

## “Joy in All Circumstances”

June 15, 2025

Philippians 1:12-26

### I. Introduction

One of Paul’s driving desires as an ambassador for Jesus Christ was to preach the Gospel in Rome. Rome was the hub of the great Empire; a common phrase of the day was that “*all roads lead to Rome*” and they pretty much did. If Paul could make a beachhead for Christ in this city, it would have meant reaching millions with the message of salvation. Convinced of the importance of bringing the Gospel to Rome, he wrote in Acts 19:21, “After I have been there, i.e. in Jerusalem, I must visit Rome also.” Writing “To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints” (Rom. 1:7). Paul wrote in Romans 1:15, “I am eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome.”

Paul saw himself going to Rome as a preacher, but instead he went as a prisoner. The record of the events leading to his imprisonment in Rome is found in Acts chapters 21-28. It all began with Paul’s illegal arrest in the temple in Jerusalem. For the next two years, Paul became the focal point of both political and religious plotting and remained a prisoner in Caesarea. After finally appealing to Caesar, Paul was sent to Rome. However, on the way, his ship was wrecked. So, after three months of waiting on the island of Malta, Paul finally made it to Rome and the trial he had requested before Caesar.

Although he was not writing this letter from a dungeon but, as Acts 28:30 says, “in his own rented house,” Paul was chained night and day to a Roman soldier. He had no privacy when he ate, when he slept, when he wrote, when he prayed, or even when he preached, taught, or visited with friends. During this time as a prisoner, this very lack of privacy made it impossible for the Roman soldiers guarding him to avoid hearing the gospel and witnessing Paul’s Christlikeness as he walked the talk.

When the believers in Philippi heard that Paul was in prison, they sent a message to him by one of their pastors, Epaphroditus. It might have gone something like this: “*Poor brother Paul, we feel so sorry for you. Now you’re great missionary journeys are finished; you’re in prison, and the Gospel isn’t getting out! Your loss of joy can be understood.*” To many, Paul’s arrest and imprisonment would look like failure but

not to this man concerned with sharing Christ and the Gospel. Paul did not find his joy in ideal circumstances; he found his joy in obeying his Lord and Savior and winning others to God. In Acts 20:24 he wrote, “I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.” Instead of seeing himself confined as a prisoner, Paul shared that his circumstances really opened up new areas of ministry. He recognized that God sometimes uses strange, unexpected circumstances to help spread the Gospel. In Paul’s case, there were three unexpected circumstances that helped him spread the gospel even to the elite Praetorian Guard, Caesar’s special troops; there were his chains, his critics, and his crisis.

## II. Three Circumstances that Helped Spread the Gospel

A. First there were **Paul’s Chains**. Having received the support and comfort from the Philippian believers, Paul wrote back to them, “Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.” Little did Paul’s enemies or even the Philippians realize that the chains that were fastened to Paul would release him instead of binding him. Turn to 2 Timothy 2:8-10. God’s Word cannot be chained. Paul didn’t complain about his chains, instead God used them to help Paul “advance the gospel.” Paul could have told his persecutors what Joseph, back in Genesis, told his brothers many years after they sold him into slavery: “It was not you who sent me here, but God. . . . You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done” (Genesis 45:8; 50:20).

**1. Paul’s chains gave contact with the lost.** Instead of focusing on the chains and his situation, Paul focused on 2 important things that came about because of them. First, Paul’s chains gave him contact with the lost, including his guards. Paul’s chains were about 18” long. One end was attached to Paul’s wrist or ankle, the other to a guard’s wrist or ankle. The chains were not removed from the prisoner as long as he was in custody, making both escape and privacy impossible. Although Paul was allowed to live in private quarters, he was chained 24/7 to a series of soldiers for 2 years. Over those years, it was possible that many different soldiers were assigned to guard Paul, each one becoming his captive audience. Turn to

**Acts 28:30-31.** Paul's guards had to listen to the conversations, too. "As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard, and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ."

Not only did the guards hear Paul's preaching and his teaching, but they also observed and even experienced his Christian life: his graciousness, his patience, his perseverance in the midst of great affliction, his wisdom, his humility, his love, and concern for them. Both Paul's message and character must have had a profound impact on these elite, hardened, and influential soldiers. There is no record of how many of the Praetorian Guard became Christians, but no doubt many did. Paul's chains gave him contact with the lost.

**2. Paul's chains gave courage to the saved.** A 2<sup>nd</sup> effect of the chains was that Paul's chains gave courage to the saved. The apostle's example of courage & faithfulness during his confinement caused many of his fellow Christians "to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly." The word *speak* does not mean just *preach*. Rather, it means everyday conversation, including how they lived their lives. No doubt some of the Romans were discussing Paul's case and the Christians in Rome took advantage of the conversations to say a good word for Jesus Christ. Discouragement has a way of spreading, but so does encouragement. Because of Paul's joyful attitude while in chains, the believers in Rome took fresh courage and witnessed boldly for Christ. Paul's strength became their strength; Paul's courage became their courage.

