



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

When Bad Things Turn Out Well

Philippians 1.12–18

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Introduction

Let's first read our text:

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. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice (Phil 1.12–18).

I read it first to call attention to a comment made by Gordon Fee in the middle of his discussion of it: “Most of us know this material so well that we tend to overlook how surprising it is.... The surprise comes in [Paul’s] large-heartedness about this—not that he could be large-hearted, but that he could be so toward people of a kind whom he elsewhere seems to inveigh so strongly against” (Fee 1995, 118).

Fee’s observation prompts us to try to look at this text with fresh eyes. Here is what we learn:

- That the Philippians were concerned about what Paul’s imprisonment would do for the spread of the gospel (this is the first thing he tells them in the letter body) (v. 12).
- That his imprisonment gave him opportunity to tell the gospel story to his guards and “the rest”—perhaps “others who had dealings with imperial affairs” (Fee 1995, 114).
- That not only did his incarceration not *hurt* the gospel, it inspired “others within the Christian fellowship [to a] fresh stimulus and courage for the work of evangelism.” Paul piles up multiple terms for courage in verse 14. Also, in the same verse, he says that some, having been “already *convinced*, now continue to serve” (O’Brien 1991, 94).

- That even in the New Testament era, church troubles existed, including problems of personal rivalry and competition (vv. 15-17).
- That, despite being a prisoner and a victim of intense jealousy, rivalry, and intentional ill will, Paul kept things in perspective (cf. Phil 4.11).
- That “the significant thing is that ... Christ is being preached” (v. 18, O’Brien’s translation).

Obviously, this text has much to teach us. Let’s look more closely and see three of its lessons.

Lesson One: Sometimes Bad Things Happen to Good People

Verses 12–13 imply a truth most of learn from the school of hard knocks: sometimes, bad things happen to us even when we have done good. Paul indicates that the Philippians were concerned that his imprisonment would prove to be a setback for the gospel. In fact, he says, the opposite was true, as the *ESV* underscores in its translation: “that what has happened to me has *really*¹ served to *advance*² the gospel” (v. 12).

The issue is not whether the Philippians were justified in their concern about the spread of the gospel. After all, the one imprisoned was *Paul*, the man with the vision and drive to take the gospel deep into the Roman world. Furthermore, the “crime” of which he had been accused was preaching Jesus. As Acts shows, he had been arrested and appealed to Rome because the Jews falsely accused him and made it impossible for him to be tried fairly (see Acts 21.27–40; 22.21–30; 23.12–33; 25.1–12). So, he was not “a murderer or a thief” (1 Pet 4.15), but the victim of religious persecution from the Jewish leaders and misunderstanding by the Romans.

How could any of that have been good? He was no longer free to preach the gospel and might be executed for doing so. Furthermore, despite his sincere efforts to please the Lord, even some among his brothers and sisters sought ill for him.

The lesson for us in that is that if it could happen to Paul, it can also happen to us. Just because we intend and do good does not mean that we will be exempted from trouble and ill treatment. In fact, we can take it a step further, drawing on something Paul says later in Philippians: if Jesus was mistreated, how can we think we should be immune (cf. Phil 3.10)?

In addition, Paul’s circumstances should serve to caution us against too quickly accepting the idea that an improvement in bad circumstances is itself a sign of God’s special favor. While that *may* be true, it is not *necessarily* true. To confirm this, think only of the troubles experienced by people like Joseph, Moses, Elijah, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and, most importantly, *Jesus*.

Lesson Two: Good Things are Sometimes Done for Wrong Reasons

In verses 14–17, Paul refers to two different aspects of human nature that are often seen. Verse 14 says that some had responded to Paul’s imprisonment with greater confidence and boldness in speaking the word. Knowing Paul could not move about and preach, they had taken up the slack, apparently showing even more boldness than they had demonstrated previously.

Some, however, reacted in a very different way, apparently making an attempt to use Paul’s trouble to advance their own standing. Paul’s description of these people is revealing. They

were characterized, first, by “envy” (φθόνος, *phonos*). According to Aristotle, this “was not simply ... the desire to have what another person possesses without necessarily bearing a grudge against him because of it. Rather, the concern was more to deprive the other person of the desired thing than to gain it” (O’Brien 1991, 99). Second, they displayed a spirit of “rivalry” (ἔρις, *eris*), that is, “strife, discord, contention.” Fee suggests that “rivalry” is a good translation as long as we understand that the actions involved were “carried out contentiously” (Fee 1995, 119). *Eris* is related to the word translated “selfish ambition” in verse 17 (ἐριθεία, *eritheia*), showing the root cause of the rivalry.

