

# *The Great Reversal*

Philippians 1:12-14

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Good morning, everybody. Thanks for having me back. Glad to be back here. We visited once this summer. I want to say thanks to the elders for inviting me to share in the preaching over the next three months. I've already enjoyed the teamwork with PD and with Rob as we've been preparing and looking forward to our times together.

So this morning, we're continuing the series in Philippians, "Our Joy in Christ." I wonder how many of us, when we hear that word, "joy," kind of switch off a little bit, not because we don't like joy. I mean, we all want to be happy. Right? But because the idea of joy sometimes seems so disconnected from the reality of our circumstances. The Apostle Paul addresses this precise issue head-on in our passage, and he does so not by flinching away from the reality of discouraging or hard circumstances but instead by pointing to the hope that God is the God of great reversals.

So our passage this morning is Philippians 1:12-14. And I invite you now to hear God's word.

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray.

Father, thank you that you have given your word to us so that we don't have to stumble around trying to figure out who you are or what you want from us. We ask that your Spirit would come open our ears. Make our hearts receptive to your message this morning. If there's anything in me or in us as a community that would keep us from hearing from you, we ask you to break through that. Let us only hear you this morning. We pray in Jesus's name. Amen.

So the passage that's on the front of your bulletins this week is from the story of Joseph in the very first book in the Bible, the Book of Genesis. It's a story of unexpected reversal. Joseph is hated by his brothers. He's sold into slavery by them in Egypt. But he ends up being used by God to save the entire country of Egypt from famine and his own family as well. And Joseph says to his brothers, "You intended it for evil, but God intended it for good." And that story reveals that God is all about the great reversal. He takes weakness and makes it strong. He turns failure into victory. And that pattern that God establishes in Genesis, it's fulfilled in the greatest reversal in history, the cross of Jesus Christ, where His death becomes life for the world. I know that's kind of frontloading the point, but I don't want there to be any doubt about this. Everything that Paul says in our passage is rooted in his hope that in Christ, God turns the defeat of death into the joyful victory of life.

So Paul begins our passage by saying, "I want you to know." Now, that's actually a common element in Greek letters of that time. It was sort of the indicator that I'm about to tell you how I'm doing. The Philippians wanted to know what was going on with Paul. They were concerned about him. They had sent Epaphroditus to care for him while he was in prison. So they want to know how he is. And Paul uses that phrase, "I want you to know," to signal to them, "I'm about to tell you how I'm doing." So he says, "I want you to know," but then it's sort of unexpected. He doesn't actually tell them how he is doing. He tells them how the gospel is doing. He doesn't say, "I want you to know I'm in prison. And it's kind of

cold. And, you know, I could use a blanket." He doesn't tell them, you know, "I'm in prison, and the food is okay." No. He says, "I want you to know my imprisonment has really turned out to advance the gospel." They might've assumed because of his imprisonment that his mission had been hindered, that he wasn't able to preach. But really, Paul says, his imprisonment served to advance the mission. What was intended to silence Paul has actually been reversed and is being used to promote the cause of Jesus.

There's a very common tactic in battle of staging a retreat in order to draw your enemy out only to turn their apparent victory into a crushing defeat. One of the more interesting times this has been used in history, it was called the "Tactic of Missing Stoves." It was used by Sun Bin, a military leader in China, at the Battle of Maling in 342 B.C. Sun Bin was facing a well-defended enemy. But rather than face them head-on, he had his army camp out in the field, and on the first night, they lit a hundred thousand cooking fires. On the next night, they only lit 50,000 fires, and by the third night, only 20,000 fires were burning. The enemy saw this, and they thought, "We've got them on the run. His army is abandoning him." And so they left their positions, and they chased what they thought was left of Sun Bin's army only to find out that they were hiding in the woods. And they were surrounded and issued a crushing defeat. What appeared to be a setback was really an advance.

The powers that imprisoned Paul had hoped to silence him. But by putting him in prison, they'd actually stepped into the trap that God had set for them. God brings about the great reversal. What they intended for evil, God intended for good. Paul's opponents didn't understand the nature of the gospel that Paul was proclaiming, that by putting him in prison, they were actually feeding into the very thing that gives the gospel its power.

Jesus told His followers that if they wanted to save their life, they had to lose it. And anyone who lost their life for His sake would find it. He wasn't just playing with words. That's the nature of what Jesus did for humanity. Jesus went purposefully to the cross knowing that that was exactly what His enemies wanted. The Jewish leaders thought they would be rid of Him. The Romans thought they could quell any chance of unrest. The powers of evil thought they had the upper hand. This is the Son of God, and we're putting Him to death. But Jesus's apparent defeat led to victory over sin and death. Sin was put to death with Him, and in His resurrection, death was defeated. The forces of the entire human race are reversed. Our need becomes the very place where God's riches are given.

