

Text: Phil 1.12-26
St Stephen's

Jan 16/17, 2010
Weekend Message

'The View From Jail'

Have you every **prayed for something** for a long time, prayed hard, but the answer didn't come, doesn't come... and **then it does come**. But when it does come, it **comes in such a different way, maybe in such a difficult way**, that you kind of wondered why you prayed for it – and you are maybe even having a hard time seeing God's answer in it!?!

Anyone ever **prayed for patience**? And all of a sudden you have all these things that **try your patience!**?!

Or prayed that **God would give you humility**, and then you have a **major failure** in your life?!?

Or prayed that God would give you **children** and you ended up with 6 teenagers?

Just to refresh your memory, **Paul's second missionary journey** started about 20 years after Jesus was raised and lasted about 3 years. The **Philippian church** was planted in the middle of that journey...

During those years **Paul had a prayer**, that God would enable him to bring the **gospel to Rome**.

Now, a bit over **a decade later**, Paul is in Rome, where he had always wanted to go, but it **wasn't going like he had expected**. He writes the Philippians about it with these words...

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

Phil 1.12,13

He writes to them about, *'what has happened to me'*. What has happened to him **he came to Rome under arrest**. Arrested in Jerusalem, he went through trial and appeal and finally was **taken to Rome in chains**. Those are the actual words he uses to describe his situation. Our translation says, *'my imprisonment'*. He has a simpler phrase in the original language, *'my chains'*. So he has been arrested, taken to Rome, held under confinement, and is awaiting trial. **Quite an answer to prayer!**

All this happened **because he was a Christian evangelist**, preaching the gospel of Jesus. That's what he means when he says *'my imprisonment is for Christ.'*

That is not how the Roman government would have phrased it. The **sticking points for Rome** were the riots back in Jerusalem and the underlying issue of whether this new religion of Jesus was **an approved religion** in the Roman empire like the Jewish religion was. So it was an issue of **religious liberty** for Christians and the gospel. Paul was willing to go to jail to defend that. And there was also this little point about Christians saying that **Jesus was 'Lord'**. Well, in the ancient Roman world that was a title that was **reserved** alone for one person, **for Caesar**. So the charges against Paul could have included **treason**.

Either or both of these charges could have meant the **death penalty**. Paul was willing to put his life at risk over the issues of **liberty for the gospel** and his **allegiance to Jesus** above all other authority.

You can tell a lot about someone by **what they will die for**. If you haven't got something worth dying for, you may not have something worth living for. Paul had something worth dying for – and living for.

But not everyone saw it this way...

- **Paul's Christian Friends: ashamed and anxious.** The Philippians had staked quite a bit on their new faith... And now their leader, their Apostle sat in a Roman jail. All of them were worried. Some of them were ashamed.

- **Paul's Christian Opponents** (there were some believers who just didn't like his leadership): **vindication and opportunity**. 'See, we told you this guy was a problem. We told you we were the real apostles...'
- **Roman Guards:** just another troublemaker – get the chains

But **Paul himself** says something quite different...

everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News.

Phil 1.12

He's been arrested. He's been taken from his country of birth to Rome to stand trial. He's lost his liberty. He's chained. He's at risk of being executed. And he says, *everything that has happened to me here has helped!*

Why? Because it has all helped to move forward what he is living for. The spread of the gospel. That's what matters to Paul. Look **how he details it...**

*Everyone, including **the whole palace guard**, knows that I am in chains because of Christ... because of my imprisonment, **most of the believers here** have gained confidence and boldly speak God's message without fear... **some** are preaching out of jealousy and rivalry... But that doesn't matter... the message about Christ is being preached either way, so I rejoice, and I will continue to rejoice...*

Phil 1.13-18

There in this paragraph are all three groups that I'd just mentioned.

- **Paul's Roman Guards:** have heard all about Christ
- **Paul's Anxious Friends:** are now bold, speaking for Christ where they used to be intimidated
- **Paul's Opportunistic Opponents:** are preaching Christ!

Paul says, 'This is so, so.. good!'

Get that scene once again... Paul is in chains in a Roman jail. His life work is arguably being poached by competitors. He is about to be tried on capitol offenses. And he writes, *'I rejoice'*! *'I will continue to rejoice!'*

The view from jail looks pretty good to Paul.

Take some notes on that jail cell with me. Inside there is...

1) A Big Heart

Most of the time if you have a **sharp setback**, it makes your heart **hard and bitter and small**. But not Paul.

some are preaching out of jealousy and rivalry... But that doesn't matter... the message about Christ is being preached either way, so I rejoice

Phil 1.13-18

What Paul is doing here is sorting out **the difference between the majors and the minors...**

What counts is the gospel. **What doesn't count** are the **little things: style and place and personalities and preferences**. What matters is that the message about Christ is preached. If the message is changed, Paul quickly gets sharp and clear and strong! But if the message is spoken, he can cut people a lot of slack, make a lot of room for differences in style and place and personalities and preferences.

2) A Big Priority

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

Phil 1.21

Christ and his gospel are the singular pursuit of his life. For Paul, Jesus Christ **towers over everything**, and has become the defining purpose of his life. Serving him, trusting him, loving him, receiving from him, following him, proclaiming him. Paul is locked in on Christ's presence, Christ's Spirit, Christ's sacrifice, Christ's character, Christ's rule and reign...

The possibility of **life** means all of this for Paul. It is **a great blessing**. Even his imprisonment, far from closing him down, has simply given him another place to serve, another pulpit, one close to the heart of the Roman Empire. Now, he writes, the whole palace guard has heard the message of Christ.

The possibility of **death** simply means that he will be **with Christ face to face**. What is not wonderful about that?

The choice between life and death becomes **a 'win/win'**.

I really don't know which is better. I'm torn between two desires: I long to go and be with Christ, which would be far better for me. But for your sakes, it is better that I continue to live..

Phil 1.22-24

3) The Big Reality

I want you to understand what really matters..

Phil 1.10

There is something important about **God's jail cells**. They come in all kinds of sizes and shapes: a relationship crisis, a medical situation, a loss of a job – it's **the place where your hands are tied and you can't do what you would want to do**. In that place God strips away things that don't matter so you can see what does matter. Maybe you are in one of those cells today...

What Paul can see from his little cell is the Big Picture, the Big Reality.

He could see that God has intervened in the world in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. There is **nothing larger**. Paul could see right away that this was big stuff. It can't be contained by religious boundaries of national boundaries or cultural boundaries. It is larger than Rome, greater than Caesar. You can't lock it up in a jail. It overflows everything, swallows up everything, makes sense of everything. There is **nothing that doesn't fit**.

It **triumphs over sin** – so that every failure is not just forgiven, but redeemed, and turned into a strength of character. It triumphs even over **human suffering**, and in the end will heal every believing heart, and even the whole cosmos...

Paul says, *I want you to understand what really matters..*

Here is his appeal to us from his jail cell...

*Dear brothers and sisters, **pattern your lives after mine**, and learn from those who follow our example... Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.*

Phil 3.17, 4.9