

Rejoicing in Hardships

Partakers of Grace

By Steve Viars

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: Philippians 1:12-18
Preached On: Sunday, August 23, 2015

Faith Church
5526 State Road 26 E
Lafayette, IN 47905

Website: <http://www.faithlafayette.org/church>
Online Sermons: <http://www.sermonaudio.com/faithlafayette>

One of the great heroes of the Christian faith is a Baptist pastor from England named John Bunyan. John Bunyan grew up in a poor home. He later wrote in his autobiography "Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners" that his father's house was "of that rank that is meanest and most despised in the country." That's old English for, "We were born on the wrong side of the tracks," for sure. The name of his first wife is unknown but Bunyan said that while the newlyweds possessed little, his quote was, "Not having so much household stuff as a dish or a spoon betwixt us both," that his wife had inherited 2 books from her father, Arthur Dent's, "The Plain Man's Pathway To Heaven," and Louis Bailey's, "The Practice of Piety," and as a result, John Bunyan became a follower of Christ. He even was encouraged to begin preaching in his church. That's when he published his first book, "Some Gospel Truths Opened."

Well, in 1660, the political and religious culture changed and clamped down on religious freedom for anybody seeking to worship and teach apart from the official Anglican church so a warrant was issued for Bunyan's arrest and he was tried a few months later because he was "devilishly and perniciously abstained from coming to church to hear divine service." A few of you committed that crime a time or 2 this summer. You should expect to hear from the magistrates this week. That's what he was tried for along with having "held several unlawful meetings and conventicles." Don't you love that word? Conventicles, "to the great disturbance and distraction of the good subjects of this kingdom." So John Bunyan was thrown in jail undoubtedly by those in the political and established religious power who believed that that would silence his message of the Gospel. Well, the problem was that Bunyan went right on preaching to his fellow prisoners in the jail. In fact, he would do it in the walled courtyard of the jail and in addition to the prisoners inside the wall, history tells us that other people from the town would come and stand outside the wall and listen to the sermons. You can imagine the consternation of the leaders who had to conclude, "We may need to rethink our strategy here. We wanted to silence this man and now he has at least a partially captive audience. Putting a preacher inside a jail where the parishioners can't get out may have been a wrongheaded approach for sure." So their solution was to confine him to even the deeper recesses of the prison where he could no longer impact others. It was at that time that he began to write his most famous work. Do you know what it was? "Pilgrim's Progress," which literally for centuries was the second most highly read and translated book in the

world. Centuries. In the entire world. Second only to the Bible in popularity. Who knows how many millions of people around the world heard the preaching of the Gospel through that great book.

You see, the principle is what sometimes looks like hardship and opposition intended to silence and stifle your witness and testimony can actually turn out to be the polar opposite where you now have a more effective ministry platform than ever before. That's exactly what happened to John Bunyan. That's exactly what happened to the Apostle Paul. And that may be exactly what's happening to the church of Jesus Christ today. With that in mind, open your Bible now, if you would, to Philippians 1. If you don't have a Bible with you, don't worry about that, just pull out the one from under the chair in front of you and turn to page 154 of the back section of the New Testament. That will bring you to Philippians 1.

Last Sunday we began a brand-new series for the fall entitled "Partakers of Grace." It's going to be a verse-by-verse treatment of this marvelous book of Philippians which was a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote while he was in prison in Rome to a dear church family in this city of Philippi, also known in Scripture as the region of Macedonia. Now, last week we started all of this and I mentioned 5 reasons Paul wrote the book. Let me just remind you of them quickly and I realize some are here for the first time today so why did Paul write the book of Philippians? Well, 1. To express in writing his thanks for the Philippians' financial gift. They had been gracious enough to actually receive a love offering for their missionary, Paul, because he was in prison in Rome and they wanted to bless his life and his ministry and so Paul, in return, just like we would today, wanted to write a thank you note back. Then to explain why he was sending Epaphroditus back to them. That was the man from the Philippian church who was selected, obviously a faithful, trustworthy man, to carry their financial gift to Paul with the assumption, then, that Epaphroditus would stay on their behalf and continue to serve Paul but he is now being sent back, and to be sure that the church didn't think that Epaphroditus had disappointed or failed Paul in some way, he explains why that is happening. Then also just to inform them about his circumstances in Rome. We're going to see a lot of that today. But in other words, he would say, "Don't worry about me. Don't worry about these chains. Let me tell you exactly what is going on here." Then to exhort them to unity. Any time you get 2 followers of Jesus under the same roof you're going to have a problem here or there, huh? It happened around here. This place used to be perfect until you came. Or was that me? But to exhort them to unity and we get to chapter 4, verse 2, a couple of ladies are going to be called out in the church house. We'll get there eventually, but to exhort them to unity. Then lastly to warn them against false teachers as is always the case. You know, it's amazing how similar Paul's situation was to that of John Bunyan.

