

Meaning, Ministry and Joy in your Troubles

Philippians 1:12-21

Every trial is providentially ordained to give you a platform for proclaiming the excellencies of Christ.

It was the apostle Paul, the author of Philippians, who, when writing to the church in Rome, declared, “And we know that God causes all things to work together for God, for those who love God, for those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

Paul wrote those words to a suffering church. We know that because in that same chapter (Rom. 8) he writes, “I am convinced that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” Paul repeatedly wrote to others about how they should respond to suffering. But it is in Philippians chapter 1 that Paul’s credibility to speak about how to handle trouble is solidified. Why? Because it is in Philippians that Paul writes about his view of suffering right in the middle of his own time of trouble.

In Philippians 1:12-21 Paul teaches us that for followers of Christ, trouble can be a grace that offers meaning, ministry and joy.

I want to talk about four themes that I see in this text.

I. Paul’s Experience of Trouble

II. Paul’s Interpretation of Trouble

III. Paul’s Goal in Trouble

IV. Paul’s Motivation in Trouble

Read Phil. 1:12-21

I. Paul’s Experience of Trouble

1. If you have read the NT you know that it seemed as if Paul was ALWAYS in trouble. In fact, in 2 Cor. 11 he lists some of his troubles. He tells of

- multiple imprisonments,
- countless beatings,
- often near death.
- Five times he received from the Jews 39 lashes.
- He was beaten with rods three times.
- Stoned once.

- Three times shipwrecked;
- a night and a day adrift at sea; danger from rivers,
- danger from robbers,
- danger from his own people, and the list goes on! I mean, Paul was always in trouble!

2. All of these difficulties were events that happened in the past. And sometimes when an author reflects on the past the story may get somewhat embellished. But here in Philippians Paul is not speaking about past trouble. He is in prison NOW. He is experiencing deprivation NOW. He is being mistreated NOW. And how does he respond to this new and troublesome trial? Well, that's what this text is about.

3. Notice the first few words of this section (12). Paul says, "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me..." (Stop there). When we read the phrase "what has happened to me," the faithful student of the Bible needs to ask, "What, exactly, has happened to him?" Well, we are not specifically told what happened. The epistle of Philippians is a personal letter that is being sent, no doubt, in response to letter written by the pastors in the church of Philippi. Clearly, they knew what had happened so Paul doesn't need to explain. Apparently, however, some change in Paul's circumstances had occurred.

4. We know from Acts 28:30-31 that Paul spent two full years in his own rented quarters under house arrest. In those days Paul had significant freedom to preach and minister to all who visited him.¹ But now something has changed. A new development has taken place. Paul is now "in chains" (Phil. 1:13). It seems that Paul had been moved from his own rented quarters to a dank Roman prison cell. His letter to the Ephesians (written at the same time) Paul speaks of the physical restraints imposed upon him (6:20) and uses a word that specifically means "chains for the hands or feet, manacles or shackles."² It is believed that during this time Paul was physically bound hand-to-hand by means of a chain to a Roman soldier day and night.³

5. Apparently, Paul had received a letter from the Philippians expressing concern about this new trouble. To them it sounded like really bad news. This was a "bad" turn of events. It sounded devastating to them. His really bad situation just became exponentially worse!

6. Perhaps you've been there. Perhaps you were already feeling bad, and when you went to the Dr. you discovered your situation was much worse than expected. Perhaps the unwelcome tension in your marriage became far worse when your spouse of many years moved out. Maybe it was financial trouble that you thought would resolve itself, but it didn't and now you're in deeper than ever. How do you respond to trouble?

- We might be paralyzed by fear.

¹ Jay Adams, *How To Handle Trouble*, (Phillipsburg, N.J., P&R, 1982), 9

² BDAG

³ Adams (1982), 9

- We might allow ourselves to slip into debilitating depression.
- We might plunge into the deep muck of self-pity.
- We might resort to bitterness, anger, and start plotting our revenge. But not Paul.

7. The truly remarkable thing in this passage is that Paul didn't respond in any of those ways! How did he respond? Let's take a look.

II. Paul's Interpretation of the Trouble:

Read v. 12-13

1. The word "really" (ESV) comes from Mallon, meaning "actually," or "rather." The NAS translates it "greater." But here the word is used as a comparative marker indicating contrast. Paul is contrasting an interpretation of his trial that is blind to God's good providence, with one that sees the circumstance in the light of God's good providence. When we fail to look at our troubles through the lense of God's providence we tend to see them through the dark lense of deprivation. We tend to focus on our own discomfort, mistreatment, and misfortune. We see injustice in the actions of others and (dare we admit it?) in God, and we blind ourselves to what He is accomplishing through the trouble for His own glory and our good. But Paul didn't make this mistake.

