

p 19 WEEK 3: PAUL'S IMPRISONMENT IS FOR THE GREATER GOOD

Philippians 1:12–18

The Place of the Passage

After Paul's introductory words of greeting and thankfulness, he turns to one of his main purposes in writing this letter: to update the Philippian church on his welfare—"I want you to know ... what has happened to me" (Phil. 1:12). They were concerned for Paul in these days of imprisonment. In 1:12–26 Paul seeks to assure them, first with news that the gospel is spreading (1:12–18), then by modeling confidence in God's sovereignty over life and death (1:19–26).

The Big Picture

In Philippians 1:12–18 Paul encourages the church with the news that the gospel is spreading, not despite his imprisonment but *through* it—and this is all that matters.

p 20 Reflection and Discussion

Read through the passage for this study, Philippians 1:12–18. Then consider and answer the following questions. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, page 2281, or visit www.esvbible.org.)

Verse 12 begins with the words, "I want you to know ..." What might this phrase indicate about this section of Philippians? What might it suggest about Paul's purposes in this letter?

If the phrase "I want you to know" (v. 12) begins a new section of Philippians, where does that section end? Or, put another way, which verses in chapter 1 fall under that introductory phrase "I want you to know" (v. 12)? (Hint: it may go beyond the verses for this chapter of the study guide.)

Paul encourages the concerned Philippians by insisting that his imprisonment has actually helped the spread of the gospel, and he gives three examples to prove his point (vv. 12–18). Identify each of the encouraging examples, describing them in your own words. (Hint: one is in vv. 12–13, another in v. 14, and another in vv. 15–18).

p 21 Isn't it wonderfully ironic how *opposition to* the gospel could turn into *opportunities for* the gospel? That certainly wasn't coincidence or luck; God was behind it all. As with Joseph's

brothers, what Paul's enemies meant for evil, "God meant ... for good" (Gen. 50:20). Can you think of other stories in Scripture where something was meant for evil but used by God for good? After answering that question, read Acts 2:23 and 4:27 for the ultimate instance of this.

In verses 14–16 Paul mentions several good and right motivations for preaching the gospel. Identify them, noting also the wrong motivations Paul mentions in verses 15–17.

Paul says that his imprisonment for Christ has actually made some believers more "confident" and "much more bold to speak the word without fear" (v. 14). This may seem counterintuitive. Why would persecution of one Christian produce courage in others? What does "love" (v. 16) have to do with gospel-boldness?

In verses 15–17 Paul talks about a strange kind of Christian preacher: they "preach Christ" out of "envy and rivalry ... out of selfish ambition ... to afflict" p 22 Paul. It is difficult for us to understand exactly who these people were and how they could oppose Paul *by* preaching Christ, though rivalry among preachers is not unknown. Without perhaps coming to a full understanding of what was going on, write down what can be known about these preachers, their motives, and their message. (See p. 2281 of the *ESV Study Bible* if you need help.)

What do verses 12–18 say about Paul's priorities, aims, concerns, and joys? What is primary in Paul's mind, according to these verses? Which verse makes that explicit?

Paul joyfully celebrates the gospel's advance (v. 12) through Christ being preached (v. 18). Is this just his own personal testimony to the Philippians, or something more? Is he simply informing them, or implying something more for them? What is he *saying without saying it*?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections may have for you.

p 23 **Gospel Glimpses**

A CONVICTING EXAMPLE, A COMFORTING GOSPEL. Paul's singularly focused concern for the cause of Christ and his gospel is in sharp contrast to our puny efforts and quick complaints. Paul's radical example is convicting. That is not an inappropriate response. God is good when his Word exposes our sin and draws us into repentant confession and humility. We should be reprovved by Paul's bold example. But we should also be comforted by the very gospel he so radically preached. Jesus died for sins, including the sins of cowardice, selfishness, joylessness, and complaining. This is the gospel that we have heard and believed and received as Christians. Paul provides a lofty, convicting example, but he too is motivated by a gloriously comforting gospel.