Now, I also just raised the issue last week about the situation in which we find ourselves as a church because without a doubt, there is a certain level of growing animus toward the church of Jesus Christ on the part of some people in this culture. Some, not all. Let's not make it worse than it is but some people want to shame or silence Bible believing Christians and Bible believing churches in all sorts of ways. Examples are everywhere. We saw one down in the city of Carmel of all places this week where Mayor Jim

Brainard stated that, "There is a distinct difference between how we worship God in our churches, our homes and our hearts, versus how we live." With all due respect, Mayor Brainard, "No, there isn't. No, there isn't." Paul said it like this, "Whether therefore you eat or drink," how often do you do that? That would be every day. The way you live. "Whether therefore you eat or drink or whatever you do," anywhere, any time, any place, "do all," to what? "All to the glory of God." And columnist Peter Haack was writing his op-ed piece in the Indy Star this week when he said, "Perhaps for you, Mayor, but for many of us our faith is who we are, not something we do on Sunday mornings and we're no more willing to treat our beliefs as an on/off switch than we are to bow the knee to a city administration abusing its power to tell us we must." Smile, but that is the way that it is.

So there is pressure and animus that seeks in John Bunyan terms to put the Gospel deep in the recesses of the cultural prison or to treat men and women who believe God's word like the cigarette smoker who needs to go outside if you want to do that. So I pointed out churches like ours have to at least ask the question, "What does that mean for our future? What are we going to do about that?" And I suppose one answer is to just abandon any biblical belief that is offensive to the culture in which we live. We could do that. Do you want to do that? We're not doing that, right? We are absolutely not going to be ashamed of the truth of the word of God or subject our beliefs to political correctness. Well, if we're not doing that, then we at least have to ask, "Will the next generation of Christians be willing to stand up for the Lord without compromise even if that means paying a greater cultural price of lack of popularity or acceptance in this culture?" If not, in other words, if God cannot put his product on the market in this day and age, then here's what we'd better do: we'd better hunker down. We'd better hunker down. We'd better strategize for a reduced footprint of ministry and influence in the future as a church. So you just have and don't get all nervous about it, okay? I'm not wound yet. So it's not like I'm worried about this. In fact, I slept really well last night so I'm not....but we have to point it out. It's my job to point that out along with, here's a trend, we just need to figure out what the Lord is doing with a rather significant contingency fund for many of our ministry divisions because of both just regular generous giving on the part of our church family and some unexpected and large significant financial gifts. If you took all of the contingency funds now held by our various ministry divisions, you would be talking about millions of dollars. Well, are we a bank? Are we supposed to just hunker down? Lay on the gold? What are we? And now, since we're finishing our senior living community, pretty happy about that? One of the keystones of our current five-year ministry plan, what should we do next? What should we do next especially if we're going to be put in the jail of cultural condemnation? I asked you last Sunday to be praying for our pastors and deacons last Thursday evening as we considered a whole series of initiatives to work on next as a church believing that the last thing we ought to do is hunker down. The last thing we ought to do is be filled with fear. We believe these are great conditions in which to be a bright light in an ever darkening world. And the decisions that were reached last Thursday night, your elected leaders are just a little bit wild and the decisions that were reached and I'm so proud of them, are easily announced and explained this morning now in the setting of what Paul tells the Philippians next in this great letter.

