

In chains for Christ

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Rev Howard Stone

[0 : 00] Philippians 1 verse 12. Now I want you to know brothers that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. May the Lord help at night to consider verses 12 to 18 there this morning.

So it seems that it may not be too long before we're faced with another general election. I think the government wants to hold out as long as possible but obviously the opposition parties are keen to bring the government down.

If they possibly can. But supposing an election does come about, can you imagine the worry and confusion there would be amongst the political parties if their leaders were put out of action for some reason?

If John Major ended up in a hospital bed or Tony Blair was laid low by an accident, there would be great consternation. Or imagine some sports team, some football team perhaps, who are facing an important fixture and their star player is not fit for a match.

How can we possibly manage without them? How can we possibly succeed? What a disaster this is. Well the New Testament church was perhaps tempted to think the same sort of way with regard to their great leader.

[1 : 20] Here was the Apostle Paul in prison. He's likely to have been under house arrest in Rome. But the one who had been instrumental in establishing the Christian church in the years after our Lord's death and resurrection and ascension, he was now out of action.

He was now locked up in a house in Rome. No longer able to tour the world and preach the good news of Jesus Christ. So the Philippians to whom Paul wrote, they rather thought, well, what are we going to do then?

What a disaster this is. What a setback to the development of the church and the spread of the Christian gospel. Well it's clear from this passage that that is not Paul's attitude at all.

It's not the way he's thinking. So in verse 12 here, he turns the Philippians' attention, and your attention and mine, first of all to the effect that his imprisonment has had.

The effect of Paul's imprisonment. We read there verse 12, 13, As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard, and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.

[2 : 33] Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. Paul here wants his Philippian friends to know the truth about his imprisonment.

The truth of it, the effect it has had. Now, perhaps you know the details of what had happened to Paul. If you have a chance, you could read it in Acts chapter 21 to 26.

Paul had gone to Jerusalem, a free man. He had more or less been lynched by the Jews there. They were wanting to put him to death. But the Romans had come and rescued him, and thought he was some great rebel who was stirring up trouble, and he ended up in prison.

And he never had his liberty again after that. He was first of all transferred to Caesarea, where he appealed to the emperor, and from there he went to Rome. And that's probably where he's writing from now.

These Philippine Christians, they may be very discouraged to hear what had happened to Paul. How can this be good? Paul lying in a Roman prison. Why has God allowed it?

[3 : 52] Where's the victory of the gospel? Does it not look as if the world, the devil, is on the winning side here, when the great apostle has been confined to a prison?

So Paul says, don't be discouraged. Don't think that way. The truth about this, is that things have actually worked out for the advance of the gospel. What has happened has actually been a benefit.

And he says, if you look superficially, it looks all black. But if you examine the facts, you'll find that actually the benefits outweigh the disadvantages and the drawbacks.

Now, Paul, of course, believed in the absolute sovereignty of God. He believed that everything that happened in this world is under God's control and part of God's purpose. We have that plain in his letter to the Ephesians.

Chapter 1, he writes, God placed all things under Jesus' feet and appointed him to be heads over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

[5 : 01] Paul was writing there, he said, Jesus has been made ahead of everything. Jesus is the great ruler of the universe for the sake of the church.

Everything he does is for the sake of the church, the community of God's people. And that is his belief in this circumstance as well, that God is benefiting the church.

He is working for the good of the gospel. But Paul goes on to say that these benefits are obvious. We can see the good effect it is having on others.

First of all, in verse 13, he says, the gospel is going to new places. I've got new opportunities that I wouldn't have had otherwise. It has become clear to the whole palace guard and to everyone else, everyone else through Rome, that I'm here for the sake of the gospel.

Paul would probably constantly have been guarded. He may well have been chained up for a Roman soldier to a palace guard 24 hours of every day.