2. Paul is saying to the Philippians; No! No! You have it all wrong. Yes, my situation has changed. But the effect is not what you think. Through this trial God is giving me a whole new way to bear fruit for Christ.

3. Is there any evidence to substantiate that claim? Yes!

A. His increased trouble has brought greater contact with the lost.

Read 13

- 1) The Roman armies were not allowed in Italy, but there were nearly 10,000 elite, hand-picked soldiers who served as Ceasar's personal body guards. To retain their loyalty they received double pay for their service.
- 2) Apparently, the change of events put Paul in personal contact with one after another, after another of these influential soldiers as they took their respective shifts being chained to Paul, or at least serving as his personal guard.
- 3) Can you imagine the conversations they must have had? Paul would have gotten to know each one of them. He would have demonstrated real love and care for them and their families. He would have counseled them, prayed for them, and offered them the hope that he himself had even in chains. For their part, the soldiers would have had uninterrupted time to ask him questions and he would

have taken advantage of every opportunity to share the gospel of the resurrected Jesus with them.

- 4) In fact, at the end of this epistle (4:22), Paul sends greetings to the Philippians from all the brothers who were with him, “Especially those who are of Ceasar’s household.” Those were Roman soldiers!
 - 5) Eventually, “the whole imperial guard” became convinced that Paul was no threat to Rome. He wasn’t a revolutionary. He had no ambition to overthrow Ceasar. He was in jail because of Christ. And as they learned about Christ and saw His effect on Paul’s life – the hope, the wisdom, the compassion, his focus on the needs of those around him and his joy - many of them partook of saving grace and went back as work-place missionaries leading others to Christ as well.
 - 6) This was Proof Positive that Paul’s imprisonment was advancing the gospel. Paul wasn’t blind to the providence of God. His suffering had purpose and meaning that afforded him opportunity for greater ministry that only served to increase his joy.
 - 8) So Paul’s trouble brought greater contact with the lost.
- B. His increased trouble also brought greater courage to the saved.

Read 14

- 1) Many of the believers who heard of Paul’s suffering for the gospel were inspired by his courageous faithfulness. They became confident in the Lord. They became much more bold (even fearless!) with the gospel than they had been before.
 - a) Faithfulness in the midst of personal suffering is an inspiring force. The courage of one tends puts steel in the backbones of others. The faithfulness of one experiencing trouble inspires the faithfulness of many who are safe, healthy, and free.
 - b) Witness the testimony of Jim Elliot and the Equidor five. Their deaths inspired a great surge in missionary and ministry commitment among the young people of the 1960’s and 70’s.
 - c) I read this week that during a world conference on Evangelism sponsored by the Billy Graham organization in the year 2000, Steve Saint and his father’s killer, Minkaye, were among the 12,000 delegates who attended from all over the world. While there, Steve and Minkaye had the opportunity to ask the crowd how many of them had made life-changing decisions as a result of the five missionaries’ deaths in 1956. They could hardly believe it when at least 3,000 delegates stood to their feet.⁴

⁴ Ken Fleming, *Why This Waste: 60 Years after the Auca Massacre January 8, 1956*, In “Christian Missions In Many Lands (CML) news letter, Vol. 45, No 1. https://www.cmmml.us/sites/default/files/mag_pdf/jan_2016_1-15_update.pdf

C. You see, beloved, no matter what trouble you face, God is up to something good. He is working all things together for good (Rom. 8:28). And when you believe that; when you choose to view your trouble through the lense of God's good providence, your personal suffering takes on meaning, it reveals unique opportunities for ministry to others, which in turn fills your soul with joy.

4. At the same time, Paul knew that some were emboldened to preach the gospel for the wrong reasons. They weren't really concerned about proclaiming the excellencies of Christ. They had other things in mind.

Read 15-17

5. But Paul knew had no control over other people's responses or motives. He knew that some would view his imprisonment as an opportunity to advance themselves. They looked at Paul's misfortune as the perfect scenario for advancing their own agenda and perhaps make a good sum of money. In the process they might even seal their own fortune by making Paul's situation worse.

6. Its interesting to note here that Paul never accuses them of getting the gospel wrong. These misguided teachers knew the true gospel and even preached the true gospel, but they did it with selfish motives.

- A. This is not terribly dissimilar to some televangelists of our day who are in it for the money.
- B. Many of them actually preach the true gospel, and then bury it under appeals for money and promises of health and wealth.

But Paul even viewed that through the lense of God's providence. He was convinced that in the mystery of God's providence he could even use the true gospel preached by false teachers to bring some to Christ. He could leave all of that in the capable hands of a sovereign God. Regardless of their response, however, Paul saw reason to rejoice. Why?

Read 18

6. You see, Paul handled his trouble well because He knew God was in the trouble and He was confident that the invisible hand of providence was accomplishing good things that could only be accomplished through Paul's suffering. God was in the business of exalting the excellencies of Christ in the proclamation of the gospel and the salvation of the lost.

