever before. According to verse 14, Christians in Rome saw Paul's courage, heard the reports about his impact on the palace guard, of how people were responding to the gospel, and it encouraged them to speak out, to openly confess their testimony, and to fearlessly take a stand for godliness. In this way, too, what happened to Paul served to advance the gospel.

Unfortunately, some of these other folks had mixed motives in what they were doing. To be sure, many of them served out of love for Christ and love for Paul. Our text says that they were preaching Christ, so we know that they were not heretics who distorted the message of the gospel. They had the right message and, of course, they wanted people to accept Christ. But at the same time, they kind of wanted to rub their freedom in Paul's face. What may have bothered them was that Paul was getting too much attention. As far as they were concerned, he was just a little bit too famous – the big shot apostle who came to town as an imperial prisoner. All the Christians in Rome were talking about him and singing his praises.

Some of the local leaders got a bit envious of all the attention Paul was getting. They secretly hoped that the attention would shift to them. Then he could see what it was like to have someone else praised while he was in prison. *We'll be out there doing the real work of the ministry, while Paul can't go three feet without hitting the end of his chain.*

Paul knew some had mixed motives. Others were preaching purely. Some acknowledged that it was God's design for Paul to be in chains and to appear before Caesar. They knew that God did

this, so that the gospel could be defended at the highest level in the Roman Empire. But the others missed the point and wanted Paul to feel resentment while they were freely moving about town and adding to their reputations. That must have hurt.

But what really mattered to Paul was that Christ was being preached. That brought a lot of joy. That was more important than his suffering or convenience. He was able have joy even when things went bad, by putting the gospel first in his own life and in the lives of the people he knew.

LESSONS FROM PAUL'S SUFFERING

What lessons are we to learn from Paul's example? What are we to get from this passage? Let me suggest a couple of things to take away today.

First, we are to understand God chooses to work in our weakness and not in our strength. That is how His power is made known. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote about a different suffering – a thorn in the flesh, he called it – and he asked God to take the problem away. God did not. Instead, we have the message in God's Word:

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Many times the Lord will place us in circumstances that seem impossible to bear, apart from God's grace working in us. Circumstances like cancer, depression, unemployment . . . you name it. Our normal reaction is to break under the weight of these problems – to panic, despair, reject God. But the work of the gospel in our lives keeps that from happening and God gets the glory.

We know people in this congregation right now who deal with illness or emotional pain or financial difficulty and yet keep on trusting God. In their problems – because of their suffering – the gospel is being advanced, the power of God in their lives is being displayed in front of those who do not yet believe and the rest of us are encouraged to live out the gospel ourselves. Again to the Corinthians, Paul wrote:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive, are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that His life may be revealed in our mortal body (2 Corinthians 4:7-11)

Perplexed, but not in despair, persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.
How does that happen? By the work of Christ in a believer's life, steadily producing the fruit of the Holy Spirit, a growing trust in the Lord.

That is gospel work, that is a dependence on God seen by other people only when the going gets tough. Suffering is hard. But we can have joy even when things go bad, by putting the gospel first in our own lives and in the lives of the people we know.

Let me give you an example. Some of you heard me talk about a friend of mine named Gretchen. She was the wife of a colleague and associate pastor at our church when we lived up in Massachusetts. Gretchen had an aggressive form of cancer.

For a while, with her husband Greg and their four boys, she was a missionary in Istanbul, Turkey. They served there before her illness brought them back to the states. Greg and Gretchen had studied and prepared for a lifetime of bringing the gospel to Muslim people. That was what God had called them to do. It was their dream. But the Lord had different plans to advance the gospel through them.

What struck me most about Gretchen was her heart for evangelism. She and her husband were passionate about sharing Christ and helping people grow. Even while she was undergoing extensive chemotherapy and suffering greatly, she got involved in outreach. She and I worked together as co-leaders in our church's Alpha course. She led weekly discussions about Christianity, until she was too sick and frail to continue. Her devotion to Christ and trust in His grace even in the midst of great suffering had an influence on everyone she knew.

One such person was Norm, an unchurched non-Christian who was invited to join the Alpha course. Norm was dying of AIDS and he watched with great interest how Gretchen dealt with her cancer. He wanted to know if there was something beyond the despair he was facing. We talked a lot about Gretchen's struggle and how he longed for the hope and peace that Gretchen enjoyed. Norm came to understand the gospel and soon put his faith in the Lord.

Both Gretchen and Norm went home to the arms of their savior a few years ago. Someday you will meet them. I believe it was the grace that Norm saw in this frail, dying, godly woman that made the difference. It was her weakness, her suffering that God used to bring Norm to Christ.

God's power was made known through Gretchen's cancer. Although He could have, God did not take the cancer away. Instead, He used the cancer to show the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ to a man dying of AIDS. The Lord took her in great weakness and made her strong; strong with a hope that surpassed every cancer or virus or problem that she and Norm or you and I will ever face.

These were days filled with lots of tears. But you know what? Gretchen experienced real joy, better than beating cancer because she saw a man headed for eternity in Hell come to the arms of the Savior. Even when things were going really bad, she put the gospel first in the lives of the people like Norm and the gospel was advanced.

The second thing I'd like you to take away is this. In order to experience joy, we must make the gospel first priority in our lives. The centrality of the gospel is the great question and challenge for each of us. The apostle Paul understood what was at stake here. He knew that the eternal souls of people in Rome counted more than his life. He knew that the gospel was the reason Jesus came

and gave His life, so he was so centered on getting the good news of Christ out to the lost in Rome that his feelings and desires were subsumed and made subject to the advance of the gospel. Theologian D.A. Carson writes:

Paul's example is impressive and clear. Put the advance of the gospel at the center of your aspirations. Our own comfort, our bruised feelings, our reputations, our misunderstood motives – all of these are insignificant in comparison with the advance and splendor of the gospel. As Christians, we are called upon to put the advance of the gospel at the very center of our aspirations.

What are your desires? To make money? To get married? To travel? To see your grandchildren grow up? To find a new job? To retire early? None of these is inadmissible; none is to be despised. The question is whether these become so devouring that the Christian's central aspiration is squeezed to the periphery or checked out of existence entirely (*Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians*).

CONCLUSION

That is the key to real joy. Making the gospel your central, most important desire. Living out and telling others the good news about Jesus.

Understand that God chooses to work in our weakness and not in our strength, so sometimes we will suffer so that His power is seen . . . seen by those to whom He wants us to witness of His grace. And because He is intent on advancing His kingdom, as His servants we must make the gospel first priority in our lives.

Notice that in our passage Paul never denies the painfulness of his situation. He knows that suffering is real and it can hurt. Paul offers a way to live above the despair of difficult circumstances – not to escape the pain, but find real and lasting joy in the midst of them.

The apostle Paul learned the lesson of joy. So did George Frederic Handel and my friend Gretchen. Each saw the Lord take their circumstances and use those troubles for the advancement of His kingdom. And they experienced the joy of seeing people saved and brought to Christ because they put the gospel first.

We can – we must! – learn that same lesson. You can have joy when things go bad by putting the gospel first in your own life and in the lives of the people you know.