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Together For Good Philippians 1:12-18

Intro: Before we launch into our text today, I want to read one of the most famous and oft quoted Scriptures in all of Christendom. This verse will serve to add context to our study in Philippians. The verse is **Roman 8:28**. This is one of the most well-known passages of Scripture because it has brought encouragement and assurance to believers in every age of the church, and rightly so. But notice that, while **vs28** does say that all things work together for good – it doesn't say that all those things that work together are necessarily good. This passage was never meant to infer that believers would never experience suffering. On the contrary, its goal is to encourage believers to hold on to the faith in the midst of suffering as God is able to take their difficult and even dire circumstances and use them to accomplish good for the advancement of the gospel and His kingdom.

Of course, the Apostle Paul was the one who wrote this passage (by inspiration) but it wasn't just inserted as a pick-me up verse to shore up the faith of the Roman Christians. This was a truth that Paul not only firmly believed but he lived by it, took comfort in it and actually expected and looked for it in the many dire circumstances that he found himself in throughout the course of his long and fruitful ministry for the Lord. The specific truth or doctrine that Paul is referring to in this passage concerns the complete sovereignty of God and His ability to manage every aspect of our lives. This truth is constantly demonstrated in the fact that although we must face suffering at times in this present life, God is able to make even our most difficult and misunderstood sufferings work together for good.

Sometimes, I will admit, it is hard for us to see the good. This is usually because the good is manifested beyond our sight or knowledge, but not always. Sometimes the good occurs right before our very eyes and yet we still fail to recognize it for what it is because what God is doing – what God calls good – is not highly valued by us. It is often difficult for us to rejoice in the good because we take so much offence at the difficulty that was necessary to bring about that good. We could just scratch it off as human nature but as believers, we don't have that "out" as an option. If we have accepted Jesus Christ as our savior then we now have a new

nature and one of the characteristics of this new nature is the ability to deny our selves and submit our lives to God's purposes, no matter what they bring.

This is how Paul lived his life and it is clearly evident in our text.

12-14 – We have spoken at length of Paul and his thought processes in writing this letter but what about that of his intended audience? What were the Philippian believers looking for in this communiqué from their beloved Apostle? Let's put ourselves in their shoes for a few minutes. It's been at least 4 years since they'd seen Paul. They had heard rumors of all the things that had happened to him and they were worried. They had received news from Rome about their church member, Epaphroditus, who had been sick. Those who carried the news would have certainly shared all they knew of Paul's situation. But now some time had passed and they had plenty of questions unanswered. Was Paul still in chains? Was he sick? Had he been brought to trial? Had he had already been martyred for his faith? The Philippians had no way of knowing the answer to these speculations.

Finally, news arrived from Rome via a letter written by Paul himself. At least he was alive! How eagerly they would have read it. You can imagine them skimming over the greeting in the first 11 verses where the focus is on them, hurrying on in the letter until they got to the news about Paul himself (**12-14**). Here is some news at last. Many of the rumors they'd heard were true after all. Many unfortunate things had happened to Paul. He was still in chains. The future was still uncertain. Yet something else is true also. All these things have served to advance the gospel, and for that Paul rejoices. In one short sentence, Paul shifts the legitimate interest of the Philippians from himself to the great, unwavering purposes of God in history.

Paul has written that the things that happened to him have actually furthered the gospel. What are those things and how did they further the gospel?

Remember, first and foremost, that the things that happened to Paul were very different from the things Paul had planned for himself. Paul was the great missionary to the Gentiles and for years he'd carried the gospel to various parts of the world: Syria and Crete, most of Asia Minor (Turkey), and Greece. At some point, he planned to take the gospel west, to Spain, after returning one more time to Jerusalem and stopping for a visit in Rome.

These plans never came to pass. Instead, he found himself a prisoner on trial for his life. We recall the travesty of justice that was Paul's arrest and incarceration from our study of Acts. At the time of writing Philippians he still had no real assurance that he would ever be free again. Nevertheless, still imprisoned, still chained, still unheard, still uncertain, he looks back and declares, "the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel."

Think of all the frustration, all the delay, all the physical suffering. Yet all of this is overshadowed by the fact that it served to spread the gospel. Paul's not just putting a brave face on a bad situation. He had dedicated his life to the spread of the gospel. If his arrest can bring about further progress, that is cause for celebration for him. It's also a reminder that God's idea of what is for the best is often very different from ours. Notice that Paul doesn't mention anything about him or his ministry being advanced because he didn't care about that and he assumes the Philippians didn't care either. Their common desire was for the furtherance of the gospel and the gospel continued to advance.