THE GOSPEL IS FREEING AND FIXATING. In the midst of imprisonment and opposition, Paul's joy (1:18) is otherworldly. Only the gospel can free us from focusing on our circumstances and then fixate our hearts on Christ and his cause in this world. Paul shows us the power of the gospel to bring supernatural joy because of spiritual realities. As he wrote to the Corinthians, "we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18).

Whole-Bible Connections

THE ADVANCE OF THE GOSPEL. The gospel is supposed to spread. It is good news to be proclaimed freely, widely, and boldly. Jesus issued this call to his followers multiple times (Matt. 28:18–20; Luke 24:47–48; Acts 1:8). But the idea of salvation spreading in the world was promised and foreshadowed all through the Old Testament, beginning with God's promises to Abraham (see Gen. 12:3). Throughout the Old Testament God had a unique covenantal relationship with the nation of Israel, but all along there was a growing anticipation that God's saving program would eventually reach the Gentile nations; one day "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD" (Hab. 2:14). Very early in Jesus' earthly ministry he made it clear that this time of globally spreading glory had begun. He came not for the "righteous," but for "sinners" (Luke 5:32)—regardless of their ethnicity. This Old Testament background combined with Jesus' model and teaching formed Paul's aim to "preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named" (Rom. 15:20). That is why he preached the gospel in Philippi (Acts 16:11–34), and why he eventually left Philippi for the next city. That is why he rejoiced in his Roman imprisonment and the spread of the gospel among Roman guards (Phil. 1:12–13).

p 24 OPPOSITION TO THE GOSPEL. God's redemptive plan for the nations is not always met with belief and joy. Paul wrote Philippians while imprisoned for Christ. The frequency and severity of the persecution he had previously faced was simply remarkable (read 2 Cor. 11:23–27). But it was not surprising in light of Jesus' opposition and cruel death (John 15:20). Like the *advance* of the gospel, *opposition* to it has a long history in the Bible. That's why the early church, when persecuted and threatened, looked back to Psalm 2 to remember the promise of human opposition to God's ways and to encourage themselves by dwelling on the futility of that opposition (Acts 4:25–28). The coming of the true, anointed King inevitably results in both salvation and opposition.

Theological Soundings

THE GOSPEL. The word "gospel," the basic label for Paul's message, is used throughout Philippians. More often, though, the concept of the gospel is put in slightly different terms. For instance, it is "the word" in 1:14 and simply "Christ" in 1:15, 17, and 18. These different words shed light on what the gospel is. It is "good news," a "word" to "speak" (v. 14), to "preach" (v. 15), to be "proclaimed" (vv. 17–18). More specifically, it is an announcement of a person—Christ, the Messiah. More specifically still, it regards his *person* and *work*: that he lived righteously, died horribly, and rose victoriously for the salvation of his people. Our hope is completely and solely in him. This is good news to be heard, embraced, celebrated, and retold.

SOVEREIGNTY AND PROVIDENCE. Not once in this passage does Paul say explicitly that God has sovereignly placed him in prison for his good and for the gospel's spread. There's no need to say this; it is obvious. God sovereignly orchestrated the evil of men and the gospel-passion of Christians for a gospel-spreading good that no one could plan or stumble into. The doctrine of God's sovereignty insists that God is in complete control of everything. The overlapping doctrine of God's providence teaches that God is good, wise, and purposeful in his sovereignty; his plan is for our good and his glory. Paul's imprisonment is an example of these things, but Jesus' death is the ultimate instance. Though "killed by the hands of lawless men," he was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). His crucifiers plotted in vain, for they did only what God himself "had predestined to take place" (Acts 4:25–28).

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Philippians 1:12–18 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Make notes below on the personal implications p 25 for your walk with the Lord of the (1) *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Philippians 1:12–18

p 26 As You Finish This Unit ...

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of Philippians. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight and underline these things to review again in the future.