And that's the hope that shapes how Paul understands his present circumstances in prison. It's how he can say, "How's it going with me? Let me tell you about the gospel. It's advancing." How do you get to that place where you can look at your circumstances, no matter how hard they are, and you can say with confidence, "How am I? Jesus is Lord, and His cause is advancing." How do you get there? How do you get there?

Well, let me tell you it's not—you don't get there by pretending that your circumstances aren't hard. It's not by pretending that staying up with your children late into the night is not exhausting. It's not by ignoring the fact that your kid just took advantage of the 15th chance you gave them to clean up the mess they made. You don't get there by imagining that the pain that you feel from being left or ignored by somebody you love isn't real. Paul isn't ignoring his imprisonment. He isn't pretending it's easy.

You also don't get to that place by the force of your own will, by resolving to always have a positive outlook on life, to always see the brighter side, the sunny side of life. That is doomed to failure because if by chance you're able through positive thinking to keep yourself always looking at the bright side of things, well, what's going to happen? You're going to be frustrated by everyone else around you who can't seem to always see the positive of things. "I can do it. Why can't they?" It's going to lead to frustration.

Now, the reality is, though, most of us are going to be able to, you know, think positively for a day, maybe a week, maybe if we're lucky a month. But then something comes along. And no matter how hard you try to work at it, no matter how much of a positive spin you put on it, it does not work, and it leaves you back in that place of being frustrated with yourself for not being able to stay positive.

Paul has his outlook not because he ignores the difficulty of prison, and not because he just puts a positive spin on it. He has this outlook because he has experienced the grace of God in his life. He says it back in verse 4 to the Philippians, that he shares with them in God's grace. He knows that he was God's enemy persecuting the church, and God met him with His love. He was blinded, and God made him see. The only way to have the outlook that says, "How am I? Jesus is Lord, and the gospel is advancing," is to know that Jesus has rescued you from your sins, to be freshly convicted of our sin so that we can have fresh dependence on Jesus and His sufficiency for us. That's why we confess our sins each week together. It's why we're reminded in the assurance of pardon that Jesus forgives us because we need to remember that week in and week out, day by day, moment by moment.

So how do we have this mindset that Paul has? Well, it begins by asking the Spirit to give us the gift of repentance so that we can be reminded that Jesus has saved us from our sin. When you see Jesus as the one who rescues you not just five years ago, or ten years ago, or whenever you believed, but today in the moment that He rescues you from your sin, then He becomes the most beautiful thing in your life. He becomes water to a thirsty soul, life to a dying heart. That is the only thing that can change how you view your circumstances. It doesn't change your circumstances, but your experience of them shifts because now they're in the context of God's grace that has brought you back from death.

Now, there is an important difference between Paul's experience of the reversal and the "Tactic of Disappearing Stoves." See, Paul's troubles weren't a deception. They were actually real. He wasn't pretending to be in prison. He really was in prison. He had real guards who watched him. And it's the reaction of the guards that Paul offers to the Philippians as the first proof that this reversal has happened, that the gospel is moving forward despite the appearance of setback.

He gives them two different proofs in verses 13 and 14, and the first one is the guards. Paul was probably in prison in Rome. And so when he says, "It has become clear to the whole imperial guard and to all the rest," he's talking about Caesar's elite soldiers, who are keeping him in prison. These are people who are part of the power structure of Rome. They would've held to that cry, "Caesar is lord," and worshiped the many Roman gods. But it has become clear to them that Paul's imprisonment is for Christ. And, in fact, it's clear to all the others, too, Paul says. Now, we don't know who all the others are, but clearly, it's some larger group of people who are aligned with the power of Rome. And it's become clear to all of them that Paul is in prison for Christ. The powers see that Paul isn't there because he deserved to be. He wasn't guilty of a crime. He was there because of Jesus.

I think sometimes Christians think that any opposition at all that we get is good news and proof that we're doing the right thing. Sometimes, though, we face opposition just because we're obnoxious. But Paul was not in prison because he was obnoxious. He was in prison for Christ. Literally, he says, "My imprisonment is clearly in Christ." Paul uses that phrase, "in Christ," all the time to talk about what happens to those who put their faith in Him. We are chosen in Him. Our life is hidden in Him. We are justified in Him, adopted in Him. And Paul is now imprisoned in Him. The mere fact that the guards know the cause of his imprisonment wouldn't be cause for rejoicing except that it points them to Jesus.

There's a sense in which Paul is actually in prison not just for the cause of Christ but with Christ. He's joining Jesus in His chains. Jesus said that "A servant is not greater than his master. It's enough for a servant to be like his master," and Paul was being like his master. Just as Jesus was killed by the authorities to silence Him, Paul was imprisoned by the authorities to silence him. His imprisonment is

really in solidarity with Jesus. And it's clear even to outsiders, who know nothing about Jesus until Paul speaks of Him, that he is in there for Jesus.