So please follow along carefully and watch the argument. It's a short text. It's a short text this morning. Follow the argument and you've been listening a little bit to me, now be listening a lot to the Bible, right? When we read the Scripture, it's everything into what's being said so follow the argument carefully, please. Philippians 1, beginning in verse 12, "Now I want you to know, brethren," Paul says, "that my circumstances," that is being in prison, "my circumstances have turned out for," what? "For the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard." Seriously? "And to everyone else, 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. Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. What then?" Here it is, "Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice."

We're talking this morning about partakers of grace by rejoicing in hardships. Have you got any hardships going on in your life? These verses can really help you. You think our church and any church like ours in this country has a few challenges before us? A few hardships? These verses can really help us so let's wring out the argument of that text I just read and find 3 reasons for joy from God; from God, the one we are worshiping this morning even when times are challenging.

Here you go, we start with rejoice when the Gospel can be advanced instead of focusing on or complaining about the circumstances. Have you been doing that this week? Have we been doing that this week? Rejoice when the Gospel can be advanced instead of focusing on or complaining about the circumstances. I think this passage we just read is instructive in part for all the things Paul doesn't say. You realize he's certainly not grumping about how bad it is, but here he has been serving the Lord and now he finds himself in chains as if God is unjust or serving him is unwise. Nothing in here about how bad the food is. About how rotten the accommodations are, "My mattress is lumpy." We don't read any of that or what it would be like to be chained to a guard all day every day simply because of your faith. He's not focused on how long this is going to last; how hard it is to be a Christian.

Now, he could have. He could have talked a lot about that. In fact, I would encourage you to go back in your Bible study this week along with the book of Philippians and read Acts 27, what it was like for Paul to get to Rome. Or consider this rare occasion when Paul was writing to another group of people, to the Corinthians, and for a different contextual reason, Paul just for a minute opened his heart. That's what he said, "I'm opening my heart wide to you." And here's what he said to the Corinthians about sometimes living for God was like. He said, "In far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number," think about that, "often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes." Think about that. "Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I

have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness," are you getting the point? "Dangers on the sea," kind of dangerous, "dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure."

What I'm saying is that if Paul wanted to fill the Philippians' ears in this particular book we're studying with all the details of how bad it was, he certainly could have, but instead we find him, what? We find him rejoicing because he was able to do what D. A. Carson suggested in his summary of this entire text: to put the advance of the Gospel at the center of your aspirations. Think about that for a minute. Think about the way you responded to hardship this week. Think about what made you happy. Think about what you dream about. Think about what's going through your mind when you don't have to be concentrating on something else. Put the advance of the Gospel at the center of your aspirations. You see, the question for John Bunyan wasn't, "How is this working out for me?" It was, "How is this working out for Christ?" The same with Paul in this text, Paul put the advance of the Gospel at the center of his aspirations.

Now, does that mean it's going to be easy if you do that? Put the Gospel at the center of your aspirations and then it will be a happy day every day? Are we talking about unimpeded, uncontested, unchallenged advancement? No, no, no. Often this is in the context of significant obstacles. In fact, it even comes, note the argument in verse 12, lock onto that word "progress" for a minute. Do you see it? "My circumstances have turned out for the greater progress." John MacArthur in his commentary on Philippians explains, "The related verb 'progress' was used of an explorer or an army advance team hacking a path through dense trees." That's what we are called to do. "Hacking a path through underbrush, moving ahead with considerable effort. Resistance is therefore inherent to that sort of progress." Here's what that means: the joy isn't because of the ease, the joy is because of the result. Paul's point to them is, "Don't be spending any time worrying about me or feeling sorry for me because my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the Gospel, the very sweet spot of why I live. I put the advance of the Gospel at the center of my aspirations."

