

**“Surprised by Joy”**  
**Philippians 1:12-18**  
**December 5, 2021**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

You may recognize today’s sermon title as the same as C. S. Lewis’ account of his conversion to faith in Christ. It was a journey from atheism to theism and from theism to Christianity. It is always a good surprise when someone comes to faith in Christ, particularly if it is someone who may not be expected to do so. The latest *CT* magazine included an account of the deradicalization of Muslim terrorists through conversion to Christianity. A Syrian man confessed that he started coming to church to kill the pastor of that church. But upon hearing the gospel there, he was marvelously converted. Another pastor mentioned that his once-small church has grown to more than 1,500, largely due to converted refugees. He estimates that ten percent of them are former extremists.

The word “surprise” seems a fitting word for today’s text, which contains three surprises. There are some surprises that are welcome, and others that are unwelcome. A broken and leaking hot water heater in your house would obviously be in the latter category. But all three of the surprises in today’s text are welcome surprises, the kind that bring joy to the heart. Paul’s joy came from these surprises from God, even though he was a prisoner of Rome. I note three surprises in these verses.

**I. Gospel Advancement from Prison – v. 12-13**

Over the years of serving the church, I’ve read countless missionary letters, and this section of Philippians reads just like one. Paul is a missionary, and the Philippians have been one of his key supporting churches, even being the only church supporting him at times (4:15). They have heard that he is in prison and are concerned about the state of both his personal welfare and his ministry. The expectation would be that both his ministry and his emotional state would be languishing. This is where the surprise comes, indicated by the word “really” in our text. **“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.”** That word has the sense of “rather,” indicating something contrary to expectations.

Paul goes on to report the thing that has happened that is contrary to expectations. **“It has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ”** (v. 13). There is some uncertainty concerning the location of Paul’s imprisonment, with Rome and Ephesus being the two options. The traditional view, based largely on this

phrase the “imperial guard,” is that he is in prison in Rome. The imperial guard consisted of nine-thousand elite soldiers who served as the emperor’s personal security force. Paul had appealed his case to Caesar, and he is here awaiting his appearance before the emperor. This security force would have been assigned to guard Paul and would have done so in shifts.

So there was Paul sitting with Roman soldiers twenty-four hours a day, possibly chained to them. What do you think they talked about? Paul writes that these soldiers came to know that Paul’s imprisonment is for Christ. Literally, it says that his imprisonment is “*in Christ*.” In other words, he is participating in Christ’s sufferings. Soldiers would naturally be curious as to the crimes with which their prisoners are charged. Paul would tell them that he is in prison because he’s been preaching that Jesus is the one appointed to bring salvation to the world. He has done so through suffering and dying as our substitute. As a follower of Christ, Paul is called to follow the same path of suffering that Jesus endured.

It was not only countless soldiers who heard the gospel, but Paul adds the phrase “all the rest” to those who heard. He is speaking of the others within the household of the emperor. It’s hard to imagine Paul ever having access to such places of power outside the event of his imprisonment. The gospel here is challenging the chief idolatry of this age. The Roman Empire engaged in emperor worship, believing Caesar to be divine. Paul is now at the very heart of that false worship, in the household of Caesar himself, declaring a very different message. Jesus alone is Lord. Jesus is Caesar’s Lord. The gospel is penetrating the heart of Roman political life.

There is something very important for us to learn here, a message that appears repeatedly in the Bible. The power of God is demonstrated not through our power, but through our weakness. Ministry is out of weakness. Paul’s powerful ministry here came through the weakness of his chains. Alfred Stanway was an Anglican missionary in East Africa whom God used to plant countless churches in Tanzania. In his retirement he helped to found a seminary in America. D. A. Carson mentions a visit he had with Bishop Stanway in his native Australia toward the end of Stanway’s life. He had contracted Parkinson’s disease that had so debilitated him that he could no longer talk. Carson writes:

He communicated by writing on a pad of paper; more precisely, he could no longer write, but printed his answers in scarcely legible block letters. By the time I got to know him a little, I felt emboldened to ask him how he was coping with his crippling disease. He had been so active and productive throughout his life; how was he handling being shunted aside? He had to print his answer on that pad of paper three times before I could read it: “There is no future in frustration.”

Perhaps like Paul, you are suffering under the confinement of some chains. Maybe it's a health challenge like Bishop Stanway's, or perhaps a relational, financial or occupational challenge. One choice before you is to sit and stew in frustration. Stanway is saying that such a path is a dead end. There is no future in it. Paul could have done that during his imprisonment. After all, he was a man of action. He wrote in his letter to the Romans that his desire was to preach the gospel as far West as Spain. Yet here he is confined by his chains. It's not hard to imagine someone in his situation getting angry at God, perhaps even leading to a crisis of faith. Instead of being marked by frustration, Paul's attitude was characterized by joy and trust in God. He knew that the gospel was advancing and doing so through his weakness of incarceration. Instead of being frustrated, he was filled with joy, optimism and trust in God. If you are battling frustration in your life now because of your "chains," ask God to help you trust that he will use your weakness to advance the gospel.

## II. Multiplied Preachers – v. 14

There is a second surprise in the text. Verse 14 reports that Paul's imprisonment was not only having a good effect for the progress of the gospel among Caesar's household, but also among the believers in Rome. They **"are much more bold to speak the word without fear."** It would be natural to think that the progress of the gospel would be significantly harmed by the sidelining of this amazing preacher. But in his place God raised up many others.

