

+ Philippians 1:12-18a + Rejoice that Christ Is Proclaimed! + 7th Sunday after Pentecost + 3 July 2016 +

Has anyone ever accused you of being a “glass half full” person? Has anyone ever rolled their eyes at you because you were optimistic when they expected you to be realistic or pessimistic? Being optimistic, you typically see the positive in a negative situation. You always seem to have hope that there’s light at the end of the tunnel, that things will get better.

If no one has ever accused you of being a “glass half full” kind of person, do you think the glass is half empty? Are you realistic, but you don’t go over the top? You dare not hope too much out of fear that it’s all going to come crashing down. Being realistic or pessimistic, you find that interacting with an optimistic person can often be like getting a cavity from too much candy.

The Apostle Paul was a “glass half full” kind of guy. No matter how dark the situation, there was always hope. There was always peace. There was even joy! How could Paul talk like that when his enemies were trying to discredit him or seeking to end his life? How could Paul talk like that when the members of congregations he had planted were starting to rebel against the very message he had proclaimed? How could Paul talk like that when he was spending time in city jails and Roman prisons or facing physical beatings or even when he had to deal with that physical ailment we know only as **“a thorn in my flesh”** that he speaks of in 2 Corinthians (12:7)? Even when he’s facing execution in Rome, he’s still hopeful of eternal life. Was Paul just putting the best construction on a life full of bad situations?

When you hear the first verses of his letter to the Philippian Christians, you just might think that! Paul’s writing from prison—not a SuperMax security prison where the worst criminals are held, but he’s still under house arrest. He doesn’t have one of those ankle bracelets with the special sensor, but instead he has very real chains preventing him from going where he wants. He has a well-trained Roman guard carefully keeping watch that he doesn’t try anything to escape. Plus Paul’s court case wasn’t complete. He could still get a judgment of condemnation from the Roman emperor. Then on top of all that, Paul was informed of troubles brewing in some of the congregations he had started. In fact, some of his enemies were trying to take Paul’s job out of envy and selfish ambition. What would all of this do to the ministry of the Gospel? What would all of this do to Paul?

Frankly, his situation would make most of us take a very realistic, even pessimistic view of life in general. We’d probably be pretty pessimistic about the prospects of the Gospel going out into the world, let alone surviving in existing congregations. Yet listen to what Paul has to say. **“Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.”** Now if this verse was all I read, I’d think Paul was being like one of our children who told us, “I’ve lost two hours of TV time because I was naughty, but hey, at least I didn’t lose my outside time and I still have my bike!” Is Paul just being unrealistically optimistic?

Take a closer look. Paul isn’t looking at the empty glass and hoping it will fill up someday. Paul has reason to rejoice—Christ is proclaimed! Paul rejoices because Christ is proclaimed in difficult situations. Paul explains why imprisonment advanced the good news of Jesus. **“As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.”** Paul rejoiced because he knew God was in charge and provided the opportunities—even in the most difficult situations—for Christ to be proclaimed through Paul and many others.

Why was Paul even in prison? It’s not like he had committed a capital crime, but Paul was in chains because of Christ. His enemies wanted him dead or at least tossed in jail with the key thrown away. They wanted him silenced, but yet it became quite clear among the imperial palace guards and all the people serving there in the palace that Paul was **“in chains for Christ.”**

...But what about the work of the Gospel? Who would take that good news of Jesus out into the world to other regions and cities and homes? Paul was under house arrest and he spoke with everyone who visited him, including those Roman guards assigned to watching him, but he couldn’t get out there into the world to preach and teach Christ. If not Paul, then who?

“Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.” Even though Paul wanted the freedom to preach the good news of Jesus, his prison time for the sake of Christ moved others to speak about Christ **“more courageously and fearlessly.”** More voices were opening up about Christ and his Word. More conversations were being had with

people, but they were happening because the Lord was moving believers in Rome and beyond to speak the good news of Jesus.

Paul had every right to rejoice because Christ was proclaimed even in that difficult situation. He could be optimistic about that, but there was still a problem. “Paul, what about your enemies? What about those people who want to replace you?” Yes, even then Paul rejoices because Christ is proclaimed through imperfect messengers. Paul explains what God was accomplishing. ***“It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.”*** Paul rejoiced because he knew God was in charge and would accomplish his work even in spite of those who proclaimed Christ for impure or imperfect reasons.