Look at what happened in verse 13 as a result. Look where it went, "so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard." Now I realize for us, "So?" That's a big "so" to the persons who would have received this book because the praetorian guard were the elite forces. They were the handpicked soldiers who were responsible to both keep peace in the city and also even protect the Emperor which meant you get to those guys, you've got influence. Their influence in the culture was immense and if we're the members of the praetorian guard chained to the Apostle Paul, who is the prisoner now? The book of Acts tells us that at this time strange as it may seem to us, Paul was still able to receive guests though he was chained and so you have brothers and sisters in Christ coming to him for instruction and coming to him for encouragement and coming to him for direction and here are these elite guards taking all of this in. And it wasn't just the content of the Gospel, it was also Paul's gracious, Spirit-filled way of treating his guests and even his guard and there is no

way of knowing how many of them became followers of Christ but we do know this, if you peek to the end of this book for a second where Paul says, "Greet every saint in Christ Jesus, the brethren who were with me greet you, all the saints greet you, especially those of," who? What? "Of Caesar's household." How did the people in Caesar's household become Christians? Quite possibly through the Gospel message they heard from the praetorian guard. You see, that's why Paul was able to rejoice in jail because he had put the advance of the Gospel at the center of his aspirations and these challenging times were actually making business better. Do you realize that? It was making business better. How else would the church have gotten access to the praetorian guard? How else would the church have gotten access to the household of Caesar?

Think about us. Last Sunday I explained that all Bible believing churches are facing a very similar predicament. You could ask it like this: what do you do when our adversary, the devil, tweaks you on the nose? That's essentially what's happened the last several months, some of the things that have gone on culturally. The church of Jesus Christ has kind of gotten tweaked a time or 2, I suppose, and you understand, now follow this carefully: our struggle is ultimately not with flesh and blood. Do you understand that? But Paul did explain this in places like Ephesians 6, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness." Do you believe in that? Do you believe in an eternal struggle against our adversary, the devil, and his host? And do you believe that that is playing out in the world in which we live? Or are we just too sophisticated to believe that anymore? "Against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm."

So, nuance this carefully: on the one hand, we would prefer to view the world of people in this culture not so much as a battlefield but as a mission field so we want to love all of the men and woman who are around us regardless of what they might think or believe. But on the other hand, may we never forget that we're in a battle. Like Martin Luther wrote in the third stanza of his great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is our God," remember this? "And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, we will not fear." Do you agree with that? We're about advancing the Gospel, baby. "We will not fear, for God hath willed, his truth to triumph through us. The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him." We don't. "His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure; one little word shall fell him."

So I suppose you could say that our adversary has won a few cultural skirmishes recently and I've been asked by other churches around the country and even been asked by some different pastors from around the world, "What's going to happen now? I mean, should we just hunker down? Should we? Should we prepare for terrible days? Should we not expect much more advancement of the Gospel?" And the answer to all of that is, "Absolutely not." When our spiritual adversary tweaks you on the nose, you turn around and punch him in the mouth. That's the answer. Now, you say, "I thought we were supposed to turn the other cheek?" You turn the other cheek to other people, you don't turn the other cheek to the father of lies, the father of evil and darkness. James said it like

this, "Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." Peter said, "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him," there it is. That's what I mean, punch him in the mouth, same basic thing. It's in the original Greek, okay? "Resist him firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. To Him be dominion forever and ever. Amen."