[6 : 11] And I'm sure that Paul didn't talk to his, to the soldiers he was with, didn't talk to them simply about the weather or about the latest games in the in the arena or the idle chit-chat of the day.

Paul had an opportunity to speak to these people about the gospel. He literally had a captive audience. And he's saying, I wouldn't have had a chance if I hadn't been locked up.

Here God has brought new opportunities. I'm meeting people and having contact with others that I can speak to about the gospel which I would never have had otherwise.

How else could I have gotten the gospel into the very palace of the emperor? Except by my imprisonment and the opportunities I have now to speak to the palace guards. And of course with the soldiers chained to Paul, they'd have been there when Paul studied the scriptures by himself and with others.

They'd have been present when he prayed with his Christian friends. It's clear from the Acts that for two years Paul was under house arrest that people were free to come and go. He wasn't in isolation.

[7 : 26] People came and met him and provided for his needs. But all the time these guards would have been with him. No doubt the word soon got right that this was no ordinary prisoner.

This was no rebel against the state. He was no political revolutionary. He was no criminal. He hadn't done anything terrible. They learned soon enough that this man was in prison because he spoke about Jesus Christ.

A man who was crucified on a Roman cross and Paul said this man's alive. He is risen from the dead and he's the means of salvation saving you from a lost eternity.

Word got around the palace guard. Word got around Rome itself about what Paul was doing there in bonds for Christ in chains for Christ.

The imprisonment had brought new opportunity. It looked black but there was a very positive sign to Paul's imprisonment. But then it had had another effect as well.

[8 : 35] He says it had made his Christian brothers fearless and bold. They were brothers in the Lord who had been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. Now you might have expected differently.

You might have expected Christian friends to say well see what happened to Paul when he preached the gospel? He ended up in prison. Oh I think I'll keep my mouth shut. I'm not saying anything to others about my Christian faith.

But the opposite happened. It's more than likely that these people as they had contact with Paul they saw that Paul was still full of trust in the saviour.

He was still full of joy and contentment even in his bonds. There was evidence there in the life of Paul that Christ was still upholding him and giving him strength even in such trouble.

He hadn't denied his faith. He hadn't given up on the saviour. And the Christian brothers and sisters could say well if that's what Christ could do for Paul why should I win?

[9 : 40] Why should I have any concerns? I'm going to go on speaking about my saviour and I trust that Christ will look after me as well even if it means persecution. I'm going to go on with it fearlessly and courageously.

It made them bold. Paul's imprisonment had this positive effect of making other Christians bold in their witness to the truth. Notice in verse 14 Paul's speaking about brothers in Christ speaking the word of God.

He's not primarily here thinking of those who are preachers ordinary Christians ordinary people in the pews ready to go and tell others to speak to others of their faith in Christ.

they were being encouraged to speak to their neighbours to their workmates to their family to their friends about the faith they had in Christ.

Even if it brought suffering even if it brought trouble and persecution they were confident that God would uphold them just as God was doing with Paul in his triumphs.

[10 : 53] So Paul's imprisonment you see has two very positive effects new opportunities for preaching the gospel for communicating the truth to others and the boldness and fearlessness that it's engendered in his friends.

Christian friends maybe there are times when we see things going on in the church of Christ that discourage us things that we wonder well what good can this do?

What is God doing with this church? How can it possibly be of benefit for the cause of Christ? That's the death the sudden death of good men it's about six or seven months now since a moderator of the murder of Alan McLeod from Stornway that he suddenly died on his 60th birthday.

Some years before that there was Douglas Macmillan and Caleb Matheson and Ibron S. Good men who seem to have such a potential for doing good in this world and the Lord called them home.

Why?

Why did God do that? Why did he allow that? We see division in congregations. We see division between denominations between God's people.

[12 : 16] We see the cause of Christ very small in our own land as a presence. Why? Why is God allowing these things? What is God doing? Or there may be our own personal difficulties our own personal illnesses perhaps and limitations and we think what good can this be?

