

Ben Libby

Sermon

October 3rd, 19th Sunday after Pentecost

To the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the One who is, who was, and is to come, to Him be glory forever amen. (Rev 1:8 NKJ)

Our sermon text for this Sunday is taken from Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 1, beginning with verse 12: **I want you to know, brothers, that the things which happened to me actually took place to advance the gospel. 13 And so it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to all the rest, that I am in chains because of Christ. 14 And, through my chains, the majority of the brothers in the Lord have become much more confident about daring to speak the word of God fearlessly. 15 Some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, and others out of good will. 16 The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am placed here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, but thinking they can cause trouble for me while I am in chains. 18 What does it matter? Only this, that in every way, whether for outward appearance or for the truth, Christ is being proclaimed, and in this I rejoice.**

This is the Word of the LORD!!!

Mercy, Grace, and peace are yours through your God and Father, and through His Son, Jesus Christ, true God and Man, dear fellow Sons and Daughters of the King...

How patient is your patience? We live in a day and age where waiting has become less and less of an everyday factor. It's nice that we have things like overnight shipping, microwaves, and air travel that allows us to travel great distances in mere hours. But, as nice as these things are, as a result I think that we have become poor at being patient. When something comes up that requires us to have to wait, we struggle because we aren't really all that used to it.

As inconvenient as waiting might seem, it can have its advantages. Waiting for something allows us to develop a sense of anticipation. If something takes time, it also gives you a chance for reflection. When something doesn't just happen instantly, and then finally happens, it is all the more sweeter.

In our sermon text, the Apostle Paul was waiting. But what he was waiting for was not desirable. Philippians is one of what we call Paul's "prison letters". He was writing this letter to the Christians at Philippi while he was waiting for his trial at Rome. He had plenty of time for reflection when he was in jail. As a result of that imprisonment, we have been given

tremendous gems in these letters. Paul's immediate future didn't look so good. But, the Apostle keeps the bigger picture in focus, and so should we.

Worthwhile things often take time. Just look at salvation. How long did it take before the "fullness of time had come" for earth to receive her Messiah? Thousands of years! Great things do not just happen overnight. What do they say about Rome, that very city from which Paul penned these words? "Rome wasn't built in a day". Paul had to wait a long time for his ultimate deliverance. So too must we. There's a reason why we are all waiting for our Lord to take us home. We are here for the advancement of the gospel. It's a war of attrition. Progress is not always instantaneous or even visible. But our victory is assured, so we wait. This waiting is not an inconvenience. It's a blessing and a privilege. We wait for our Lord, and in the meantime, we move the chains. And so, we pray: LORD, SANTICIFY US BY YOUR TRUTH, YOUR WORD IS TRUTH, AMEN!

I want you to know, brothers, that the things which happened to me actually took place to advance the gospel. 13 And so it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to all the rest, that I am in chains because of Christ.

Life is not a sprint, it's a marathon. It's a process. And, above all, it's not easy. It's a struggle. Paul knew struggle like the back of his hand. He summarized it once in his second letter of Corinthians: **From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; 26 in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; 27 in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness-- 28 besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. (2Co 11:24-28 NKJ)**

These are the things that he is talking about here. The "things that happened to him which took place to advance the gospel". We recently went through Paul's first missionary journey in Bible Class. It was on this trip where the stoning Paul referenced took place. What was his conclusion after that stoning occurred? **"We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." (Act 14:22 NKJ)**

In the moment, it can be very hard to have that attitude. When we are in pain, whether for the sake of the gospel or just pain in general, we don't want to see significance, we just want it to stop. If we do place significance to it, it's usually the wrong conclusion. It's such a human thing to conclude, "I am suffering; therefore, God must be angry with me." But we know that's never the case. But it's easy to feel that way. It is challenging to face adversity. But it's even harder to face it knowing that it is to the glory of God.

Being Christian does not mean glory. It means standing up for the Savior and His Word. It means not living like the rest of the world lives. And it means not caring how the world will view you. Paul wasn't ashamed of his chains. He could see that it was for the advancement of the gospel. He could even see that his prison guards could see this. The advancement of the gospel was the reason Paul was in prison. But this wasn't shameful. He concludes, **For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes (Rom 1:16 NKJ)**

Yet, that's not how the world views it. Humans think, "That person has all of these things, they must be doing something right." Or, "That person is miserable, they must be doing something wrong." Did Paul look like a successful missionary? No, he looked like beaten down prisoner. Did Jesus look like conquering King? No, not in his simple life and especially not nailed to a cross. Do we look like a thriving church? Not really, we worship in a simple building and don't have a vast membership. But looks can be deceiving. And we aren't called to look good. Instead, we are called to preach the Word, to advance the Gospel. It can be slog at times, but that doesn't mean it's not worth slogging through.

14 And, through my chains, the majority of the brothers in the Lord have become much more confident about daring to speak the word of God fearlessly.

It's football season. It will come as a big shock to no one that I watch a lot of football. You know what is frustrating to watch? A football team that is vanilla and conservative. It's not fun to watch a team run to ball for 3 yards, then run for 3 more, and then run for 4. It's painful. You want your team to throw the ball all over the field for swaths of yardage. You want to witness exciting and explosive plays. But, if you convert first downs, if your team move the chains, then what does it matter how they did it?