Now it might sound rather strange that anyone would want to proclaim the Gospel out of selfish ambition or envy, but Paul was a very influential leader in the early Christian church. He was the tip of the spear as the Gospel went to the major cities of the Roman Empire. Strange as it sounds, people were jealous of his influence and leadership. So when Paul ended up in a Roman prison, they saw their opportunity. They tried to replace Paul and take his job of Gospel proclaimer. They figured they would cause him trouble and people would think more highly of them. Yet what they didn’t realize is that God was using them to proclaim Christ and accomplish his work in spite of their motives.

Paul knew that the message that was going out in spite of his difficult situation, in spite of the imperfect motives of the messengers, was the true, life-changing message of Jesus. Paul rejoiced because Christ was proclaimed through the perfect message. Paul makes that clear. ***“But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.”***

You could try to dismiss Paul’s joy as putting the best construction on a bad situation, but Paul isn’t looking at it through rose-colored glasses. No, he saw the big picture. Paul rejoiced because he knew God was in charge. He knew that the Gospel message being proclaimed was God’s good news for this world of sinners. Paul knew that God would work through that Word to rescue souls from an eternity in hell and guide them on the path to heaven.

How can you be like Paul and rejoice? Look at the world around you. Our world is growing more violent and terrifying every day. Violent persecution of Christians is taking place around the world, as is terrorism. Here at home, it’s getting more difficult for conservative Christians to practice their faith in the public square, and the concept of religious freedom continues to erode. People, especially younger folks, seem to be fleeing the Christian church rather than flocking to it—and the public view of Gospel preachers is often about the same as common criminals and IRS auditors. Then you mix in the challenges of false teaching and false teachers and you’d think the Holy Christian Church is being attacked on every side. Then you look at the lives of Christians, like you and me, and their households and you find temptation and sin and guilt, while indifference plagues many. With that kind of a bleak picture, how can you possibly be optimistic like Paul and rejoice?

You can rejoice because Christ is being proclaimed in difficult situations. The early church father Tertullian once wrote, ***“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”*** (*Apologeticus*, chapter 50) Many pagan Romans came to know Christ because they were shocked that even women and children would willingly suffer death for the sake of Christ, so they wanted to know more. Amazingly, in spite of increasing attacks on Christianity, the Gospel is going out to places and regions and cities and corners of this world that have been covered in the dark dust of unbelief for centuries.

God is in charge and he provides the opportunities for the Gospel to go out not just to faraway places, but even here at home. Our God does not expect you to be the 21st century version of the Apostle Paul, but he does give you opportunities to proclaim Christ, to share your Savior with people you know, people you love, even strangers you meet wherever life takes you. There is no perfect situation for sharing Jesus, but there are opportunities to walk across a room and talk about your Savior with a loved one who needs him.

“...But I’m not good at telling people about Jesus. What if I don’t know what to say? My fumbling, stumbling lips will get in the way! I’ll just rejoice that somebody else does the work.” To that, Paul would say, “Rejoice because Christ is proclaimed through imperfect messengers like you!” You don’t have to be Seminary trained to talk about your Savior, to share what you have personally learned from God’s Word and why that matters for your life. You just need to open your mouth and talk. God’s in charge. He accomplishes his work, and his Word never returns to him empty working even through imperfect messengers. Why? We proclaim the perfect

message—the message from God himself to this world full of sinners like us. I think sometimes we forget that we need that perfect message to be proclaimed to us first—the good news that you have a Savior who purifies your lips, who cleanses your wrongs, who forgives your failures, and who gives you reason to rejoice even when you trip over your words.

That's not trying to put the best construction on a bad situation. That's not trying to see an empty glass as half-full. No, you and I can rejoice because Christ was proclaimed to us through fumbling, stumbling lips and now Christ is proclaimed through our own. Nothing stopped Jesus from rescuing you and so he gives you real hope and joy as you take his good news to the people in your life. Rejoice that Christ is proclaimed through us! Amen.