There are different kinds of sufferings and God has different reasons for allowing it to come our way. Some suffering is corrective. It is intended to get us on the right path when we have gone astray. Some suffering is intended to wake us up to the needs and feelings of other people. Some suffering is instructive. It's intended to mold us into the image of Jesus Christ, for we learn through the things that we suffer. But Paul's suffering was neither corrective nor instructive. It was simply a suffering permitted by God so that the gospel might be spread to others. This wasn't a suffering to be disregarded or complained about. God had greatly honored Paul with this suffering and he rejoiced even in the midst of it because he could see how his suffering has brought salvation to others. This is a joy won through vales of tears, but it's one of the highest rewards of the Christian life.

It's clear that the gospel was advanced through the difficult circumstances that Paul found himself in; his suffering was the catalyst for it. But, how was the gospel advanced; in what way? Well, in 2 very specific ways!

1) Paul was able to bear an effective witness to the Praetorian Guard (13). This particular corps of elite soldiers was the official bodyguard of the emperor. As such, they were also responsible for all imperial prisoners.

Now, it was highly unlikely that the soldiers responsible for guarding Paul would be unaware that he was imprisoned for his faith. They would know this because Paul was under house arrest, not in a prison cell, and his freedom would be limited by being chained to one of his guards. Those individuals detailed to guard Paul would spread the news (gossip) of the little Jew who was awaiting trial by the emperor over a new variant of the Jewish religion. Paul is sure that the news had spread widely in the upper circles of Roman society.

It may seem a stretch to credit gossip among soldiers as spreading the gospel but the effect of this rumor should not be underestimated. One of the biggest hurdles faced in the job of sharing the gospel is the 1st one: attracting enough interest to cause people to want to know more. When word begins to get around that something interesting or odd is happening, that's when curiosity is piqued and explanations of the interesting oddity are readily listened to. What was interesting or odd about Paul? Even though Paul's situation was wrong on every level, he didn't complain about it; he didn't take out his frustrations on the poor sap who happened to be chained to him. No, for Paul, the guard at the end of the chain represented a person for whom Christ died.

The way Paul endured his sufferings had an effect on these tough Roman soldiers. Here's a man who had every right to be thinking of himself, but instead he spoke of Christ and even these hardened soldiers listened. Paul bore a witness not only to the 1st soldier on duty but to the one who replaced him at the 2nd watch and the one who replaced him at the 3rd watch and so on throughout the days and years. This is how Paul reached most of the imperial guard.

There is a special application here for those who don't have the freedom to preach the gospel. Paul was chained to a prison guard. You may have chains of your own. You may be tied to a desk when you'd rather be out in more direct Christian service. You may be tied to a home, with young children needing constant care. You may be tied to a sickbed and never see beyond your hospital room. This needn't be cause for discouragement. If you're in circumstances like these, this has been given you by God and can be used by Him. You can bear a witness to people who come by your desk, your kitchen sink, or your hospital bed. If you do, God will bless your efforts. You'll see spiritual fruit. It will also entirely change the way you look at your

limitations, whatever they are. You can say with Paul, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel.

2) Paul's suffering had an effect on other Christians (14). Paul says that the Christians in Rome had moved from fear to boldness as a result of his example. They learned to testify in the face of their own difficult circumstances.

They saw that Paul had joy in the midst of his suffering. They saw that God would take care of Paul in less than agreeable situations. They saw that God could still use Paul even when he was imprisoned. Their new zeal sprang from a desire to have the same degree of faith and love for God that Paul showed. Examples like Paul's are encouraging because they demonstrate that such faith and service are actually possible. Those who show this level of devotion become beacons to the rest of us.

Has your life ever had that effect on other Christians? While it's true that Christians should always be bold in their witness for Jesus, that they should always be ready to give a reason for their faith (testify). It is equally true that many Christians are shy and afraid. They may simply lack an encouraging example. It could be that God has placed you in a position where your witness can move one of God's shy witnesses to boldness.