What Paul did wasn't glamorous. It was hard. It was painful. He suffered for it. But he was willing to suffer for Jesus' sake. And his chains had an effect. Others noticed it, and they became more **daring to speak the word of God fearlessly**. It seemed as if as Paul's suffering grew, so too the Word of the Lord grew.

But it seems like there were mixed results. **15 Some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, and others out of good will. 16 The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am placed here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, but thinking they can cause trouble for me while I am in chains.**

The sufferings that Paul endured had both positive and negative effects. It was encouraging to those who understood what Paul was doing and who he was doing it for. But false teachers also seized on the vacuum of his absence. Many words in the prison letters are dedicated to warning Christians about these sorts of people. His imprisonment strengthened the brethren, but it also provided false teachers room to spread their false doctrine.

How do we determine if we are making progress, advancing the chains, advancing the gospel? It can be hard to truly see. It's hard to see because you're looking for something that cannot always be seen. Yes, we can at times see the results of our spiritual efforts. But even at these times, once more, looks can be deceiving. If I as a Pastor see a large increase of membership, or offerings, I could say "man, the Lord is certainly working through me", and I wouldn't be wrong. The conclusion "the Lord is working through me" would be correct, but things like membership or offerings don't determine that. In football, you can see if your team is moving the chains because it physically happens. But there are no such markers spiritually.

How do we determine progress? Well, that's not really our concern, is it? It's nice to see when it happens, but even then, it's not certain proof that we

are doing what we are supposed to be doing. So how can we make sure that we are advancing the Gospel? There is a line from a recent book, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People". One of those principles sounds simple yet is easier said than done. It is: "*The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing*"

Why is this so hard to do? Because we get distracted all the time. Other things which are not important become more important than they should. When it comes to advancing the Gospel, what is the main thing to keep the main thing? THE GOSPEL!!! How do we determine if we are making progress advancing the Gospel? It doesn't matter! Seeing progress is not a concern of ours. All that matters is that we keep on preaching the Gospel, that Jesus died for sinners. It's such a simple message that it often gets lost. It has been lost so many times over the years. That was why the reformation was so vital. The church had added other focuses. Like we have to cooperate with God to earn His grace. That we had to do certain things not to end up in purgatory (a doctrine not found in the bible). Like it was dangerous to translate the Bible into the language of the people. The reformation came along and provided once again the focus of making the Gospel the main thing. The Word was once again front and center.

When the main thing is keeping the main thing (the gospel) the main thing, then nothing else really matters! **18 What does it matter? Only this, that in every way, whether for outward appearance or for the truth, Christ is being proclaimed, and in this I rejoice.**

Paul's whole point here was that there was only so much he could control. He couldn't control whether or not he was in chains or set free. He couldn't control what other people were saying or thinking about him through out the world. He couldn't control what other people were preaching. All he could do was preach the Gospel in whatever way he could. At this time, it was limited through these letters. That might have

seemed like an inconvenience at the time, especially for Paul the missionary of missionaries. It must have pained him tremendously that he was not able to travel and personally check in on these churches. And yet, here we are today, centering our worship this morning around this letter that he wrote in chains.

When you look at the bigger picture, it's really simple. Boil it all down. What is that we are doing. We preach the Word. What does the Word say? It says that we are doomed and lost sinners. We cannot keep the Law, try as we might. We will not be justified by doing the things of the Law, because we are so totally depraved by sin. This means we are headed for death and destruction. The sinner dies, not just in this world, but also in eternity. This knowledge breaks our stony hearts of sin and then the Holy Spirit turns us to repentance. Then the Gospel, a word that simply means "Good News" comes in. It says, "There is nothing that you need to do about your sin. There is nothing you could do. It has all been done for you already. Jesus Christ has died on the cross and paid for your sin. You now receive His righteousness and gain eternal life with Him in heaven." It's so simple.

It is so simple in fact, that it is simple to the point of being hard. That is, it's impossibly hard to understand if you don't have faith. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians, **but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1Co 1:23-25 NKJ)**

Now look, none of this is breaking news to you. Nothing I have said this morning isn't anything you haven't already heard. We all know that we are sinful. We all know that Jesus died for our sins. Why do we keep on repeating these two facts over and over again, Sunday after Sunday? It's to keep the main thing the main thing. Yes, we have all heard law and gospel before. But we need constant reminders. We

need these reminders, not because the Word is insufficient, but because we are! We hear about how we have sinned, but Jesus died for our sins, and we are forgiven. Then, we go out and sin again! Keep the main thing the main thing, visible progress is overrated!

How patient is your patience? Have you developed the ability to wait for something without going insane? It's a hard thing to do. Really, it's a trait that comes from our God. Above all else, He is patient with us. That's what His loving mercy is. It is patience in practice.

We, like Paul was, our called to advance the Gospel. This is an exercise in patience. You don't get instant results all the time. It may seem at times like zero progress is being made. Being a Christian in this life is a war of attrition. You keep on preaching the Word until you die. How can we keep on doing this without visible signs of progress? We can because ultimately our victory is assured.

The Gospel which we preach is good news because it takes people who were destined for hell and brings them to the gates of heaven. The Good news that Jesus has died for us is a message of victory. Because of what Jesus has done, we have won! Nothing else matters! So what if we are looked down on by the world. So what if we suffer in this world for our faith. So what if we don't see spiritual progress in our mission. We have won the battle over Satan and death because of what Jesus has done once and for all! That is why we are called to merely advance it. The battle is already over. We will enjoy the fruits of that battle with Jesus in eternity. AMEN!