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Phil 1:12-26 – *Gospel Progress*

Preached from home via Zoom for Trinity CRC

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Phil 1:12-26

<sup>12</sup> Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. <sup>13</sup> As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. <sup>14</sup> And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

<sup>15</sup> It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. <sup>16</sup> The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. <sup>17</sup> The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. <sup>18</sup> But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, <sup>19</sup> for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. <sup>20</sup> I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. <sup>21</sup> For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. <sup>22</sup> If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! <sup>23</sup> I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; <sup>24</sup> but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. <sup>25</sup> Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, <sup>26</sup> so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

This morning we're going to touch on something we should all be able to relate with:

Suffering...

Unpleasant situations...

Circumstances that we'd rather not be in.

Especially right now it seems like we can relate:

We're unable to meet with our friends and our family as we'd like;  
 Our trips and plans have been canceled or postponed;  
 Our sports leagues or other rec activities are in doubt;  
 Some of us have lost our jobs or are having trouble finding work;  
 We're exhausted from being around our kids all day.

I'd say this is a situation the majority of us would rather not be in...

Our circumstances are far from ideal.

We are suffering.

There is much to grieve right now.

The Good News we hear this morning though is:

**God uses suffering.**

That's the main idea for this sermon:

**God's uses suffering.**

I'm not going to pretend to have this all figured out—

I don't have the silver bullet to the question, "Why does God allow people to suffer?"—

But we *are* looking at a reading this morning of someone suffering...

And God using that suffering for God's purposes.

We see this theme pop up in the opening verse of our passage...

Paul says in verse 12:

"Now I want you to know..."—

"Pay attention to what I'm about to say..."—

"What has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel."

Paul, in essence, says,

"God is using my situation..."

"He's using my suffering."

"What has happened to me has advanced God's purposes."

We don't know the exact details of Paul's situation...

But "what has happened to him" is that Paul is in prison...

Three times in our passage Paul mentions that he's "in chains." (1:13, 14, 17)

If it's correct that Paul is writing this letter from Rome...

Then he would have been under house arrest. (cf. Acts 28)

Paul wasn't confined to the state prison—

He wasn't starved, tortured or subjected to cruel treatment this go-around—

But he was still under constant guard...

Unable to leave his rented house in Rome.

We don't know if he was literally chained to the soldier supervising him...

But he was obviously still under arrest...

Restricted in his movements as he awaited trial.

Paul is suffering.

It's kind of like where we're at today...

Unable to see those people we long to see...

And home bound...

Like we're under house arrest.

It's not a situation we want to continue in forever...

We're suffering.

But, as we said, **God uses suffering**.

We see him using Paul's suffering in 3 ways:

First, Paul's house arrest gives him the opportunity to carry God's message...

Carry it to places it otherwise might not have gone.

Paul writes, "It has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ." (1:13)

The palace/imperial/praetorian guard are the elite of the Roman military.

They are well-respected, better paid than other soldiers;

Usually taken from the center of the country...the heart of Italy...

Not slaves like other soldiers.

They are in charge of protecting the emperor and maintaining order in Italy. (Keener, Acts)

Paul says, "It's clear to them that I'm in chains for Christ."

Accompanied by at least one of these soldiers day in and day out...

Paul of course has the opportunity to share his faith.

The story of Christ—

His life, death, and resurrection—

Is shared with these Gentiles.

Paul tells them how to have forgiveness of sins...

How to have new life and a relationship with their Creator.

It's thought that the whole praetorian guard was made up of around 9,000 soldiers...

So either Paul is using hyperbole here...

Or God is doing a mighty work of spreading the word about Christ.

This is the first way God uses Paul's chains:

The gospel message is spreading to those who would otherwise not have heard it...

The gospel is advancing because of Paul's chains.

Second, Paul's chains encourage other believers.

"Because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear." (1:14)

Christians were being imprisoned during these times.

Jewish leaders did not like being attached to the Christian message...

And they thought it was blasphemy to say that Jesus was God...

So they tried to keep the Christians quiet.

Christian worship also took away from emperor worship...

It threatened the peace and favor that was granted by the Roman Emperor.

So, in a very real way, Christians had reasons to be afraid.