If we belong to Jesus, then our lives will always carry on them what one commentator says is "the stamp of the cross." They will always have that great reversal pattern stamped on them. In one sense, Paul's imprisonment was to be expected because if he's united to Jesus, then his work is going to look like Jesus's work. It's going to carry that stamp of suffering and weakness around with it.

I think it's easy sometimes for Christians to have a distorted perspective of weakness and suffering. We often hide our weakness because we think that somehow only showing the good side of our life will help our witness for Christ, or we're just simply too ashamed to let others see the real us.

Ten years ago, our family returned from being missionaries in London. We'd been there for about six years, and ten years ago, we returned to this country. We returned because I was tired. I was burned out, and I felt like a failure because I couldn't go back. I tried hard to put a good spin on things, but even that was exhausting. And I remember having a conversation with a close family member, who at the time had walked away from the faith, and just kind of letting my guard down and just being honest about how I felt. A couple months ago, that family member out of the blue said to me, "I am so glad you came back from London." My failure, or my apparent failure, my sense of failure, had set off a chain of events in their life that ended up leading them back to faith in Jesus.

We are weak people. We try hard to hide it, but we aren't fooling anybody. I wasn't fooling anybody by trying to put a good spin on things. But if you're only ever victorious, if that's all you let people see, then how is anyone who's struggling going to know that there's hope for the struggler in Christ? If you are in Christ, you don't have to hide your weakness. He knows about it anyway. He chose you from the beginning of the world. He loves you. He delights in you. He has taken all of your weakness, all of your failure on Him on the cross. He is your strength. You don't have to hide your weakness. Your life may be marked by failure, by weakness, but in your weakness, Jesus will be made known. In your failure, His plan will succeed.

Paul's imprisonment was real. He didn't go looking for it, but it came. And he didn't try to hide from it or try to minimize it. Don't let anybody tell you that believing in Jesus means you have to hide your problems. Don't believe the lie that says once you become a Christian, you will always be strong. Don't believe the lie that says that you have to have it all together. The joy that Paul finds in his imprisonment is not that Jesus makes it all better. It's not that his circumstances are reversed. It's that in his real suffering, in his real weakness, God's strength is on display, and others see that Jesus came to save real sinners with real struggles.

The great reversal is underway. Paul's imprisonment has turned out to advance the mission that he shares with the Philippians. The guards and everyone else see Jesus in Paul's chains. And the gospel is going forward to those outside the family of God. That's the first proof that he offers the Philippians, that the gospel is advancing.

And the second proof that he offers them is in verse 14. The gospel's also advancing among the family of God inside the church. He says in verse 14, "Most of the brothers have become confident in the Lord." Paul's not the only one proclaiming the word. Most of the believers in Rome have been encouraged by Paul's imprisonment to do so as well. Paul calls them brothers. It's the second time in our little section that he uses that word "brothers." He says it in verse 12. "I want you to know, brothers," speaking of the Philippians, and now here he says, "Most of the brothers have become confident." Why is that important? It's important because while the Philippians are partners with Paul in the gospel, they're also brothers and sisters with him in Christ. They're part of the family of God. They're children of God in

Christ with access to the embrace of the Father and His delight in them. Their partnership with Paul goes a lot deeper than just a transactional partnership supporting his needs and hoping that things go well with him. It's a partnership rooted in the fact that they are family. They are brothers and sisters together, and this is the family business that they're involved in. Their brothers and sisters in the church in Rome have been made bold. Paul wants them to know that their brothers and sisters are bold because this means the gospel is progressing.

How are they made bold by Paul's imprisonment? You would think—if you saw one person get in prison for doing something, you'd probably back away and be like, "Well, I'm not going to do that." Right? I mean that's the whole point of prison. It's a deterrent to keep you from carrying on in that activity. But no. They look at Paul's imprisonment and say, "I'm going to do that some more." It's not what you would expect. But here's the thing. Paul says they're confident. What? In the Lord. They're confident in the Lord. And I think it goes back to some of what the guards saw, that Paul's imprisonment is in the context of his relationship and solidarity with Jesus. They're confidence is in the Lord. And the weakness of Paul's imprisonment helps them see that because it strips away any pretense that there's anything in Paul that makes him influential. He has nothing to offer in himself. There's nothing for him to gain and nothing for him to lose apart from Christ. And their confidence, the confidence of the brothers and sisters in Rome, is not in the circumstances around them. It's not in their own ability to handle the circumstances. It's in Jesus. Paul's imprisonment made sure of that.