7. Sometimes our suffering has less to do with God's correction or discipline of us then it does God's giving us opportunity to magnify the excellencies of Christ through joyful ministry in the face of obvious trouble. Paul is fairly explicite about this (1:29) where he writes, "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in Him but also suffer for his sake."

8. I take this to mean that God grants us the privilege of suffering so that the excellencies of Christ will be displayed and magnified in us. The lesson here is that God is more concerned about Christ's glory and the proclamation of His gospel than about our comfort, our safety, our health, or our relationships. And joy is found NOT in making much of self in our suffering, but in every circumstance to make much of Christ.

9. This is how Paul interpreted his trouble, and it is how we too should interpret our suffering in this life. When we do so, our troubles take on substantive meaning, launch us into effective ministry, and fill us with joy.

10. So we have seen Paul's Experience of Trouble and Paul's Interpretation of Trouble. Third,

III. Paul's Goal in Trouble:

Read 19-20

1. At this point the jury is still out on whether Paul will be exonerated or condemned to death by Ceasar. But that is clearly NOT Paul's greatest concern. His Primary goal was NOT to be free of His chains. His primary goal was that "now as always Christ will be honored in his body whether by life or by death."

- A. The word "honored" (ESV) is translated different ways in different versions of the NT.
- B. NAS – Exalted
- C. NKJ – Magnified
- D. GK: megaluna –to make large, to make great, to exalt, glorify... in other words, to worship.

2. Pul is saying, no matter what happens at my trial before ceasar my goal is NOT ultimately to be released. My goal is that Jesus would be honored, exalted, magnified, and worshipped in the outcome whether I live or die.

3. This was always Paul's Modus Operandi. To the church in Corinth he once said (2 Cor. 5:9) "Therefore I have as my ambition whether at home or absent to be pleasing to the Lord." Home or absent means dead or alive. Here in Phil 1 he said "whether by life or by death." There is something more important than living. It is proclaiming the excellencies, the glories, the honor, the majesty of Christ by the way we live until this life is over.

4. At this point one might reasonably ask, what motivates Paul to live like this?

IV. Paul's Motivation in Trouble

1. What kind of core convictions did Paul possess that motivated him to live like this; to view his troubles, no matter how severe, as opportunities to exalt Christ and serve people? Paul makes this abundantly clear when he writes (21) “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

2. If you were to sit down with a very wise person and ask him to evaluate your life based on the evidence of what you do, how you spend your discretionary time, what you talk most about, what you dream about and live for, what would they conclude? Would they conclude that you live...

- For pleasure
- For good health
- For financial independence
- For the acceptance of others
- For academic or business accomplishment
- For fame
- Entertainment
- For the next thrill
- Based on the evidence of your life what would they conclude you live for?

3. In the case of the Apostle Paul the answer is, “For me to live is Christ!” In other words, Paul’s whole life was wrapped up in Christ. He loved Jesus. He worshiped Jesus. He studied God’s word in order to know Jesus. He prayed in order to fellowship with Jesus. He loved Jesus more than his own life.

4. When Paul met with the elders of Ephesus (Acts 20:24) he declared, “I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.”

5. Paul’s life was all wrapped up in Jesus. “To live is Christ.” Moreover, he believed that not even death could rob him of that which he treasured most. In fact, as Paul saw it, he had no need to worry about losing his life as he preached and defended the gospel because death is not loss. For the Christian, death is like a honey bee that has lost its sting. Paul was convinced that the greatest desire of his heart would never be met in the things of this world. The greatest longing of his soul was to see Jesus face to face and that would NOT occur until the day of his death. For Paul, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

6. O what an impact our little church would make on the sprawling metropolis of Dallas/Fort Worth if even half of us could say with all integrity “To live is Christ, and to die is gain.” What kind of men would we be? What kind of women would we be? What kind of young people would so many of you be?

7. As I was researching for this message I ran across the story of Jim Elliot. He and his four partners in ministry lived like this. They gave everything they had for the sake of Christ and his gospel. And in the end, they lost their lives so that others might know Jesus. It was Jim Elliot who famously said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

8. That’s just another way to say, “To live, Christ. To die, gain.”

9. How do we cultivate the kind of devotion to Jesus that brings meaning, ministry and joy in the midst of our trouble? How do we gain the conviction that to live is Christ and to die is gain? I promise, that kind of life will never arise from devotion to entertainment, pleasure, wealth, acceptance and other things. No man can serve two masters. It comes, if it will come at all, from a life devoted to learning Christ, knowing Christ, fellowshiping with Christ alone and with others, and viewing every trouble in life as an opportunity to proclaim the excellencies of Christ in all things to the glory of God in the Joy of all peoples.

Every trial is providentially ordained to give you a platform for proclaiming the excellencies of Christ.