Or we look overseas and we see persecution in the church that are places today with our Christians and Christians because of their faith in Christ. This is not something that happened centuries ago. This is an ongoing situation. The church of Christ is still persecuted. In fact I read something recently that's estimated that there would be more martyrs for the Christian courts this century than in the 18th centuries that preceded it.

More martyrs in the last hundred years than in the previous 1800s. persecution still goes on. Why does God have left? What good is it doing?

My friends we must come to the same conclusion that Paul came to. It is really serving to advance the gospel. God knows what he's doing.

[13 : 37] Christ as we have thought already he's on the throne of the universe. He is controlling everything that happens in this world. And he never allows anything that's going to harm his church.

Christ said I'm going to build my church. He's not going to tear it down. He's not going to allow anything that sets back his work, that destroys the work of his people in the world.

Yes, there are things we don't understand. In Paul's situation it was obvious. There were obvious benefits from his imprisonment. It may not be true in our circumstance.

We may not be able to say well there was positive blessing out of the Lord calling these people home when he did. We may not be able to see what benefits the difficulties we face may bring us. Perhaps as we face more difficulty, more trouble, we are increasingly dependent on the Lord and that drives us to prayer. That's a blessing surely.

[14 : 44] When trouble comes we're far more dependent on God for help. We're far more prayerful. Perhaps when trouble comes you're given new opportunities, new contacts with people you would never come into contact with otherwise to speak to them and pray the gospel.

At Presbytery on Tuesday I was hearing one of the elders from the Robert congregation I think it was who had been very ill in hospital and apparently some of the nurses there had said there's something about that man.

They realised that that man was a Christian. That man had contact with nurses and doctors and was able to testify to his Christian faith that he would never have had he not been ill and in hospital.

It was serving to advance the gospel. Or perhaps as we see how others bear their persecution, how the church is able to bear up under suffering and should encourage us to go on speaking.

If Christ is able to give sufficient strength to men and women to face death then surely we can be confident he'll give us the boldness we need to speak to those who read about us about Christian things.

[16:07] We may provoke a hostile reaction. We may have those who ridicule and reject what we say to them. But surely the Lord is able to uphold us in the midst of such things and give us the boldness and the wisdom we require.

The Lord knows what he's doing with his church. He has his purposes and he's working them out and finally in the final analysis they are for the advancement of the gospel even if it doesn't seem like it to us.

Paul knew for sure that what had happened to him although it was very difficult for him must have been very discouraging for the church initially. He was saying it's clear that this is for the good of the gospel.

But then in the second place Paul draws our attention or the Philippians attention to the reaction there had been to Paul's imprisonment.

The reaction. Verse 15 It's true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry but others out of good will. The latter do so in love knowing that I'm put here for the defense of the gospel.

[17:20] The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition not sincerely supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am changed. The reaction to Paul's imprisonment.

Well there were two reactions amongst those who have been bold. He'd already said my imprisonment has made other Christians bolder to preach. But amongst these Christians there were two reactions to Paul's imprisonment.

One was to cause or to try to cause more trouble for Paul. Can you believe it? Christian brothers preaching not primarily to save sinners not to build up the church but to cause pain to the apostle Paul.

They did it out of envy and rivalry. There seems to have been amongst some of these Christians a secret delight that Paul had ended up in prison.

They were glad to see him out of the way. Perhaps they envied his position in the church. They envied his reputation and the honour in which he was held.

[18:35] Perhaps they were preaching to undermine that and to make a name for themselves. They envied Paul's position in the church but now Paul was out of the way.

He was confined to a house at Rome. He was unable to defend himself and so these people made the most of the opportunity. They thought they would add to Paul's suffering by this preaching of the gospel.

They thought that perhaps Paul would be so concerned about what was going on that he would feel even more miserable. He would be concerned about his loss of reputation. He would be impatient to get out of prison to sort things out once more.