15-18 – Despite the advancement of the gospel among the palace guard and the new found boldness of the Roman Christians, there were also some problems in Rome; there was a darker side to the situation. While there were some who preached the gospel motivated by love, there were others who's preaching was motivated by partisanship (envy and strife), who's ultimate goal was to add affliction to Paul's incarceration. So much for the "good old days" of love and unity in the 1st century church.

Understand, the ones who were trying to cause Paul more trouble by their preaching were actually Christians. Even though Paul says their preaching was insincere, it doesn't mean that they didn't sincerely believe in Jesus Christ or that they didn't care about the spread of the gospel. They were likely committed to both. But, instead of rejoicing that God was continuing to use Paul, they see his bonds as a negative and are happy to contrast their own apparent success with his seeming failure. They preach to increase their own standing and to be a put-down for Paul.

It would be right to call these troublemakers unbelievers, as some commentators do. They weren't attempting to water down the gospel or deny the faith. They weren't anti-Christ; they were anti-Paul and they were anti-Paul with a vengeance. They were jealous of him. Paul had made some tremendous accomplishments in his ministry for the overall benefit of the church, the Body of Christ. Not only had he carried the gospel into Gentile lands at the risk of his own health and life but he had waged a theological war against legalizers in the church and had clarified and codified a large portion of Christian doctrine in the letters he wrote to the churches. Instead of rejoicing and learning from Paul's extensive ministry, there were some Christians in Rome who were simply jealous of his success.

Furthermore, as if that wasn't bad enough, their outlook on ministry was characterized by strife. These were some belligerent Christians, the kind who loved a good battle and weren't too worried about friendly fire while attacking the enemy. In fact, they probably preferred shooting at Christians because they knew there'd be less return fire. This attitude led them into opposing camps in which their main efforts were directed toward promoting the interests of their own party rather than the interests of the entire church of Christ. This was a deplorable situation. The church was divided by jealousy, strife, and partisanship. But what does Paul say? Oddly enough, he merely says that even in the midst of such conditions Jesus was preached and the gospel was spread, and in that, he rejoices.

How does this apply to modern Christianity, in a time when the church is more divided into ever increasing camps of opposition? The church is torn by jealousy and strife. There are examples of partisanship every where you look. Denominations refuse to cooperate with each other; even independent churches fail to cooperate. We must admit that all the envy, strife, and partisanship that was present in the church at Rome is present in our churches also. But, what should our attitude be toward those responsible for it? It's easy to speak against it or dismiss those with questionable motives for their preaching. But, if Paul's example counts for anything, it teaches us to rejoice if Christ is preached, even by those who do it with less than worthy motives, who methods appear to dishonor the gospel.

Now, this isn't meant to imply that envy, strife and partisanship won't yield bitter fruit to those who sow them. They're not of the Spirit, and God won't bless them. In fact, they'll hurt the witness of the church and other

Christians. There is historical evidence that suggests this jealousy among Roman Christians in some way facilitated Paul's execution.

Envy and strife caused trouble in those days. They cause trouble today, not necessarily in death, but in the declining impact of the gospel on our society and on the world. Never in the history of the world have the opportunities been greater for the proclamation of the gospel. And yet, at the same time, never has the believing church been more irrelevant or more divided.

Paul gives the solution to this situation in **ch2. 1st**, he says we're to develop a low opinion of ourselves. This is hard to do, but it should be easy. We're just to see ourselves as God sees us, and this happens as we study His Word. As we draw near to Christ by reading the Scriptures, Christ's light will fall on us and we will begin to see ourselves as He sees us. When we do, we will look to Him for cleansing.

2nd, we're to have a better opinion of others, even the troublemakers. This occurs as God makes us sensitive to the work of His Holy Spirit in other believers. It doesn't mean we should consider a Christian honest if he's not. But we should see that he's more honest as a Christian than he was before becoming one. And we'll look in our own hearts for those areas where God desires to work in us.

3rd, we're to possess the mind of Christ. He challenges the Philippians, Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus (**2:5**). We develop this mind through fellowship with Him as he works in us, gradually molding us into His own image. Basically, we're to go against our most natural response. Difficult? Yes, but that's God's way, and God will give you the strength to do it. You're to see His hand at work in the lives of other Christians, even those who are obnoxious to you, and you're to think highly of God's work in them. Plus, you're to work with them, as much as is possible because this is the way the gospel is spread, believers are strengthened, and Jesus Christ is honored. 😊