Proclaiming Jesus as the Lord, raised from the dead, could get them into trouble.  
But Paul's boldness in his suffering encourages them.

Their faith in God—

To trust God in all circumstances, good and bad—  
Is being strengthened by what Paul is going through.

So not only is *Paul* spreading the message of King Jesus...

Now other Christians in Rome are emboldened to share it...

Advancing the gospel.

The third way God uses Paul's suffering is by growing him...

Leading Paul into a still deeper relationship with God.  
Everything is not rainbows and butterflies for Paul...

From this passage we get the sense that there are people who don't like him...

*Christians* who are opposing Paul for some reason.

While there *are* people that are genuinely concerned for Paul and his welfare...

There are also people—fellow believers—out to get Paul.

"...supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains." (1:17)

I don't know about you, but when people don't like me...

It bothers me—I feel uncomfortable.

It consumes my thoughts and I want to fix it...

I want to get them to like me...

It becomes the center of my attention.

Paul's imprisonment though, is leading Paul into deeper focus on the gospel...

Not putting his own needs first...

But the advancement of the gospel message.

"What does it matter?" Paul says.

"Christ is being preached."

"And because of this, I'm rejoicing."

In this time of suffering...

God is maturing Paul's relationship with him.

God uses Paul's suffering for his growth/sanctification.

Well, maybe some of us look at Paul and say,

“Of course God used Paul...”

“Of course Paul was faithful in suffering...”

“He is the great, super-apostle after all.”

But, as we look at our passage, what enables Paul to get through this?

What strengthens him to advance the gospel while he's in chains?

And what allows Paul to grow through his suffering?

He says 2 things in v. 19:

1. The prayers of God's people;
2. And the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Paul doesn't do it on his own...

He can't.

And neither can we.

What strengthens Paul is the same thing that is available to us:

The prayers of God's people;

And the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Don't underestimate the power of prayer...

God uses the prayers of his people to strengthen and sustain.

Prayers hold up Paul while he's in chains...

And prayers by the Church hold us up in our suffering.

So, don't neglect to pray for God's people...

And let people know where you need prayer.

We all suffer and we all need help...

None of us can do it on our own.

God gives us fellow brothers and sisters to intercede on our behalf.

Second, it is the Spirit of God that sees us through.

God doesn't save us and then leave us.

God saves us and continues to do a good work in us...

Carrying it on to completion...until we're perfected.

We will go through suffering in this life—

And God will use this suffering to advance his purposes in us—

But be assured...

He is with us every step of the way.

“Be sure of this,” Jesus says, “I am with you always.” (Matt 28)

This is his promise to us too...

That he will never leave us.

The Spirit of the Lord is *always* with us.

So how about us?

How is God using our circumstances?

How is God using your suffering for the progress of the gospel?

Is he putting you in a place to share the hope of your faith with others?

Are your present sufferings opening doors for interaction with people who don't know life in Christ?

Are your neighbors or even strangers more willing to talk now?

There are plenty of people walking around in fear and despair today...

As God's people, we carry words of comfort, hope, and life.

We know that God is in control and that God is all about healing and restoration...

God raised Jesus from the dead to defeat sin, death, and brokenness...

This is the message we carry that others need to hear.

Maybe God is using your suffering to be an encouragement to fellow believers.

The way that you're handling these times with great hope and faith...

Might just be giving strength to those weighed down.

Or maybe God is using this season of suffering to lead you into a deeper relationship with him.

Maybe he's inviting you into greater levels of maturity in your faith...

Inviting you to focus less on *your* plans...

And more on *his* plans...

Inviting you into deeper levels of sacrifice...

So that the life-saving message of Jesus Christ will advance through you.

Or if you don't know Christ...

Maybe you're being invited to turn to him.

To trust him with your life.

To trust what he says:

That Jesus is the only way back into relationship with God the Father;

That he died for all of your sins against God, yourself, and other people;

That forgiveness and real life is only found in him.

God uses our suffering.

No matter where we're at in our faith journey...

God is using our suffering—

It's not going to waste—

He's using it to advance his good purposes in us and in the world.

Let's see our sufferings as invitations...

An invitation from God to turn to him...

A divine invitation for God to do a work in and through us!

For his glory...

Amen.