So they preached Christ. They preached the truth to answer his affliction. Now it does seem that they were preaching the truth. Hard to understand as it is that there's no condemnation here of the message that they proclaimed.

Now if they had been preaching a false gospel no doubt Paul would have condemned them in no uncertain terms. He did that before in his letter to the Galatians where he says as we have already said so now I say again if anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted let him be eternally condemned.

[20:02] What fierce terms. What strong words. He said if anyone even an angel from heaven preaches any other gospel let it be condemned to hell. Paul says nothing like that here.

So we can only assume that what was being preached although with a evil motive was largely the truth of Christ. The message of salvation through his death and resurrection.

That was one reaction then. People preached to hurt Paul to add to his misery. but then there were also those who preached who'd been made bold to preach out of love.

They were motivated by love. The latter do so in love knowing that I'm put here for the defense of the gospel. They had a love for Christ himself.

They had a desire that the whole world should know the good news that there was a savior. That he brought atonement. It was possible for men, sinful men and women like you and me to be

reconciled with the holy God.

[21 : 15] They loved Christ and they preached about him. They preached of his death, they preached of his rule, they preached of his return out of love for their savior. But no doubt they preached as well out of love for Paul.

They knew that there was nothing that Paul wanted more than to see the gospel going on. That the work would continue. They knew that as they preached he would be delighted because he was there for the defense of the gospel.

That's the very reason he was in prison. And they knew he wanted that gospel to carry on being preached. And perhaps implied there as well as a love for the world.

these people preached because they knew that men and women need this gospel. Just as today, friends around us desperately need to hear of the love of God in Christ Jesus.

And so out of love, motivated by their love for Christ, for Paul and for the world, these people were bold and they preached Christ. Christ. But these two reactions in turn brought a reaction in Paul.

[22 : 33] Some were preaching from false motives, some were preaching from good motives. But Paul said, what does it matter? The important thing is that Christ is preached.

And because of this I rejoice. There's Paul's reaction, joy. His heart is full of joy brimming over because the message that he so loved, the message that he spent his life proclaiming was still being preached.

People were still hearing about Jesus Christ. The message of Christ coming into the world, the message of his life and work and death on the Roman cross as a substitute person, the message of his resurrection and ascension, a message to bring eternal life.

That was still going on. And Paul rejoiced. What do you think was the most important thing in Paul's life?

What was number one priority for Paul? Christ. He says later on, for me to live is Christ. He wanted Christ to be glorified, by the preaching of the message of salvation.

[23 : 55] He wanted others to hear this good news and to be brought to know the saviour themselves. That was what brought him most joy in life, to know that his saviour was being proclaimed to the world.

He knew very well that some of these motives were very far from being good and right. things. But he had a great confidence that God could even use what was preached under false motives.

That it was possible for God to use the message of Christ to save men and women out of their paganism, to build them up in their faith, and to advance the church.

Paul desperately wanted the message to be proclaimed. proclaimed. And when he heard that he was being proclaimed, it filled him with joy. He rejoiced to see what God was doing through these Christian brothers.

Believing friends, does it fill your heart with joy? Does it fill mine to see the gospel of Christ being proclaimed? Is it something that like Paul, we desperately want to see?

[25 : 10] We want to see the gospel of Christ, spreading in our own communities, spreading overseas in the mission fields, until the day comes when the whole world is full of the gospel.

Until there's nowhere left to go, because everyone has heard the good news of Jesus. Do we really believe that this news is the power of God to salvation?

I'm sure we do. But does it have a practical effect on the way I live and the way you live? Does it bring us joy and delight to tell others of Christ?

If we have a delight in these things, surely we'll want to tell others. I'm not taking away from the difficulties and problems that we face in a society that has largely rejected Christian things, that thinks these things are old-fashioned and out-of-date and have no relevance today whatsoever. But if we have experienced the difference that this message can make to our lives, should we not want to pass on that good news to other people? How can we possibly keep it for ourselves?

