A Study of the Book of Philippians

Key to Contentment (Philippians 1:12-18a)

“The discontented person thinks everything he does for God is too much, and everything God does for him is too little.”
~ Thomas Watson, The Art of Divine Contentment, 84

I. Overview

After his introduction to the letter, Paul moves to the body of his epistle. In a joyful note of praise, Paul sets the tone for the entire letter in this section—a tone that recognizes that his present sufferings can serve for God's glory. Rather than focusing specifically on his situation, Paul writes to rejoice over the spiritual success of the Philippian church and the success of the Gospel.

II. Paul's Focus on the Gospel (1:12-18a)

A. Rejoicing over the Advancement of the Gospel (v. 12)

v. 12 - “brothers and sisters” - In an affectionate tone, Paul relates to his readers as one family.

“rather” - This term highlights the unexpected. Contrary to the rumors that Paul's mission is failing, the Gospel is waning, and the Church is in trouble, Paul writes to assure them that the Gospel is in fact spreading without hindrance. The term for “advance” only reiterates this truth. This term is a “metaphorical word that pictures ‘pioneers cutting a way before an army and so furthering its march’” (Hawthorne, Philippians, 34).

Why would the church at Philippi believe that Paul's imprisonment meant trouble for the Gospel?

“Commentators have been quick to point out that although the apostle devotes this first main section of his letter to giving news of his own circumstances, he offers no abundance of details and his ‘miserliness’ in this regard has often caused surprise” (O'Brien, Philippians, 91).
B. Reasons for Acknowledging the Advancement of the Gospel (vv. 13-18a)

1. Full awareness of why Paul is imprisoned (v. 13).

Paul first identifies the imperial guard as a group of individuals who understand why Paul is imprisoned. The “praetorium” can refer to either the headquarters of an administrative center or the elite troops of the emperor's guard stationed in Rome.

The “everyone else” encompasses all those who have heard the Gospel since Paul's imprisonment (e.g., Roman soldiers in Jerusalem and Caesarea, Roman governors of Judaea, King Herod Agrippa II, etc.).

“in Christ” - This phrase seems to indicate that Paul is not imprisoned because of his identification with Christianity, but because he shares in Christ's sufferings (see 3:10). Thus, “his imprisonment is not simply a result of his Christian commitment but is the necessary means through which Paul fulfills his calling. It is not only ‘for Christ’ but ‘in Christ’ as well” (Thielman, *Philippians*, 59). Just as Christ's suffering was for the advancement of God's redemptive work, Paul's suffering, to which God had called him, was fulfilling this same goal (see 2 Cor 4:7-15).

2. Boldness on the part of the saints because of Paul's imprisonment (v. 14).

Paul's imprisonment has also encouraged the saints to have greater courage in their preaching.

“word” - The term seems to speak of the Christian message as a whole (*see 1 Thess 2:13*).

3. Ongoing preaching even by those seeking to stir up trouble for Paul during his imprisonment (vv. 15-17).

Speak of proclaiming Christ, Paul also refers to a group of individuals who are seeking to harm Paul by their message.

vv. 15-16 - “jealousy and rivalry” - These terms can be translated as “envy” and “selfish ambition,” and are traits often featured in lists of evil qualities (see Gal 5:21). Despite these characteristics, these preachers must not be seen as heretics. Unlike Paul's opponents who preached “a different gospel” in Galatians 1:6-7 or the false prophets of 2 Corinthians 11:13-14, these individuals preach the same Gospel.

It should also be noted that Paul is concerned with the motives of those in ministry (see 1 Thess 2:1-12). The context of the letter to the Philippians was meant to rally the troops around the Gospel. Paul did not write this epistle to address his rivals or to attack those who had fallen under heretical influence.
Why exactly these Christian brothers are creating problems for Paul is left unanswered. One commentator raises two possible reasons for their rhetoric (Hawthorne, 37-38):

- They felt Paul should embrace martyrdom rather than Paul seeking to secure his own release.
- They believed Paul should have showed no sign of weakness. In their minds, Paul’s imprisonment distracted from the triumphant message of the Gospel.

Note the contrast between those individuals in verse 13 and these self-centered preachers. The first group properly understands why Paul is imprisoned. Whereas, these individuals of verses 15 and 16 “stumble at Paul’s captivity and weakness, not recognizing that Christ’s saving activity is manifested in his imprisonment, and so through it the gospel advances” (O’Brien, 101-102). Consequently, these individuals oppose Paul out of personal animosity, disappointment, arrogance, and jealousy.

4. Summary (v. 18a)

Despite his imprisonment, his hardships, and the public ridicule from even fellow believers, Paul rejoices. These adversities have only increased the advancement of the Gospel—the very purpose for Paul’s life (1:21).

Ironically, Paul recognized that God works not merely in spite of, but through adverse circumstances (see Thielman, 65).

III. Intersect

A. Since our sins far outweigh any present suffering, our Savior from our sins deserves our praise in the midst of adversity.

   Ezra 9:13 -

B. Contentment in Christ consoles the soul and confines unbelief and impatience.

   Psalm 73:1 -
   Psalm 100:2 -

   “Discontentment does not ease our burden, but makes the cross heavier.” ~ Thomas Watson
C. Contentment is forged on the anvil of humility. A humble man seeks God’s glory, not his own.

2 Timothy 2:8-10 -

“A proud man is never content; he is one who has a high opinion of himself. Therefore under small blessings he is disdainful; under small crosses he is impatient. The humble spirit is the contented spirit. If his cross is light, he reckons it in the inventory of his mercies. If it is heavy, yet he takes it upon his knees, knowing that when his state is worse it is to make him better. Where you lay humility for the foundation, contentment will be the superstructure.” ~ Thomas Watson, The Art of Divine Contentment, 115

For further thought . . .

Based upon our study this morning, you may want to spend some additional time this week interacting with the following:

In light of Paul’s response to prison: Has God “chained” you to anyone in order to share the gospel (1:13)? If so, how can you use your situation to bring glory to God?

In light of Paul’s response to others who are ministering: Reread Philippians 1:15-18 and review why Paul is unconcerned about the selfishness of those who preach Christ? Serving alongside others in the church or in a para-church ministry can become difficult, frustrating, and discouraging. In light of Paul’s response, how should you view your colleagues? How can you pray for them and this ministry?