You know, we live in uncertain times. The world is uncertain at the moment. And this is an uncertain period of transition for this church. Where does your confidence lie in the midst of uncertainty? Are you confident because God has made the circumstances of your life easy? Are you confident only when the path ahead seems clear? Is your confidence in the circumstances of society in the world around you? Listen, these things always come and go. We live in a society that doesn't seek to ground itself in the upside down principles of God's kingdom. And if our confidence is in the uprightness of our society, it will easily be shaken. If your confidence is that as a church community you will never go through hard times, it will always only be easy, then you will be disappointed because we are a community of sinners who live together in weakness. It's the nature of the church. It will be hard to be a community together. But if your confidence is in the power of God who raises the dead, who keeps His promises to a thousand generations, who takes what was intended for evil and works for good, then you will find that hard circumstances, discouraging circumstances, apparent failures are ripe soil for His reversing power to be on display.

The places in our world where the church has faced some of the stiffest opposition, places like China and India, are the places where the church is growing like wildfire. I have the privilege of knowing a brother who is a pastor in Europe. He's from a strict Muslim country. So I'm not going to name him because of the sensitivity of it. But he's a pastor that Chapelgate supports. And some of you may actually know of him as well.

But he became a Christian because one day he traveled out of his strict Muslim country, and somebody gave him a Bible while he was on travel. He didn't think about it. He just threw it in his suitcase and went home. And the police found it in his suitcase and threw him in prison. He's a Muslim, but they threw him in prison for having a Bible. And he said, "You know what? If this book is going to cause so much trouble, I want to know what it's about." So he got out of prison, found another Bible, read it, and became a Christian. And he had to flee his country because of persecution. And he now lives in Europe pastoring a church that welcomes a steady stream of refugees coming out of the same region. Every month, he's telling us stories and sending pictures of new people who are believing in Jesus for the first time and being baptized. And they have very little money. They can't even fit all the people in the

room that they meet in because there are so many people coming to faith. And yet if you looked at the circumstances, you would ask, how is there hope for the gospel here? But our confidence is not in the circumstances. It's in God who brings life out of death.

Paul says that as their confidence in Christ grew, they became "much more bold to speak the word without fear." This isn't just one or two leaders. This is most of the brothers and sisters in the church. These are all the common church members who are uncommon because of their union with Jesus. They're bold. They're confident. I believe it is the responsibility of every follower of Jesus, all of us together in word and deed, to display and declare that Jesus is Lord. So this encouragement isn't meant just for one or two select preachers. It's for all of us together to be emboldened in declaring the message that Jesus died and rose for sinners like us. Boldness doesn't come from having the right answers, from having learned the right responses. It comes from having experienced the joy of being forgiven by God and being made His sons and daughters in Jesus.

One last implication for us to think about this morning. Paul was a role model for the brothers and sisters in Rome. They saw his suffering in prison and were made bold because of it. Too often when we look for role models or people to emulate, we look for those who are the most well-spoken, who seem to have it together, who have the greatest obvious gifts, who are the strongest leaders with the biggest vision. But when we look for role models in the faith, we ought to be looking for those whose lives have been touched with the suffering of Christ, whose life is in touch with Jesus and His suffering, whose lives have been shaped by hard circumstances, that God brings about to further the cause of His gospel.

I want to suggest maybe this week that you consider who are the people in your life that you look to as models in the faith. And is there somebody in your life who knows suffering, who knows pain? Maybe you've avoided them because the weakness scares you or you might have to actually enter into the pain. What if, in fact, God has brought them into your life because they have somebody that He could use to strengthen your faith through the gift that God has given to them of His faithfulness in their weakness. And consider if there's maybe weakness in your life that you've been hiding and ask God if He wants to use it to strengthen somebody else's faith.

Our shared joy is in Christ, not in our circumstances. Paul is encouraged because the gospel's going forward both outside the church and in it. And he's deeply and personally experienced the great reversal of the gospel in his own heart, and that allows him to see that what matters most is the work of Jesus in the world saving sinners and making everything new. Nothing has changed from His day until now. I mean, the circumstances certainly look different. But the nature of Jesus's work hasn't changed, the shape of His work in us in the world is the same. The great reversal of the gospel is at work in our hearts today and in our world. Have you experienced that for yourself? If not, consider that today Jesus might be inviting you to find out what it's like when He comes and reverses the course of your life. Put your trust in Him. Receive His forgiveness. And know God's delight in you.

And if you are a child of God and have put your faith in Jesus, take this opportunity to bring the reality of your circumstances into the light of His great reversal. It brings light out of darkness, life out of death. And know that whatever is going on in your life, you are His, and He delights in you. This is good news for all of us. Let's pray.

Father, thank you for the confidence that we can have in you, that you keep your promises that if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old is gone. The new has come. And whatever the circumstances of our life, we are yours. Thank you for keeping that promise. We ask this week that we would know your presence in the midst of the hard and the good, and that in both cases we would see and know the delight that you have for us in Jesus. We pray in His name. Amen.