[26 : 24] us? Well, Paul couldn't preach anymore. He couldn't get out there and spread the message, but he rejoiced to know that there were others that were carrying on the work that he had once done.

how glad we should be as well, shouldn't we, to know that the gospel of Christ is being proclaimed. It may not be in our own denomination.

It may be by those with whom we have differences of opinion regarding certain spiritual things. Those perhaps who differ with us in regard to baptism or with regard to the gifts of the Spirit,

whether they're speaking in tongues and miracles and things now.

There may be those who worship in a very different way, who have a very different style of preaching, things that are perhaps great on our ears that we feel uncomfortable with. But whatever, can we not be like Paul who rejoiced?

As long as the gospel is being proclaimed, what do these things matter? They come very much as second importance. Perhaps we'll even question their motives.

[27 : 39] we don't hear so much about them now, but a number of years ago, some of the American televangelists were often in the public eye because of their faults.

Men who did seem to proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ to thousands or perhaps millions of people in the States through television, but it seems at least some of them were preaching from false motives.

They wanted to line their own pockets. They made themselves very wealthy. But if we take Paul's attitude, we'd have to say, well, what does it matter? If the good news of Jesus Christ is going out through these people, well, praise the Lord, let's rejoice in that, while not at all condoning the evil of their practices.

But if anyone is telling the good news of Jesus Christ, whether we agree with all his understanding of the Bible, if we are perhaps not on the same wavelength as him, we should be thrilled by the fact that the gospel is being preached.

Because this is the only way to be saved. This is the only way that any person, man, woman, or child, can be saved from a lost eternity.

[29 : 01] And as that message is proclaimed, people may hear it, and believe it, and be saved. I wonder if we all know the good news of Jesus Christ in our own experience.

Not just that we understand, or we know a little bit about what's in the Bible. We can remember the lessons we learned in Sunday school, perhaps, about the life of Jesus. Perhaps there's psalms and things we learned, or catechism we learned as youngsters.

That's not what the message of salvation is about. It's about a living relationship with our God. Not something we just do week by week, but an ongoing dynamic, living contact with the living God. Things doesn't give you joy to hear about Jesus Christ. Do you love to come to church? Love to read your Bibles?

Love to be with other Christian people and speak about Christian things? Because if these things bring you delight, then it's evidence that you have a love for Christ and you know the Savior. But if you find these things perhaps a little uninterested, a little tedious perhaps, nothing of great importance, well I fear that you do not know the Savior that Paul preached.

[30 : 38] You don't have the salvation that he's offering. Because if you know the Savior, surely you'll have the same attitude that Paul had, that you'll love to hear of Jesus Christ.

You'll be full of joy when you know that this marvellous message of salvation is being proclaimed. This is the only way to be saved. Friends, are you saved?

Have you responded to the salvation that Christ has offered? Have you responded to the gospel that Paul preached and that these other Christian brethren who preached in Rome, the gospel that I trust is being preached in this church week by week?

The gospel is going to stand the test of time and is finally the decider as to whether you spend eternity with God or with the dead and his antios.

Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. May the Lord advance the gospel in our lives and in the community in which we live for his glory.

[31 : 52] Let's pray. Lord, it is a great privilege to have this good news. There are millions today who have never heard of Jesus Christ, who have not got the opportunity to be saved as we have, who do not know all the joy and the peace and the love that comes through responding in faith to the work of Christ in salvation.

How privileged we are to have these things and we remember that to those to whom much is given, much shall be required. You have blessed us with great spiritual privileges.

Help us to respond in faith and to know your blessing, to know your joy through forgiveness. Please give us opportunity to speak boldly to others of what you have done for mankind and of the salvation that you offer to all who will put their trust in the Savior.

We confess our unworthiness of any of these things and wonder at your goodness to us today. In Jesus' name, Amen.