

The Witness of Persecution.  
Philippians 1:12-19

Romans 8:18-28

1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1:3-9

Congregational Reading. Psalm 37:1-11

READ: First 11 verses.

So last week we reviewed what we did the previous week, kind of. We actually ended up going over the exact same verses but talked about something completely different. Last week we looked at Paul's prayer here for the Saints in Philippi and we showed how his prayer for them is actually a good example to us on how we are to pray.

Alright, it is everyone's favorite time now. Test day! Does anyone remember the 4 examples we took from Paul's prayer?

1. We should pray for one another.
2. We should pray with affection
3. Pray for love to grow
4. Pray so we may approve that which is good.

Extra bonus points for anyone who can remember the 5<sup>th</sup> thing about prayer. That we should pray without ceasing. So how has everyone done incorporating all of this into their prayer life this week? Honestly some of this isn't that hard, praying for each other, praying for each other with affection, neither of those are really that much of a challenge.

At least 2 of these for me seem to be where I need some work. It is not often that I just simply pray for love to grow, toward each other, and those around me, in fact if I am to be honest I seem to pray more along the lines that people just leave me alone, when in actuality I should be praying that God would work in me love, patience, and kindness toward them.

Also the practice of praying without ceasing. Often times I let my mind run idle, Sometimes I spend more time than I should focusing on things of very little importance, but most the time I focus on my struggles, my difficulties, stresses, problems, worries and doubts. The practice of making prayer more forefront in my mind is probably my biggest struggle. I usually wait until I have traveled so far down the dark rabbit hole of negativity that it would seem I reached a dead end, and it isn't until then that I think...hmm I should probably pray about this!

Looking at Paul's prayer here, verse 8. "For God is my witness, how greatly I love for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ. And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. "

As Paul mentions earlier, and also talks about in our passage today he is imprisoned. And his thoughts are not about how he is suffering or how reaching out so that someone may free him from his chains, but his thoughts and prayers are for the Saint's at Philippi, rejoicing in them, and praying for them that they should grow in love, knowledge and discernment

This is a challenge for me, because my prayer is often for deliverance, or release, or help, or guidance. Which none of these are bad, we are told to pray for such things, and to make our petitions known but if I sit back and think about it, if I am to be honest this focus still comes all down to me, what I need, what I want. As I said I usually end up praying when I reach the end of my rope, or when I am frustrated and don't find myself often just praying, for the purpose of worship.

The focus in my prayer is often on myself, but by the examples we have here, that is not the case at all. Despite the circumstance that Paul finds himself in, he rejoices, he praises God, and his focus is his prayer and concern for others.

So let us now go to our passage for today, Philippians 1:12-19 and read that. So what we find here starting out is Paul's take on his situation. Notice he isn't complaining, but he is rejoicing and glorifying God. Even in his chains, it has been an opportunity for the furtherance of the gospel. Even though I have referenced it probably a million and a half times now, I am going to do so again. Remember James says to count all our trials as joy....why? Here we go, another test. What should we count our trials as joy? James says that the trials, is a testing of faith and will produce in us patience. Teaching us to wait upon God, to rely more on him, to focus less on ourselves, and to rely on God more.

Is that not what we see Paul doing here, while imprisoned? Is this not exactly what Paul did when he and Silas did while imprisoned there in Philippi? And out of that, from a few hearts that God quickened to understand the Gospel delivered by Paul, we now have an established church that he is writing to.

Think about that for a minute. I think I may have mentioned this a few weeks ago in the introduction, but I think it is good to bring it back up again. By any outlook and opinion of this world we would see Paul's mission trip there as pretty much a failure. He managed to get himself thrown in jail, he cast out a demon...and only a handful of people responded to his preaching. Josh, our missionary friend has said that this is a very big struggle for modern missionaries.

They go around to churches, seeking support so that they can bring the gospel to unreached people. They come back after year, or even a few years to give a report to which they rejoice that there is now a small group of 3 or 4 people who meet, who pray and read the bible. Many churches look at that, and think.. we have given you all this money, supported you for all these years and all you have to show is 3 to 4 people...maybe?

Sadly that seems to be the response to the mission field today, it is seen as a financial investment with the payout being converts, and if the soul stock market isn't rising as they think it should, if they are not seeing returns on their investment that they deem worthy then pull back support. Many missionaries return from the field just for the simple fact that they are unable to get the support they need. I ask, what is the price of a human soul? A few hundred...maybe a few thousand? I think at times we forget, we are talking eternity here, and one soul..or 3 or 4 souls won for Christ, even if that is all that is accomplished throughout a life of ministry, it is priceless.

And look at what is recorded here, out of 2 families a church has grown at Philippi. This should be a great encouragement to missionaries, to pastors, and to each of us as we go about witnessing for Christ. And this should stand as an example to the churches who give support to those who are willing to go to unreached people, that we should not despise small things, but instead be rejoicing and giving

God praise that 2 or 3 more of his children have been freed from the slavery of sin.

