

Philippians 1:12-18a

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Despite being imprisoned in Rome, Paul's ministry has increased. He has become well known to the emperor's guards and has preached the gospel to them. The believers in Rome have grown more courageous in sharing their faith. But there are some who preach Christ to earn status among the believers; they think that since Paul is a prisoner, they have an opportunity to gain influence in the church. But Paul is happy that the gospel is preached, whether the motive is pure or selfish.

Paul now turns from the introductory section of his letter to bring some news. He is writing this letter from imprisonment in Rome. He spent two years under house arrest, awaiting the hearing of his appeal before Caesar (Acts 28:30). Doubtless the Philippian believers had great concern for his welfare; they had come to faith under his ministry, and were the only church to participate with him financially (Philippians 4:15). Paul now brings some good news, stating: Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel.

Consistent with his overall message, Paul does not express concern about his own comfort. His primary concern is with the mission he serves. He is happy that his imprisonment has turned out for the greater progress of the gospel. As it happened, Paul's imprisonment in the cause of Christ had become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard. During this period, the praetorian guard was like the American Secret Service. They were the elite group of soldiers that protected Caesar. They were also known to have toppled emperors, as well as to have installed them. They were, accordingly, highly influential in Rome. Paul does not say how many of the praetorian guard became believers, only that the cause of Christ had become well known to them.

Paul made special note of the praetorian guard, but also noted that his imprisonment in the cause of Christ had also become known to everyone else. So it seems that Paul's ministry in Rome through his house arrest had become a very successful gospel outreach. God had worked much good out of a situation that was bad. Paul was unjustly accused, and really should not have had to appeal to Caesar in the first place (Acts 28:19-20). But God worked it for good.

Another positive outcome of Paul's imprisonment in Rome was that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear. There was already a church in Rome before Paul's arrival. In Paul's epistle to the Romans, he wrote that their faith was "being proclaimed throughout the whole world" (Romans 1:8). Paul made clear in this epistle that he had not yet been to Rome. It seems likely that Priscilla and Aquila had a lot to do with the founding of the church in Rome. They were Paul's co-laborers that he brought to the knowledge of Jesus while they were refugees from persecution under the emperor Claudius, having fled Rome for a time (Acts 18:2; Romans 16:3).

It was probable that Paul was able to plug directly into a network of believers in Rome upon his

arrival and imprisonment. Because of Paul's message and conduct, the brethren in Rome grew stronger in their faith, and had far more courage to speak the word of God without fear. Paul brimmed with confidence that anything he lost in this life for the sake of Christ was great gain in rewards from Jesus in heaven (as he will state overtly in 3:7-8).

Next Paul acknowledges the reality that not all who preach Christ do so from a proper motive. He states that Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife. These who preach from envy and strife do so out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives. These people are preaching the gospel, but not to please Christ, as they ought. Rather they are doing so to one-up Paul. Paul says these preachers are thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. It seems these people were jealous of Paul's authority, and sought to create competition and division in order to displace Paul with themselves. Their priority is not to equip people to follow Jesus. It is to create followers for themselves. It would be natural for Paul to oppose such people.

However, Paul does not seem to care. Paul asks What then? He answers this question with the statement: Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. Paul does not care whether these people preaching the gospel are doing so as a matter of pretense, hoping for some earthly gain, so long as they preach a gospel that is true. These people proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives. A pure motive would be to have the same mind about obedience that Jesus had when He came to earth. Paul will instruct us in this in Chapter 2. Jesus obeyed His Father, knowing that it was for His very best, and trusting His Father's benevolence to reward Him abundantly. But those who would be Paul's competitors do not have in mind pleasing God, and gaining rewards from Him. Their motive is selfish ambition.

In Romans 2, Paul contrasts actions that are "selfishly ambitious" with those who have "perseverance in doing good" and in doing so "seek for glory and honor and immortality" from God (Romans 2:7-8). Selfish ambition seeks glory, honor, and legacy from the world. But those who choose to do good, trusting God to reward them, they will gain great reward. They will gain the greatest fulfillment of life. Those who are "selfishly ambitious" will experience "wrath and indignation" in the judgment of Christ (Romans 1:7-8). Their works will go up in flames in the fire of God's judgement (1 Corinthians 3:11-17). Knowing this, Paul does not worry about these people. God will judge all. That is not up to Paul. Paul is only concerned to see the gospel spread.

How could Paul know of these improper motives? He does not tell us. But in addition to providing the emperor protection, the praetorian guard was also the emperor's intelligence service. So it could be that Paul had a tremendous amount of intelligence flowing to him that would allow him to make such a judgement. Paul says some spreaders of the gospel are thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. From the context here, it seems the distress would be from Paul fearing that they were taking his place, and diminishing his status. But Paul's goal is not to ascend over other people. It is to serve Jesus, the Lord of all. So long as the mission God gave him to spread the gospel is advanced, he is happy.

Thankfully, some also preached the gospel from good will. These do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel. Some people have the same attitude as Paul, and are

glad to work alongside Paul as co-laborers. These are people who recognize that we are all one body, and there is only one Head, and that is Jesus (Ephesians 5:23). They are preaching the gospel out of love. The word translated love is the Greek word “agape” which is a choice to benefit others based on values. Perhaps Paul is interpreting their choice to serve Jesus in the gospel as love toward him, given that such an action is helping him accomplish the mission Jesus entrusted to him. If this happens, Paul says in this I rejoice. Paul leaves judgment to God. He rejoices when the mission is advanced to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Biblical Text

¹² Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, ¹³ so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, ¹⁴ and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear. ¹⁵ Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; ¹⁶ the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; ¹⁷ the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. ¹⁸ What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice.