

Side By Side: Gospel Partnership in Philippians

The Strangest Church Growth Technique

By [David Strain](#)

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Philippians 1:12-30

Now let me invite you please your copies of God's Word and turn with me to Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter one—Philippians one. Our attention will be on the words of verses 12-18, but we'll read from verse 12 to the end of the chapter just to give us some context, and see the flow of the argument as Paul develops it in these opening sections of his letter. You'll find it on page 980. Before we read together would you bow your heads with me as we turn to God and ask for His help in prayer. Let us pray.

O Lord, how we long to hear the voice of Jesus. We believe that He speaks to us in His Word, and so we pray that You would come, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, give us ears to hear. Help us to know, like sheep who hear their shepherd's voice, and answer when he calls, help us to know the Good Shepherd's voice, and to find Him nourish us by His Word. Give us Christ to feast upon to the sustenance of our hearts and lives for the glory of His name that we might be wholly given up to His honor in all the challenges of the week that lie ahead. How we need You. Come and minister to us, we pray in Jesus name. Amen.

Philippians chapter one at verse 12. This is the inerrant Word of Almighty God,

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. Some, indeed, preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely, but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers, and

the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage, now as always, Christ will be honored in my body—whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh that means fruitful labor for me. Yet, which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better, but to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again. Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent I may hear of you, that you are standing firm in one spirit with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in Him, but also suffer for His sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

Amen. And we praise the Lord that He has spoken to us in His holy and sufficient Word. May He write its truth on all our hearts.

Real Trials, Hard Providences, and Christian Growth

One of the great challenges, perhaps the greatest of challenges, for many of us in our Christian lives is to interpret God's providence correctly as it works itself out in our lives, particularly when, in His providence our lives are marked by suffering and hardship and trials. [William Cowper] teaches us to sing, as we will sing at the end of our service today, "Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace. Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face. Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan His work in vain. God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain." Those are precious words. That's a beloved hymn, and speaks truth to our souls, and yet isn't it also true that we can also sing them more easily than we can believe them and live them? When things are hard and sore and dark and difficult it is sometimes very hard indeed, as we see those dark clouds overhead that we so much dread, it is very hard indeed to believe that they are, in fact, big with mercy in God's sovereign purpose. As we turn to Philippians 1:12-18 we meet the apostle Paul in a dark place, in a season of real trial. He is in chains, he tells us, for the sake of the gospel. And, as we read in the latter half of the chapter, he is unsure whether he is going to survive this rather particularly fierce and sore trial through which he is passing. And as the chapter concludes, Paul has told the Philippians that suffering—the same sufferings they now see and hear of him, that he is enduring—those same sufferings wait for them also. And so as he's prayed for

them in verses 9-11, here in verses 12-18 he turns to provide for them an insight into the way he personally deals with providential hardship and suffering and trials. He wants them to have an example so that when it's their turn, as it will inevitably be all of our turns, that hardships come our way, we have been given some training, and some help, and some guidance in the life-example of the mighty apostle.

I. Gospel Providence

I want us to notice four things in these verses, verses 12-18. The first of them is simply to see how Paul teaches us about gospel providence itself, how to interpret our trials correctly. Look at verse 12 with me, "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel." Back in verse 7 we learn Paul is in prison for the defense and confirmation of the gospel, but here notice his concern to reassure the Philippians that contrary to all expectations his chains have not hindered the gospels advance in the world, but actually were precisely the purpose and plan of God to make that gospel advance in ways far beyond human expectations. The inverse of what we might logically have expected to take place, as the mighty apostle, the father of so many of them in the faith, is incarcerated for the sake of the gospel, is what happens. The gospel is not hindered. The gospel explodes. The word that Paul uses here for the advance of the gospel contains a metaphor. It gives the idea of military scouts who move ahead of the main force of an invading army, clearing the path, and scouting out the most favorable terrain so that their march might be hastened onward. That is what Paul is saying his chains have done for the gospel: they have cleared the path, as it were, so that instead of hindering, the gospel has made advances. There's been an invasion of gospel progress as the good news has captured more and more hearts through faith in Jesus Christ. "God's ways," Paul is saying to us—isn't he, "God's ways are not our ways. And His plans are not our plans."

"What you meant for evil, God intended for good"

In 1949, Maoist Communism successfully took over the rule of China, and in one fell swoop thousands of Western missionaries were expelled from the country. Churches were closed. Gospel preaching was silenced. The fledgling Church in China at that time was weak and struggling, its indigenous leadership inexperienced, immature, small in numbers. It was, without any real exaggeration at all, a devastating blow to the advance of the gospel in China. The world Church was stunned, by what was, from their perspective at that moment, a catastrophe of massive proportions for the cause of Christ in China. In 1978, 30 years later, China began to loosen restrictions. A few carefully monitored, state-sanctioned, churches were permitted to exist, and Western observers began to see what had become of the fledgling Church behind the regime of Communist dictatorship some 30 years before. And what emerged took the Church, and the

rest of the world, almost completely by surprise. When Communism came to power in 1949, approximately 1 million Chinese believed in the Christian gospel and professed faith in Christ. By 1979 there were 12 million Christians in the officially registered, state controlled churches. By 2000, that estimate was over 20 million, and when underground churches are factored in the real figure may be anything from 50 to 100 million Chinese Christians. Today, estimates are that Christianity may account from anything from 5-10 percent of the total population of that vast country. God's work was mysterious. No one could have predicted it. But it is gospel progress, and gospel providence in actions. Turning evil for good.

The *locus classicus* for gospel providences, of course, Romans 8:28, beloved by so many of us. Perhaps you've memorized that verse. For God is at work for those who love God in all things—He's working, "all things together for the good of those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose." It's one of the most precious passages in our Bibles. Often, however, we misunderstand it. It's not a promise that everything is going to be okay. That's not what it means. Rather, it is a promise that God is going to work in every circumstance, and in every detail, of all our lives—in our trials and in our triumphs—for gospel ends, for ultimate good, for Kingdom progress, that the name of Jesus might be heard around the world, and men and women, boys and girls, bend the knee to Him, and find in Him a Savior. That is what He is doing in providence. He is bringing the gospel to every nation and people-group under heaven that the name of Jesus may have all the glory and all the praise. That's what happened in China, wasn't it? That's what happened in Paul's Roman prison cell two-thousand years ago. It's what Joseph, the patriarch, said to his brothers at the end of the book of Genesis in Genesis 50:20, "What you meant for evil," when you had me taken away as a slave, and I found myself in bondage in Egypt, "What you meant for evil, God intended for good." Gospel providence. Whoever would have thought that chains and incarceration were an effective model of ministry? You don't find many church-growth experts these days writing books of jail-time as a tool for congregational growth. How about the complete expulsion of missionaries, and the closing of every place of worship as the most effective church-planting mechanism in history? So very counter-intuitive, and yet, resting in the infinite sovereignty and perfect wisdom of God, who does all things well, we ought not to be surprised when the Lord does great things, marvelous in our sight, in the most unlikely—even contrary-seeming—circumstances, in the sorest of trials, turning from these dark things, evil things, good for His own glory and the spread of the gospel.

II. Gospel Witness

So gospel providence is the first thing that Paul teaches us to embrace and to understand. The second thing is gospel witness. Here is the impact of living faithfully, trusting in God's sovereign goodness to work all things together for the

good of those who love Him, here's the impact of living faithfully for Christ amidst trials upon the lost. Here's what happens when, as you pass through real hardship and suffering, you cling to Jesus and walk in obedience to Him, when unbelievers begin to notice. Verse 13, "It is become known throughout the whole imperial guard, and to all the rest, that my imprisonment is for Christ." The word Paul uses for the imperial guard there is a reference to the elite bodyguard of the emperor who took charge of imperial prisoners—the Praetorium. If you remember the story: Paul had been arrested when he set foot in Jerusalem back in Acts 29, spent 2 years in prison, eventually appealed to Caesar as was his right as a Roman citizen—Acts 25 and verse 11—and so he was sent off to Rome to stand trial there. Along the way he endured unbelievable, unspeakable hardship including shipwreck on the island of Malta, Acts 27. By the time Philippians is written, he's languishing in jail, facing what he expects may well be his own martyrdom. And through it all his life and conduct, his reaction to his trials and his sufferings, his courage, his gentleness, his character, and his boldness to preach Christ have had their impact. There were around 9,000 Praetorians—Praetorian guardsman—and Paul is saying that somehow his witness, his steady-as-she-goes faithfulness to Christ amidst the maelstrom of his own sufferings, has begun to utterly permeate through that entire military regiment so that this whole body of elite soldiers, every one of them, has heard about Paul and Paul's Savior. In fact, his witness goes further even than that. Chapter 4 verse 22 tells us some of what he means when he says, "the Praetorian guard, *and all the rest* have learned that my chains are in Christ." Chapter 4 verse 22, here's how far Paul's witness has reached while he's been in prison. He's sending greetings from the Roman church to the Philippian believers, and he says this, "All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household." His witness has penetrated right into the very home of the Emperor himself. What an impact a life of faithfulness in the midst of trials, what an impact a life of Christian integrity that clings to and rests in Jesus, even when doing so means suffering, what an impact such a life can have. Who knows who is watching you, brothers and sisters? Who knows what impact your desperate resting on Jesus for supplies of grace when you feel you have no resources of your own, who knows what impact you're having? Cling to Christ, no matter your circumstances, and as you do the Lord will work by you in wonderful and mighty ways.

Suffering: *In Christ, For Christ, All to Manifest Christ*

Before we move on, do notice the significant, if rather odd, construction of Paul's language at the end of verse 13. Look at the text. Here's what he says has happened, here's what the Praetorians have noticed, specifically, about his chains. In Greek it reads a little oddly. Very woodenly translated, Paul says, "My chains-manifest-in Christ-have become." It's as though he wants us to see and hear each phrase, and understand its meaning, before we move on to the next. "My chains": the instruments used by the Lord to spread the gospel. "Manifest": these chains revealed something to those who knew Paul, and were acquainted

with him. Something engaging was made clear to them as they watch him languishing in that prison cell. What was it? He says, “My chains manifest *in Christ* have become.” Our pew Bibles, the English Standard Version, along with many others, take Paul simply to mean that he is suffering on Christ’s behalf—because of the gospel of Christ. He’s suffering for Christ. But, that’s not what he says. He says his chains are *in Christ*. That is to say, for Paul, being a man in Christ entails this suffering at this particular moment in his life and experience. To be in Christ, for Paul, meant being taken in the sovereign wisdom of His Savior down into this trial so that he might have, as he puts it in chapter 3 in verse 10, the experience of sharing in the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings. There is a fellowship with Jesus accessible to believers only in the depths of trial. And some of you know what that means. Some of you have had sweet seasons of communion with Christ, and can testify to His sustaining grace when you have been stripped of every supply of your own strength, and cast upon Him alone, because there was no one else to help you, and in those seasons He has borne you up, and kept you, and sustained you with His own grace. There has been fellowship with Christ in the depths of suffering, for you. And that is what Paul is saying being in Christ has meant for him at this moment. And as he suffers, clinging to his Savior, it has had a profound impact on all who see him. That’s what’s become clear to the guard, and to all the rest, reaching even into Caesar’s household. He’s counting his union with Christ worth it. He’s saying, “Jesus is more precious to me than chains. He’s so precious to me that I will ‘let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also.’ I want Him. And I am prepared to endure even this that I might have more of Him.” How precious is Christ to you? What do you prize more than Him? What will you relinquish that you might have more of Him? Those are the questions Paul presses upon us. He wants us to understand Christ is worth it. There is no suffering into which you may descend that He is not worth suffering for. There is no hardship to which you may be called in the course of Christian ministry and Christian service that is not worth enduring for His sake.

III. Gospel Boldness

Gospel providence, and gospel witness, then thirdly notice what we learn here about gospel boldness. Paul has told us the impact of his faithfulness, through trials, on the lost. Many of them have heard about Christ, and some have been converted, even in Caesar’s household. Now, he tells us the impact of his witness and faithfulness to Jesus amidst trials on the Church. Look at verses 14-17. “Most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord, by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the Word without fear. Some, indeed, preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.” There are some, in Paul’s day, just as there remain some, in our day, who look at the great ones, the leaders who have been used mightily by God in the Church, and see them as objects of jealousy, rather than

mentors to learn from. They see gospel preaching as a mechanism for self-promotion and self-aggrandizement. They want to be made much of. It's not that they want to make much of Christ. What an ugly thing. What an ugly thing that anyone would use the means of grace, the preaching of the gospel, to make much of themselves. It is all about Christ. And there were some in Paul's day who were doing that—trying to bring Paul down a peg or two by stealing some of his limelight, they thought. And yet, they were still faithfully, truly preaching the biblical gospel, even though they were doing so with wrong motives. Others, however, had good motives. They were made bold by their heroes' example, by their mentor's example. So they too took up the battle, and ran the race of gospel ministry, knowing that for them, just as for Paul, almost certainly that would entail suffering.

The Blood of the Martyrs is the Seed of the Church

We noted earlier how astonishing the growth of the Church in China was after Communism drove it underground, and in many ways verses 14-17 are telling us about the mechanism of how it is that that came to take place. How come, when the Church begins to suffer, and its heroes and leaders bare all for the cause of Christ—others are made bold, rather than force themselves to recant their faith and renounce their Savior—they're made bold to live for Him, and growth is the result, how come? What Paul tells us here, says that, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church," that's what he's saying. He's saying, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." He's saying, "Jesus is worth it. And when that gets a hold of your heart you gladly endure every trial to make much of Him." And others see—if Paul is willing to do this for Jesus, Jesus must be infinitely precious. And they begin to discover that preciousness for themselves. It does the same thing in them that it did in Paul. It sets them free from worldly cares that they may live single-mindedly for the honor of the Savior's name. It was Tertullian who said that, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church," and the history of the Church has demonstrated the proof of his words. Let me give you some examples. At the Reformation in England, during the reign of Bloody Mary, Mary Tudor, two of the Reforming Bishops, Hugh Latimer, and Nicholas Ridley, were to be burned at the stake for their faith in the gospel. After being chained to the stake, the wood piled around them was lit, first of all, at the feet of Bishop Ridley. At this, Latimer turned to him and said, "Be of good comfort, brother Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England that I trust shall never be put out." We will light such a candle by God's grace, as we're martyred for the faith that shall never be put out. Their convictions made them such examples to the suffering Church that many more after them rose up to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ. Soon, Elizabeth replaced Mary, and not long after that Covenanting Scots and Puritan Englishmen produced the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, and continue to articulate Presbyterian convictions, even today. The flames of Latimer's pyre lit a bright candle indeed, and the Church still burns brightly with it.

An Infinitely Worthy Savior

Or take another example. Some of you remember the story of the five Wheaton College graduates, who in the 1950's went to the jungles of Ecuador to reach the Auca Indians. And without warning, two days after making contact, Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Roger Youderian, and Pete Fleming were speared to death for the sake of the gospel. And yet the impact of their deaths created a tidal wave of missionary zeal. Throughout the American Church in the decade that followed, and for the next 10 years in particular, a very high number of Wheaton graduates gave themselves, their whole lives, for missionary service, year after year. In 1985, Nate Saint's sister, Rachel, Elisabeth Elliot, Jim's widow, and her daughter Valerie, themselves, went to live in the jungles with the Auca Indians, bringing the gospel, and leading them to Christ. All for the sake of the honor of Jesus made bold by the blood those who suffered before them. Jim Elliot's now famous principle, I think, is exactly what Paul is saying, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Christ is so infinitely worth it. What won't you give for His service, and His honor, and His praise? "The Word of God," as 2 Timothy 2, in verse 9 says, "The Word of God is not chained." God can do exceedingly, abundantly above all that we ask or imagine. Chains? There's not such a thing for the gospel. There are no closed countries for the gospel. The Word of God is not chained, and in His mighty providence, as He works through gospel witnesses, and generates gospel boldness, men and women, boys and girls, are brought to know the Savior.

IV. Gospel Joy

Gospel providence, gospel witness, gospel boldness, then finally, and very quickly, gospel joy. Verse 18, here's the heart of the apostle Paul laid bare, in jail. Some are preaching out of sheer malice and jealousy, wanting to undermine him, how does he respond? "What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in this I rejoice." Jesus is being made much of. "His name, His fame, His honor is being spread, and that thrills my heart," that's what he's saying. "I live that more might know Him," that's what he's saying. "All my joy is tethered to His, married to, the honor of His name, and so the more His name is proclaimed, the more the flames of joy are fanned into brightness in my heart."

Ambitions and Hopes tethered to the Promises of God

What are the deepest ambitions and aspirations of your heart? What do you long for most? Really, now. What are your deepest aspirations? What are your real ambitions? What does your heart most ache for? If you tether your ambitions to your own comforts, to your family, to your children, on your future, if you tether your deepest hopes and aspiration to this world they will always be vulnerable to

the shattering effect of trial and suffering. If all your hopes and aspirations are this-worldly and material, they will always be vulnerable to the shattering effects of trial and suffering, and you will be robbed of joy over and over again. But Paul has fixed his joy to the honor of the name of Christ so that no matter his circumstances, God is at work at them all, he knows, so that the name of Jesus might always be made much of. He has, therefore, an unshakeable foundation for joy. Wed your hopes and your joys not to your circumstances, but to the advancement of the cause, and glory, and fame of Jesus Christ. God has promised that His glory would cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. He has promised that every tribe, and language, and people-group will be gathered around the throne one day, and they will sing, "Worthy is the Lamb." He's promised that every knee will bow in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. That is certain. And when you have harnessed, and hitched, your hopes for joy to those promises, your joy can never be undermined. Your joy will always prosper, despite your trials, and in all your circumstances. May the Lord help us to make the deepest ambitions, and longings of our hearts, the honor of the name of Christ. Let us pray together.

Our Father, how we bless You that Jesus is at work in every circumstance, in all our trials, for the glory of His own great name. Help us to hitch, and wed, our hopes, our joy, not to our own material prospects, but to the promise that His glory will cover the earth as the waters will cover the sea. In flame our hearts with delight whenever Jesus is made much of, and grant to us grace that we may gladly give what we cannot keep, even our very lives, that we may gain what we cannot lose—endless, sweet communion with our Savior, who gave all for us. For we ask it in His name. Amen.

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