This is surprising because you would think Paul's imprisonment might have the opposite effect. If Paul was in prison because of his gospel preaching, it would seem reasonable that such punishment would have the effect of deterring further gospel preaching. Isn't that a primary purpose of criminal punishment? But it has the opposite effect here. Paul was in prison for the gospel, so these others follow his lead and boldly declare the gospel themselves.

Where does such boldness come from? It comes from believing in the sovereignty of God, which is much in evidence in these verses. Paul was in prison because of the enemies of the gospel. What happens? In the sovereignty of God, his imprisonment serves to make inroads for the gospel that would not have otherwise been possible. The enemies of the gospel only serve to further the purposes of God. God is so powerful that his enemies unwittingly serve his purposes. When the Christians in Rome realized this, it unleashed great boldness in their speaking of the gospel. They lost their fear of their enemies when they realized God's complete power over them. Do what they may, the advance of the gospel was inevitable.

This theme of the sovereignty of God over his enemies can be seen throughout the Christmas story. An emperor in Rome issues a decree that

everyone should return to his registered home in order for a census to be taken. It could not have happened at a more inconvenient time for Joseph and Mary because it required them to travel late in her pregnancy. But it only served God's purposes in assuring that Israel's true king would be born in the city of Bethlehem in accordance with the words of the prophets. An evil king, Herod, in a fit of anger and insecurity, orders the babies of Bethlehem to be slaughtered, causing Joseph to embrace the role of refugees in Egypt. Again, this only served to fulfill the Scriptures. And then the greatest example of this is seen in the crucifixion. It was Satan's moment of triumph when the Messiah was crucified. But it became Satan's moment of defeat, fulfilling the Scriptures and providing forgiveness for our sins through that death.

There's an old Chinese parable about a poor man who had only one son and one horse. One day, the horse went out of control and ran away with the boy on its back. The man's neighbors came to console him on his loss, telling him how sorry they were for this bad thing that had happened to him. But the man asked them, "How do you know that it's bad?" The next day, both the boy and the horse came back, trailing thirteen wild horses that came right into the corral. Once again his neighbors came to him, this time to congratulate him on his good fortune. The man replied, "How do you know that it is good?" The next day, the boy was trying to break one of the wild horses when he fell and broke his leg. Again, the neighbors came and told the man how sorry they were for his misfortune. And again he asked, "But how do you know it's bad?" Shortly after that, a war broke out and all the young men of the village were drafted into the army, except this young man with the broken leg.

The parable illustrates the fact that none of us knows the outcome of events in this life. But God does, and the boldness of these preachers came when they realized that God is using all things for the inevitable progress of the gospel. This doesn't mean that we can't grieve losses or difficulties in life. Paul did not rejoice in his imprisonment. He rejoiced that God in his sovereignty was using a bad thing for a good purpose, the purpose of gospel progress.

### **III. Joy from Enemies – v. 15-18**

It would seem that not all the believers in the church in Rome were fans of Paul. He mentions in this third surprise the presence of a group who sought to afflict Paul. We don't know anything about this group beyond what we learn in this text. We learn here that they didn't like Paul, though we don't know the reason. Perhaps it was a group of Jewish Christians who thought Paul was too accommodating to Gentiles. We also learn that they were preaching the true gospel. These weren't the legalistic Judaizers who were teaching that a person had to be circumcised in order to be saved, because Paul said that was a different gospel. But he rejoices in the preaching of these enemies, showing that their gospel was sound.

Clearly, though, these preachers were opposed to Paul. They thought that the way they could hurt Paul was to gather a larger group of converts than what Paul could lay claim to. With Paul's wings clipped through his imprisonment, they sought to take full advantage of his limitations. Their motive was one of rivalry. They saw preaching as a competitive sport, and they were competing against Paul. It would seem that they were hurt by Paul's success, and they assumed he would be hurt by their success. But they miscalculated in assuming that Paul was just like them. Instead of being hurt by their success, it gave him great joy because Jesus was being proclaimed.

This text has great application for us in a culture that seems to have lost its way in dealing with opponents. We see it all the time in the political world, where too many Democrats just want to hurt their political enemies the Republicans, and too many Republicans want to hurt Democrats. In the process, they too easily forget that their primary purpose is not to harm their political enemies but to help the people and the nation they were elected to serve. Paul would not play that game. Instead, he kept in mind the bigger picture, the story of God's great work of restoring paradise through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. To say it differently, he made this about Jesus instead of about himself. When we make the defeat of our enemies our primary goal, we are making ourselves primary. When personal offenses against us become the main thing, it is because we have made ourselves the main thing with God's concerns taking a back seat to our own. For Paul, the gospel was bigger than his personal role in making it known.

The primary way to unify the church isn't to find a church where everyone agrees with you. Rather, it is to be willing to be made small and to make Jesus and his gospel big. In the words of the hymn, we are to be "content to fill a little space, if Thou be glorified."

## **CONCLUSION:**

This passage invites some real heart searching. As we consider the theme of joy, we see here that for Paul the joy was connected to the advancement of the gospel rather than his personal circumstances. Is that the case for you? It is worth pointing out that it is the case with God. Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus endured the shame of the cross "for the joy that was set before him." What was that joy? It was the prospect of our return home through faith in Jesus. Life with God is our true home, and Jesus has opened the door to that home. This is the gospel, and its advance is certain, both in us and through us. We have every reason for joy. Joy to the world, the Lord is come!