Significantly, Paul never speaks well of these traits. In fact, they are usually listed among the worst of sins, as in the works of the flesh in Galatians 5.19–21 and the vice list in Romans 1.29–31. In both cases, Paul says that those who do such things will not inherit God’s kingdom. Additionally, in 1 Timothy 6.4, they are among the results when false teachers have an “unhealthy craving for controversy.”

The appearance of these traits in Philippians 1.15–17 makes us wonder what could have prompted such a reaction to Paul. It’s possible that they were teachers who did not agree with some of Paul’s ideas. But given the way Paul typically challenges those he believed had compromised on a point of doctrine, it’s doubtful he would have demonstrated the magnanimous tone we read in verse 18. A second possibility is that the preachers he referenced were like those he mentions in 2 Corinthians who apparently could not comprehend how a true apostle would have faced such trials or been imprisoned. More likely than either of the above is the view that the men in question were some who found Paul abrasive and/or were jealous of his standing with people like the Philippians.

Whatever the reason, verses 15–17 indicate that Paul saw the critics for who they were. They were characterized by attitudes of jealousy and contentious rivalry. They also took some sort of perverse pleasure in Paul’s imprisonment, to the point that they had “raised up affliction” for Paul in his imprisonment (θλίψιν ἐγείρειν τοῖς δεσμοῖς μου, *thlipsin egeirein tois desmois mou*) (v. 17; cf. NRSV: “increase my suffering in my imprisonment”).

Paul’s response is exemplary. Without letting them off the hook for their attitudes—he contrasts what those who support him “know” (16) with what the insincere preachers “think” (17)—he could look past their failings to see the good that was happening. Their motives may have been bad, but Christ was being preached! His response reminds us of the importance of identifying what really matters and learning to find a way to work through problems that arise.

Lesson Three: At All Times, What Matters is the Gospel

Repeatedly in this passage, we see that Paul’s overarching concern is for the gospel. In verse 12, he says that the gospel had really advanced because of his imprisonment, showing that his “real concern is for the unhindered effectiveness of the word” (O’Brien 1991, 90).

In verse 16, he says that his supporters preach from the motive of love, “knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.” The verb *put* translates “*keimai* [κεῖμαι], originally a military term, [which] here indicates that Paul is under orders, issued by God. There is therefore no sense of divine disfavor in his captivity. Quite the opposite. Because he has been

divinely appointed for the defence of the gospel, his captivity is entirely understandable” (O’Brien 1991, 101). Paul is not saying just that he is in prison because he stood for the gospel, but that “the gospel itself is on trial, and his imprisonment is a divinely appointed ‘defense of the gospel’ at the highest echelons” (Fee 1995, 120).

That attitude is the unifying thread that runs throughout the Philippian epistle. It’s both why Paul lived and the ideal he calls upon the Philippians to model (1.21, 27–30). It’s the ideal to which he appeals to heal the cracks in their fellowship (2.1–18; 4.2). It’s the standard he commends as having been exemplified by Timothy, Epaphroditus (2.19–30), and himself (3.1–17). It’s the basis for his appeal to remember where their true citizenship is to be found, to remember the King to whom they owe the ultimate pledge of allegiance (3.20–21).

In other words, it’s the attitude we fail to have when we are beaten down or give up when bad things happen to us and/or we are criticized by some who don’t like how we do things.

Conclusion

I do not expect to ever forget something an elder in the first church with which I worked used to say. It’s been almost fifty years now, but I remember it as clearly as if he said it ten minutes ago. He was talking about our good habit of praying for things to happen in our land that will be best for God’s kingdom. But do we ever stop to think that what is best for God’s kingdom may not be what we want, or even what we think is the best course for our country?

He was not suggesting that we pray for evil, and, as I recall, he left the most important part of the question unasked: would we be *willing* to pray for what is ultimately best for God’s kingdom if we knew that was not what we want or what we think is right/best?

Based on Philippians 1.12, 21 and 3.20, I believe Paul would have prayed that prayer. May God continue to work on us so that we will come to pray it, too.

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Works Cited

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Notes

¹ “Really served” is a good translation of the adverb, μάλλον (*mallon*) which usually means “more, to a greater degree,” but which can, as here, also mean, “rather, instead” (O’Brien 1991, 90; cf. Bauer 2000, 489).

² “Advance” (προκοπή, *prokopē*) “was used in everyday nonliterary Greek to denote progress and prosperity in the physical, economic, and social sphere” (O’Brien 1991, 90)