Now, what does that mean practically for this place? Well, here's the answer: we're going on the offensive. There is the answer. We just pushed in the clutch. We were in third gear, we just popped it out into fourth. We are going on the offensive meaning we're looking for as many ways to advance the good news of Jesus Christ as possible because your leaders believe that our church family doesn't want to step on the brakes or put the Gospel car in the garage and hope nobody finds out what we believe or who we worship. In fact, we think the polar opposite is the case. We want to be like the faithful stewards in Matthew 25. Do you remember them? For example, the man who was given 5 talents, a lot of influence and a lot of resources and what did that guy do? Note this, immediately, he didn't sit around, "Immediately he went and invested them." He traded them and he received 5 more. He put them back on the market and he accepted the risk that came with that investment and when it was all done, he had earned 5 more and was given great commendation by his Master, "Well done, good and faithful slave." Isn't that what you want to hear when you face the Lord? Not, "Great job of hunkering down." Not, "I wish you hadn't been so filled with fear." "Well done. Well done, good and faithful slave." The man who received 2 talents did the same thing and received the same commendation. We don't want to be like the man who was given one. Do you remember what he did? He was afraid and he went away and hid his talent in the ground and what did the Master say to him? "Oh, that's okay. I know it's kind of rough out there. I know it hurts your little feelings when you get mentioned in the paper as being a goof and that's printed to every one of your neighbors and put in their mailbox. Blah, blah, blah." No, here's what it was, "But his master answered and said to him, 'You wicked, lazy slave.'" We want to be like the good stewards who regardless of the ministry context in which we find ourselves are passionately and wholeheartedly looking for opportunities to advance the good news of Jesus Christ.

So what does that specifically mean to where we are right now? Well, we've got some celebrating to do. We certainly want to celebrate the completion of our senior living community that has been put together as a result of the generous work and giving of our church. So on September 13, just a couple of weeks from now on church family night after we have our time here in the auditorium and then go over to the community center and hang out and eat, we're Baptist, we hang out and eat and then we're going to keep going right through the community center onto the road where these new senior living houses are and several of the seniors are actually going to have their houses open and you can go and tour those houses and see what they're like on the inside if you want. There will be some cookies deep in the recesses of these homes because I was involved in the

organization of all this, of course. Then when you get done with that, you can go down to the end of that street where the beautiful clubhouse is. I'm so glad for the work that has been done by people like Barry R. and Pat R. and just a whole host of individuals who have been working with them, Susan B. Just a beautiful, beautiful clubhouse and you can rejoice in that and there will be some more cookies in there. There will be some more cookies in there and you can rejoice in the advancement of the Gospel among those who are older because even in a challenging economic and cultural time in history, the Lord allowed us to do that together. Praise him for that, huh?

Well, but we still have 3 1/2 years left. You know this because you have that under your pillow, don't you, laminated under your pillow our five-year strategic ministry plan and you know. You probably looked at it last night instead of watching "Dancing with the Goofs." So you know all about that, 3 1/2 more years. Well, what are we going to do with that remaining time? Well, I'm glad to tell you that our deacons and pastors just approved the launch of 8 key initiatives. Here's what we mean when we talk about looking for opportunities to especially advance the Gospel in our community and around the world. Are you ready for these? Here's the first and I am so happy. I am so happy to inform you that you are the new owners of the former Cooler Keg Bar. That's right. You know where the Cooler Keg is, right? Don't be acting like you don't. It's on Hartford Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenue. You might say, "Isn't that on the north end?" Yeah, it is. It is. Isn't that one of the most troubled places in our entire city?" Absolutely, it is. We've been doing a lot of our community development work down there. We have renovated a couple of houses in that area. Our youth group has been doing a lot of great work, in fact, they had a marvelous block party right there last night. We've already had some people from our church move into those homes essentially as city missionaries looking for opportunities to love and serve on the people there, right there are around the Cooler Keg. You might say, "Hasn't that bar been closed for a long, long time?" Yeah, it has. In fact, the ownership reverted to the city for back taxes. You say, "Isn't it a dilapidated old building?" Oh yeah, it's a hot mess. It's a hot mess. In fact, calling that a hot mess is probably an insult to all the other hot messes in the world. It's that bad. It's that bad. The city is in the process of selling that to us. That's right, selling it to us, along with all the vacant property on the other side of Hartford Street north of the bar. You say, "Okay, lay it out, how much? How much?" A buck. One buck and, frankly, we probably overpaid.