Even Paul's circumstance, in chains, in prison. Paul was a traveling missionary and here he was stuck. This would seem like a great hindrance, Like the equivalent of tying a guitar players right hand behind his back, rendering them useless and unable to perform.

But Paul doesn't see it that way, look what he says, “ But I want you to know that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel.” He is reporting to the Saint's in Philippi so that they may rejoice with him. Notice he isn't asking them to pray for his release, but rather he reports so that they will rejoice that even while in chains the gospel is spreading.

What may seem like trials, and suffering to us God very well can use for his purpose and plan. This goes back to what I was just saying earlier, instead of focusing on ourselves, our problems, and our trials the right thing to do is to focus on Christ and how he may use it so that we grow in patience, in love, and reliance upon him. We see here in this case of Paul that God has Paul right where he wants him. From our view as humans it would seem to the end of the ministry, but God put Paul there so that what Paul wrote in Roman's would be fulfilled.

Turn with me to Roman's 8, starting in verse 28. We are all very familiar with this...this golden chain of the gospel. “And we know that all things work together or the good to those who the called according to his purpose.” As we read through this...keep in mind Paul, in prison, witnessing to the guards. “For whom he foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.” Notice, predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ, I could go on here about what this means....but I will just quickly sum it up this way, we are not a part of the family of God because we believe....we believe because we are a part of the family of God, we have been conformed.. changed, molded to the image of His Son...we didn't do it, God did.

Ok, continuing on “ Moreover whom he predestined”...these people that God predetermined that he would conform to the image of his Son, “he also called.” God drew his predestined children to himself, and those who drew, those he called he also justified, and whom he justified these he also glorified. Once again, we are not justified because we did something... we are justified because God did something, which was imputing the righteousness of his Son toward us.

So, Paul goes on here.. “What can we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? So bringing this back, thinking on Paul here in prison and his letter to the Philippians. Paul knew that he was God's tool, to be used as God chose to be placed where God wanted him...even if it was in chains. And through that, we see that those whom God predestined, he called through the preaching of the gospel by Paul.

Throughout all of church history God has used persecution for the spreading of his word. And when we are suffering, how we act through out that suffering is a witness to Christ. I don't think we often think of It that way, but rather we just seek to find release and be free from it but in fact the very thing that is causing us grief could be the very tool that God is using to accomplish his plan calling, an gathering to himself those he has predestined to be conformed to the image of his son. As one author said. “ The blood and pain of the saints is the fertilizer for the multiplication of Abraham's seed.”

If we look further down we see that Paul's circumstance didn't not just afford an opportunity for him to preach Christ to the palace guard, but in verse 14 he says, “And most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from goodwill.

The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains, but the latter out of love knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel. What then? Only that in every way whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached, and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.”

Paul is so intent on preaching the gospel, so focused on the mission that God had given him that he rejoices..even in those who preach to cause him harm, to add affliction to his chains, even so the gospel is preached.

We can see this today, we don't have to look to long and hard to find pastor's who preach more for their own glory, then for Gods. They are hip, they are cool, they are entertaining, the church follows them not because of what they says, but because of how they says it. But even in this, in some cases if we did deep enough we can find the gospel. Albeit a watered down, barely recognizable gospel, but we can find Christ's atoning work being taught under some of the beards, cigars, craft beer, plaid shirts and skinny jeans.

I don't think that Paul here is condoning this behavior necessarily, And He definitely is not accepting of someone who is preaching a false message, but he is saying that even those who preach out of their own pride, who seek to puff themselves up it really is the message the matters, As long as the gospel is preached, even if by pretentious preachers, Paul rejoices.

So Paul completely understood his condition here, and he saw how he was given opportunity to be a witness for Christ to those around him, by not hanging his head low..crying out oh whoa is me...but I am sure just like he did in the Philippian jail, he was singing songs, and praising God. His affliction became the fertilizer to feed the seeds of Abraham around him that God predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. But that was not the only effect, others were being emboldened by his chains to preach the word.

Blake White in his book on Philippians, “Joyful unity in the gospel” sum it up this way. “Petty opinions fall to the wayside when Christ is central. Black carpet, blue carpet, or green carpet? Christ is proclaimed! Pews or movie seats? Christ is proclaimed! Methodist, Presbyterian, or Baptist? Christ is proclaimed! Contemporary music, or traditional music? Christ is proclaimed! Let us always keep the main thing the main thing, and when it is.. let us rejoice.

I know...I see the cringes, I felt them when typing that out...but he isn't wrong. Far to often we divide and split ourselves over petty opinions. Sometimes I think we let self stand in the way of selfless love.

