

Text: Phil. 1:12-26

Title: "Surprising Gospel Progress"

Time: 6/27/2021 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: One of the speakers at the conference I attended last week is an assistant pastor at Good News Baptist Church in Chesapeake, VA, named John Radascy. Brother John served our country as a Marine for 17 years, obtaining the rank of Major before receiving a medical discharge due to contracting cancer. John mentioned that he experienced combat in Fallujah, Iraq.

Most of us this morning can remember the war in Iraq, which ousted Saddam Hussein from the leadership of that country. The war was part of the Bush administration's response to the attack our nation suffered on 9/11/2001. Critics of the war effort were legion in those days, especially in liberal news outlets like *The New York Times*, so many were surprised when that paper published an article about the progress of the war that was titled, "A War We Just Might Win" [<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/30/opinion/30pollack.html>; accessed 6/25/2021]. It was written by two Brookings Institute liberals who had visited Iraq and had seen firsthand the good morale of brave soldiers like Brother John. Their article said in part, "[we] were surprised by the gains we saw."

The apostle Paul understood what it means to be surprised by the gains you see. The passage we read this morning teaches us important truths about the nature and significance of progress in the work of the gospel and of the faith. The theme comes up at the very start of the passage (v. 12, "the furtherance of the gospel"), and it is repeated toward the end of the passage as well (v. 25, "for your furtherance

and joy of faith"). When it comes to the gospel and to the joy of the faith, progress is important, and it is often surprising. I have titled the message this morning, "Surprising Gospel Progress," and I want us to see two ways in which Paul's gospel progress is surprising, and then the key to this progress, which actually makes it not surprising at all.

I. Discouraging experiences made Paul's gospel progress surprising (vv. 12-14).

Illustration: Our IBFNA conference theme last week was "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." Pastor Radascy spoke Thursday afternoon on the faithfulness of God to discipline His children. He shared personal testimony about a time in his life that was more difficult than the battles of Fallujah for him, a time of loneliness and depression, which he came to understand as a time of God's faithful discipline in His life. His message was greatly encouraging as a personal testimony of the works of God in his life.

Application: Similarly, Paul begins this passage by remembering the experiences of his recent past (v. 12). It is as though he is sharing his personal testimony. He does so because he wants to explain to the Philippian believers that gospel progress had been made in spite of the many difficult experiences he had just been through.

What exactly is Paul referring to when he speaks of "the things that happened to me"? These things had started about five years earlier during Paul's fourth visit to Jerusalem. He had gone with the best of intentions. He wanted to present an offering to the needy church at Jerusalem, but what met him was a firestorm of prejudice and hatred (Acts 21-22). He was dragged before the Sanhedrin where, after

mention of the resurrection of the dead, chaos ensues again and a conspiracy to take Paul's life threatens his safety.

Paul is moved from there to Caesarea, jumping out of the pan into the fire. He is tried before the notorious Felix, who finds nothing wrong with Paul but leaves him to rot for two years in prison while he hopes for a bribe that never comes. Finally, Festus succeeds Felix, and Agrippa gets into the act with his mockery of Paul and indolence. Paul is forced to appeal to Caesar in search of justice.

His transport to Rome included shipwreck and snakebite. As he wrote this letter to the local church at Philippi, he sat chained to a Roman soldier and imprisoned under house arrest. It had been two years since his arrival at Rome, and now finally his trial had begun before the court of Nero, the first Roman Emperor to persecute the Christians as a matter of public policy.

What does Paul say about all of this? "The things that happened to me have fallen out unto the furtherance of the gospel." It is a surprising outcome. Matthew Henry said of it: "A strange chemistry of Providence this, to extract so great a good as the enlargement of the gospel out of so great an evil as the confinement of the apostle."

Notice two ways the gospel was furthered by all of these trying circumstances:

1. Place: Paul's trials led to the gospel going where it would not otherwise have gone (v. 13). The *palace* referred to in this verse is the word *praetorium*, which was either a council of 20 senators with the head of the praetorium guard, which may have administered Paul's trial, or it was the imperial guard, which acted as the personal bodyguards of

Caesar. Either way, gospel good comes out of Satan's evil in what Matthew Henry called "a strange chemistry of Providence."

2. People: Paul's courage was contagious (v. 14). One of the reasons I wrote an article in our town's newspaper asking prayer for the Canadian pastors who have been jailed for church attendance is that my hope was that their courage would be contagious at New Boston Baptist Church. When that happens, the result will be boldness to speak the word without fear. We need to share our good news about the good news with one another, because when we see the furtherance of the gospel in each other, we are then encouraged to speak the word ourselves without fear.

Discouraging experiences made Paul's gospel progress surprising in terms of place and people, and the Lord allows discouraging experiences in our lives to give us a chance to demonstrate gospel faithfulness and furtherance in spite of those things. He blessed faithful testifying in spite of the negative experiences of Paul, and we can expect the same blessing from the same Lord if we follow Paul's example.

Illustration: Pastor Mark Strangman of Pittsburgh, PA preached last Thursday afternoon on our need for faithfulness in our faithful God, and he gave testimony to a lady in his church who sincerely thanks the Lord for her cancer because of the witnessing opportunities it has given to her. That good news about the good news reminded me of encouragement I have received from Cera in the past.