We're planning on advancing the Gospel right there. That's it, by tearing down the Cooler Keg. We talked to neighbors already about it. One person wanted us to bring the Cooler Keg back. We're not going to do that but what we're going to do on that side of the road because that's a pretty narrow piece of property, we're going to tear that down and replace it with a small neighborhood park where there will be some outdoor seating, a little splash pad for children to play on, maybe a basketball hoop on that side of the road. But on the other side, on the larger property, the vacant property, we're planning in collaboration with the neighbors and the city of Lafayette to build a small neighborhood resource center there. What we mean by that is the first floor will have a classroom. We'll have some offices for counseling and mentoring. We'll have a large open area for all sorts of classes. A kitchen. Other community ministries and activities. A large wrap around porch with a big grill just for neighborhood events. Also on that side of the road, some

other places outside for community athletics. On the second floor of that building we're planning to put 3 apartments where 3 of our new seminary couples will move. They want to live down there in order to oversee the programming and just love on the neighbors and lead the ministries in that neighborhood.

Now, you might say, "How in the world are we going to pay for all of that?" Now, here's something I learned a long time ago and I don't like it. I think business is spiritual. I think you ought to have a business meeting and everybody should come. If we had a business meeting about all this, we could hold it in my closet. I understand that. Most people in the church, they don't want to get into the financial weeds, they just want to be sure that somebody did and so if you say, "What has the staff been doing all summer?" Working on a business and development plan for everything that I'm about to tell you, explaining the steps and the financial aspects of each one of these projects. Now, if you really want one, I know you're saying, "Boring." If you really want one of these, they are available at the welcome center. Take one and read it and give us your feedback. That's all available. But the short version is: this particular project is a collaboration between our seminary and our community development corporation and what that means is the seminary is putting up \$250,000 of their excess of their contingency, because we're not a bank. You take what God has given you and you reinvest it in ministry. By the way, that is by far the most racially diverse area of Tippecanoe County and we believe that churches ought to be leaders in racial reconciliation. I just believe that and so we're trying to work right there on purpose and the seminary is not putting their students in the beautiful places. The seminary is putting them right there for that purpose and they are putting up money. The rest is going to be raised, we hope, through a special Christmas offering right here at our church and I'll talk to you about that more after the stock market goes back up. Now, but let's joyfully invest. You should have given last week. Let's joyfully advance the Gospel on the north end, huh? In these darkening days in which we live.

Secondly, I mentioned there are 8, that was only one. We also decided to launch the men's ministry at Bethany Farms. That's 100 acres of property that was given to this church nearly 10 years ago east of our Faith East campus. So our CDC and Faith Bible Seminary are going to lead the charge on the north side neighborhood resource project. Our counseling center, Faith biblical Counseling Ministries, is going to take from their contingency and immediately hire someone to begin working at Bethany Farms. I mean, immediately, because we think God gave us that property for a variety of ministry purposes and we want to go after that right now. And just like the Gospel has been advanced in the lives of women who are struggling at Vision of Hope, and are you glad for that opportunity, by the way? Well now, we hope and pray that the same is going to happen for man at Bethany Farms and we feel like now is going to be a really good time. You say our adversary is going to be mad about that. Good. Good, because we're punching him where? Thank you very much. That will be a huge undertaking for the counseling center but we believe it's time.

Now, I'll tell you more in a minute but let's peek back at this text. Also rejoice in the opportunity to lead and to encourage others. You see, what happened as a result of the way Paul put the advancement of the Gospel at the center of his aspirations, well, others

fed off his courage, huh? Did you see that in the text? "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." Paul recognized that for whatever reason, God had put him in a leadership position and he wanted to be used in that way. In fact, you could say it like this: you know, Paul was in prison but God's word wasn't. You might say, "How do we know that?" Well, Paul said as much in his letter to Timothy. He said this, "Remember Jesus Christ risen from the dead," there is the Gospel, "descendent of David according to my gospel, for which I suffer hardship even to the imprisonment as a criminal; but the word of God," there it is, "the word of God is not imprisoned. For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ." I want to see other men and women receive new life, "in Christ and with it eternal glory." Amen. Amen. And amen.