So I want to close today, with a little story which illustrates the gospel witness through persecution and suffering. This is an excerpt taken from the biography of Sergei Kourdakov, who was a KGB agent during the late 60s, tasked with raiding christian gatherings because they were seen as threat to communism. He had raided over 150 home gatherings of Christians in Russia until God used the suffering of one girl to convict him and cause him to see that these Christians have something that he did not.

He writes, “I saw Victor Marveyev reach and grab for a young girl. {Natasha Zhdanova} who was trying to escape to another room. She was a beautiful girl, what a waste to be a Believer. Victor caught her, picked her above his head and held her high in the air for a second. She was pleading,

“Don't, please don't. Dear God help us! Victor threw her so hard she hit the wall at the same height she was thrown and dropped to the floor, semiconscious, moaning. Victor tuned and laughed and exclaimed, “I'll bet the idea of God went flying out of her head.”

On a later raid, Sergei was shocked to see Natasha again. I quickly surveyed the room and saw a sight I couldn't believe. There she was, the same girl! It couldn't be, but it was. Only 3 nights before she had been at the other meeting and had been viciously thrown across the room.

It was the first time I really got a good look at her. She was more beautiful than I had first remembered, a very beautiful girl with long, flowing blond hair, large blue eyes and smooth skin, one of the most naturally beautiful girls I have ever seen....

I picked her up and flung her on a table face down. Two of us stripped her clothes off. One of my men held her down and I began to beat her again and again. MY hands began to sting under the blows. Her skin started to blister. I continued to beat her until pieces of bloody flesh started coming off on my hand. She moaned but fought desperately not to cry. To suppress her cries, she bit her lower lip until it was bitten through and blood ran down her chin.

At last she gave in and started sobbing. When I was so exhausted I couldn't raise my arm for even one more blow, and her backside was a mass of raw flesh, I pushed her off the table and she collapsed on the floor.

To Sergei's shock, he later encountered her at yet another prayer meeting, but this time something was different. There she was again, Natasha Zhdanova! Several of the guys saw her too. Alex Gulyaev moved toward Natasha, hatred filling his face, his club raised above his head.

Then something I never expected to see suddenly happened. Without warning, Victor jumped between Natasha and Alex, facing Alex head on.

Get out of my way! Alex shouted angrily. Victor's feet did not move. He raised his club and said menacingly,” Alex, I am telling you, don't touch her! No one touches her! I listened in amazement. Incredibly, one of my most brutal men was protecting of the these Believers! Get back! He shouted to Alex “Get back, or I will let yo have it!” He shielded Natasha, who was cowering on the floor.

Angered Alex shouted, “You want her for yourself don't you?” “No” Victor shouted back, “She has something we don't have! Nobody touches, her..Nobody!” For one of the first times in my life I was deeply moved Natasha did have something! She had been beaten horribly. She had been warned and threatened. She had gone through unbelievable suffering but here she was again. Even Victor had been moved and recognized it.

She had something we did not have. I wanted to run after her and ask, What is it? I wanted to talk to her, but she was gone. This heroic Christian girl who had suffered so much at our hands somehow touched and troubled me very much. The Lord later opened Sergei's heart to the glorious good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and as he reflected upon this, he wrote in his book to Natasha who he never saw again. “And , finally, to Natasha, whom I beat terribly and who was wiling to be beaten a third time for her faith, I want to say, Natasha, largely because of you, my life is now changed and I am a fellow Believer in Christ with you. I have a new life before me. God has forgiven me, I hope you can also. Thank you, Natasha, where ever you are. I will never, never forget you.

There are countless accounts like this one, or people who persecuted, or witnessed the persecution of Christian's only to be so astounded by their faith to begin to ask themselves questions how can this be so that these people even to the point of death will not recant. In other accounts during this time of the KBG raids on christian gatherings, Sergei reported how troubling it was that this believers never fought back, they never defended themselves against the persecution. This is the gospel witness through persecution.

Being like Christ, is what it is to be a Christian., we are to love as he loves, and we are to live our lives as living sacrifices to God. Just as Paul's imprisonment was used by God to further the gospel, so was the persecution of Natasha Zhdanova, and millions of other such stories throughout history.

And while none of us have yet been called to endure such suffering we can take from this a valuable lesson. When we loose a job, we don't panic, When a loved one dies, we don't grieve hopelessly. When we get sick, we don't despair but instead we entrust ourselves to God.

When we are wronged we do not seek revenge, When persecuted we do not curse, we bless. And this kind of perseverance provokes questions. What a strange group these Christian people are, despite everything they still keep on, holding to their faith, worshiping and rejoicing together. Let us be determined to be these strange people so that the world will see Christ in us and wonder, what is it that we have, that they do not. May God be praised, and use us for the spreading of his gospel.