None of these trials could stop gospel progress if Paul would be faithful to what the Lord directed him to do back in a cold Caesarean prison in Acts 23:11, "And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, 'Be of good cheer,

Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.'"

In our trying circumstances, are we willing to remember that the Holy Spirit has empowered and commissioned us to be His witnesses to the uttermost end of the earth (Acts 1:8)? Or will we miss out on the progress the Lord has planned for the gospel because we are of bad cheer, fearful, and silent? Is the gospel furthered in our times of trial?

What discouraging experiences has the Lord allowed you and I to endure because He wants us to testify in a way we would not otherwise be able to? Perhaps we need to confess to the Lord that we have not understood our discouraging experiences in this light, that we have been discouraged rather than courageous and silent instead of faithful.

II. Discouraging allies made Paul's gospel progress surprising (vv. 15-18).

Application: Paul has two sets of fellow gospel-preachers. It is important as we interpret what Paul is saying here to understand at the outset that both of these categories of preachers are orthodox men. Neither are false teachers, of whom Paul will say in chapter 3, "Beware of the dogs." He is not talking about German Shepherds there. Here in chapter 1, he mentions two categories of true gospel-preachers.

One category of men were a great encouragement and source of support to Paul. A second category of men were a great discouragement and source of contention for him. Yet both had this one thing in common – they preached Christ. So, when it came to the pro-Paul cause, some of the allies were discouraging. But when it came to the pro-Christ cause, Paul could rejoice. The issue is – what is our cause?

It would be truly wonderful if envy, contention, insincerity, and strife were never found in gospel ministry among true gospel-preachers. But the fact of the matter is that God has chosen frail and fallible men to preach the glorious gospel of His powerful and infallible Son, Jesus Christ. From the beginning, gospel preachers have experienced the problem Paul and Barnabas did in Acts 15, as they divided over whether John Mark should accompany them again. This has always been a part of true gospel work. How can any progress be made when gospel preachers act this way?

Paul has the surprising answer - "Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice." That has to be our attitude when good men faithfully preach Christ while not treating us well. Our cause must be pro-Christ, not pro-me.

Have you ever been mistreated by anyone who is a witness to the same gospel you witness to? Do you rejoice that Christ is preached by this sometimes irritating brother, or has the furtherance of the gospel in your ministry been shut down by this unfortunate reality of our gospel ministry? The pro-Christ forgiveness Paul exemplifies is critical to the blessing of the Holy Spirit on our own witness for Christ.

III. Hope explains surprising gospel progress (vv. 19-26).

Application: We see in this passage the true meaning of biblical hope. Ordinarily, we might say something like, "I don't know so, but I hope so." Hope is thought of as something that you have when you do not know for sure. But Paul's hope is different from that in this passage. He says, "I know . . . according to my earnest expectation and my hope." It is not that he needed to hope because he did not know, but rather that he knew for sure because he hoped. Here is what Paul's biblical hope helped him know:

1. Paul knew the power of a local church's prayers (vv. 19-20). The prayers of the local church are the tool of biblical hope. Paul's salvation would come, the supply of the Holy Spirit would come, the bold magnification of Christ in Paul's body would come because God's people prayed. I am most under the influence of biblical hope after having prayed with my local church. Do we believe in the power of a church's prayer? Are you committed to pray together?

2. Paul knew that death has no power (vv. 20b-26). As Paul writes this letter, he knows one of two things would happen - his execution or his release. One important point to notice in this regard is that soul-sleep was not one of those possibilities. This doctrine, held by some groups like the Seventh Day Adventists, teaches that, when a person dies, he remains unconscious until the resurrection of the body and soul together. Paul understands that if death were God's will for him, his body would sleep euphemistically and literally decay (see Acts 13:36), but his soul would be consciously with Christ. The soul neither sleeps nor decays.

But Paul's larger point here is that to be with Christ is far better than any other option the believer could choose for himself. To be with Christ is far better, but not more needful. From our human perspective, it is always more needful that godly saints not depart to be with Christ. We need them here, and Paul is concerned in this passage not with what is best for himself, but rather what is needful for the local church of Philippi. Suicide is an act of selfishness.

And so, Paul's hope taught him that to die was gain, but not only that. It also taught him that the purpose of his life was selflessness - "For me to live is Christ." When to live is to love and follow Jesus Christ, your purpose is a simple one - "your furtherance and joy of faith"; "my coming to

you.” To live for Christ is selflessly to further the joy and faith of His true churches.

Conclusion: And so, the progress of the gospel is surprising when we look at our discouraging experiences and even some discouraging allies, but not in view of biblical hope.

Do you and I have this hope? Can we say this morning that for us, living is loving and obeying Jesus Christ? Through the power of prayer with our local church, do we have this earnest expectation and hope, that in nothing shall we be ashamed, but that with all boldness as always so now also, Christ shall be magnified in our bodies, whether it be by life or by death? Jesus is worthy, so our answer must be “Yes, O Lord, please make it so for me too.”

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*