And as Paul lived that way, other brothers and sisters in Jesus were emboldened to follow. Do you know why? Because a Gospel centered life is an influential life. Do you believe that? Living for yourself is boring. Do you know that? Some people will hear this message today and all they did last week was live for themselves and do you know what? You're boring and I don't say that to shame you, I say that to call you to something better. A Gospel centered life is an influential life. Conversely, we've got all kinds of people that are tired right now. Do you know why? Not just because this sermon is so long. They are tired because they have been placing the Gospel at the center of their aspirations. As a result, they've been serving God in all sorts of ways and A. they're tired and B. they're joyful. Seeing men and women come to Christ. Having an opportunity to encourage people in the things of the faith. You want to wear out doing that, don't you? Absolutely.

A Gospel centered life is an influential life. Consider these verses, Paul said in Acts 20, "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself." You might say, by the way, "Now, wait a minute, we're going to have young couples living down on the north end? Do you realize that's dangerous?" And I don't want to be flip about that because I do realize that's dangerous but we've got some young people around here, some old people around here and everybody in between, who have this view: the safest place in all the world is the center of the will of God. So I don't want to just hang out with the beautiful people all the time, I want to find out where the greatest needs and I want to run to that kind of a ministry opportunity. I don't consider my life of any account as dear to myself so that I may finish my course in the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus. Have you got one of those? I hope so. The ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus to testify solemnly of the Gospel of the grace of God.

Or this, "For if I have preached the Gospel, I have nothing to boast of because I am under compulsion." That's why you spent so much time last week telling others about Christ. I'm under compulsion. "Woe is me if I don't preach the Gospel." Or this same idea, "I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish so for my part I am eager to preach the Gospel to you also who are in Rome for I am not ashamed of the Gospel." So you have people in this culture who want to shame you and they want to silence you. Are you going to let that happen? "I'm not ashamed of the Gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first

and also to the Greek." I want to put the advancement of the Gospel at the center of my aspirations. No wonder other brothers and sisters were emboldened by Paul's heart and his example.

Now back to us. Advance. Advance. Progress. Downtown neighborhood resource center in the lower Lincoln area of our town. A men's ministry at Bethany Farms. Well, what else? What else? We also plan to send Matt and Dana Hall, Matt's a student in our seminary who will be graduating this time next year, we're planning to send them on a two-year ministry assignment to the country of Albania. They are going to be working alongside an Albanian pastor and his wife. Now, a couple of interesting tidbits about this ministry partnership. Geographically, Albania is between Philippi, Macedonia where this book was written and Rome, where Paul was writing it from. Incredible just from a geographic perspective. Also it would probably interest some of you, the Albanian pastor and his wife just had a new baby one day before Matt and Dana had their daughter just a couple of weeks ago. Yeah, I knew that would get some, "Ahs." That's good. What that means is their little babies are going to spend the first couple of years in the nursery together in Albania. And what we're especially excited about is this: we're going to be serving in a formerly communist country. The Albanian pastor and his wife grew up in communist homes. The pastor's wife told me that she did not remember ever hearing even the word "God" until she was 13 years old. They grew up in communist homes and we are not going there to tell them what to do, Matt and Dana are going to serve under their national leadership in a formerly communist country and one that is now predominantly Muslim. And here's what we believe: we believe that the Gospel can be advanced right there.

Fourth, sit back, we have asked Vision of Hope to launch a ministry to victims of human trafficking. I'm very thankful for the committee from our church that has been working with prosecutor Pat Harrington on this project, Gary and Michelle L, Stephanie K., Arvid O., Mark S., Heather S. Human trafficking is a growing problem even here in Lafayette. Did you know that? Because of our proximity to I 65. Because of being in between Chicago and Indianapolis, here's what happens: some evil, vile man gets connected with a runaway and then takes that person's picture and posts it on social media that, "We'll be at a certain hotel at a certain time and you can come and have sex with this young girl or with this young boy." And I'm not talking about something happening in New York City or happening in Los Angeles, I'm talking about that's been happening right here at the hotels at the intersection of I 65 and State Road 26. You will pass on your way home today, many of you, the very place where that kind of thing has been occurring and what our prosecutor is telling us is, "Listen, when we break one of those rings up, we know what to do with the adults. What do you do with the runaways? What do you do with the kids?" And so we're looking to build a new home near Vision of Hope and we're going to begin a ministry to the victims of human trafficking and the Vision of Hope board has taken responsibility for that ministry to the point of committing \$100,000 of their contingencies to the construction of that home. We received a gift of \$30,000 two weeks ago for that project before we even announced that we were going to do it. So we want to see the Gospel advance even on that important ministry front.

Now, you look at the 4 I've already mentioned and is it all going to work out perfectly? Nope. It never does which means we can rejoice even when the ministry context is imperfect. Paul explains that the motivation of some of the people involved here was impure and it wasn't a matter of people preaching a false Gospel, Paul would have been all over that, but it was the right Gospel for the wrong motives. There was envy, wishing that Paul didn't have the intellect or the giftedness or the influence that God had given him. Some people chose to be envious of that and jealousy, wishing he had gifts instead of Paul, and all sorts of strife that comes when that's the case. In fact, some were actually seeking to add to Paul's distress. That can happen too when people use their mouths and use their energy to tear down a pastor or a missionary. Well, secretly envying them. But Paul says, "I am not going to get drawn into those personality struggles." "What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice." You see, that's what happens when you put the advancement of the Gospel at the center of your aspirations.

Now, a downtown neighborhood resource center, happy about that? Men's ministry at Bethany Farms, happy about that? A new ministry partnership in Albania. A ministry center for victims of human trafficking. Any other ways to advance the Gospel around here? Let me tell you about 4 more quickly. We're very excited about what's happening with our international student ministries at Purdue, aren't you? Matt and Leona S. have done a marvelous job. We could not be more excited about the way the Gospel is advancing there with international students at Purdue but now we think it's time to hire another staff member to serve as a missionary to that ministry. It might be in tandem with some other ministry responsibilities. We don't have it all worked out but the point is we want to put more resources into ministering to international students at Purdue.

Sixth, we think it's time to contemplate a church plant on the north side of town. I realize most churches figure out where the beautiful people are and go there. Okay, we're looking for the places of greatest need and we're going there so our community centers, Faith East and Faith West are taking the responsibility to hire probably a church planting team, a full-time equivalent with some other ministry responsibilities, to work with our CDC in the building of this project at the Cooler Keg but with the eventual goal of opening a third ministry campus on the north side of town.

And seventh, there is the planned expansion of our school. We know we're not where we need to be when it comes to facilities for our lower elementary grades. Some of our church's children's ministries. We know that. We know we have some security concerns that really cannot be addressed with all the activity that's going on in this building throughout the week. So we're planning to set ourselves up to focus on addressing those needs at the end of this period of time or the beginning of the next one and when that happens, that will displace our seminary. That will displace our counseling center and much of our church staff which brings us to the 8th initiative: at some point, we want to prepare for a new facility for our seminary, our counseling ministry and our church staff but the decision has to be made where? It may be here on our Faith East campus or it may be renovating a building downtown where that becomes the hub of much of Faith ministries. That decision has yet to be made.

Now, here's the point in case it hasn't come through clearly yet: we don't think it's time to hunker down. We don't think it's time to be filled with fear, do you? We think it's time to joyfully ask the Lord to help us advance the Gospel here in our town and around the world. And can I say to you, we need you on the team. We want you on the team. Have you accepted the Gospel personally? Has there been a time in your life where you have trusted in the shed blood of Christ for your salvation? If not, we want to encourage you to do that today. On a personal level, have you made the proclamation of the Gospel the center of your aspirations? Thirdly, will you help your church advance it with passion in this dark and darkening world in which we live?

Let's stand together for prayer, shall we?

Father in heaven, thank you for the opportunity of considering these things. Thank you for the way this worked out in the life of Paul. Thank you for the way this worked out in the life of John Bunyan. And Lord, I pray that you would give us courage. I pray that you would give us faith. And I thank you for the men and women already who are right in the middle of advancing the Gospel and I pray that you would help us to have that kind of passion and focus in the days ahead. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.