**B. Paul's Critics** The 2<sup>nd</sup> unexpected circumstance that helped spread the Gospel was Paul's Critics. To be slandered by an unbeliever is expected; to be slandered by another believer is unexpected. But this is what Paul was experiencing in Rome—some of the church leaders and preachers, in opposition to him, were preaching "Christ out of envy and rivalry." The problem was not in the preachers' theology, but in their motives, not in what they preached but in why they preached it, namely, "from envy and strife."

Envy is the desire to deprive others of what is rightfully theirs, i.e., wishing others did not have what they had. Envy is closely related to jealousy, which is wanting to have what someone else has. Like all those motivated by envy and jealousy, Paul's critics considered him to be a threat to their own importance and influence in the church. The Bible doesn't record what exactly was being said about Paul. Perhaps they claimed that Paul's imprisonment was the Lord's punishment for some secret sin. Others may have taught

that Paul was in prison because he lacked the victorious faith that would've gained his release. In their view, he obviously failed to fully tap into the Holy Spirit's power. The fact that they were free while he was in prison was proof to them that his spiritual power and usefulness were inferior to theirs. Otherwise, why did God not miraculously free Paul as he had done at Philippi or Peter in Jerusalem ([Acts 12:1-19](#))? Perhaps others thought Paul was old-fashioned and that a fresher, more up-to-date approach was needed to reach the sophisticated people in Rome. Regardless of the particular reason or reasons, Paul's critics preached "out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble" for Paul.

After the Lord appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, God told Ananias in [Acts 9:15](#), "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel." Paul knew he was there in Rome "for the defense of the gospel." Paul saw the big picture and he was able to rejoice, not in the selfishness of his critics, but in the fact that in their envy and jealousy, "Christ is preached." There was no envy or jealousy in Paul's heart. It didn't matter that some were against him. All that mattered was the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Whether the gospel was preached by jealous, hurtful preachers, or by those who were faithfully and humbly preaching the gospel with sincere motives, it was accurately preached, it bore fruit. "Christ is preached and because of this I rejoice."

**C. Paul's Crisis** Because of Paul's chains, Christ was known ([vs. 13](#)); because of Paul's critics, Christ was preached ([vs. 18](#)); because of Paul's crisis, Christ was exalted and magnified ([vs. 20](#)). This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> circumstance: Paul's Crisis. Although the preliminary trial had gone in his favor, it was possible that at the real trial, Paul would be found to be a traitor to Rome and executed. The final verdict was yet to come. A few years earlier, Paul had written to the believers in Rome in [Romans 8:28](#), "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Paul lived what he taught. He knew that his present circumstance—his crisis—was temporary and God would work it out for good—"that Christ will be exalted."

Paul knew that one way or another, "by life or by death," he would be delivered from the present crisis. [Verses 21-25](#) seem to indicate his anticipation was that he would live. But Paul wasn't certain what

God's plan was for him, but he would continue to serve and exalt Him through his life and ministry or through his death. Paul wasn't afraid of life or death. Turn to the words Paul wrote a couple of years later to Timothy as Paul was awaiting his execution following a second imprisonment, **turn to 2 Timothy 4:6-8.** Either way—in life or in death—Paul would be victorious. Paul's desire was to magnify God.

Paul went on to write in **Philippians 1:21**, **"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."** Paul knew that living is Christ because he would continue to serve Him while he lived. He also knew that dying would be gain because then he would be in God's presence, able to worship and serve Him in perfection in heaven forever. Paul wasn't afraid of life or death, in **Matthew 16:25**, Jesus said, **For whoever want to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."** Paul trusted, loved, served, witnessed for, and in every way was devoted to and dependent on Jesus Christ. His only hope, his only purpose, his only reason to live was Christ; He traveled for Christ, preached for Christ, and was persecuted and imprisoned for Christ. Ultimately, he would die for Christ. But even death, by God's marvelous grace, was ultimately for Paul's eternal gain.

Paul admitted that he was facing a difficult decision. To remain alive was necessary for the believers' benefit in Philippi, but to depart and be with Christ was far better. But, as a bondsman of Jesus Christ, Paul wanted what God wanted. Paul was **"convinced"** that Christ would have him remain, not only for the advancement of the Gospel, but also for the **"progress and joy in the faith"** of the Philippian believers. As long as the Lord had work for him to do on earth, that is where Paul wanted to be. The words he wrote to the Corinthians in **1 Corinthians 15:58** he applied to himself, **"Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."** Paul would gladly postpone his heavenly blessing for the sake of continuing to serve earthly saints and his heavenly Master.

Although he had had no word from God, Paul was convinced that his ministry to the Philippians wasn't done yet, **"I know that I will remain."** Paul would return to the Philippians to continue their **"progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on**

account of me.” Paul was being practical. He understood that God still had work for him to do. These loving, praying Philippian Christians needed his ministry. He wanted to get out of prison and go to be with them again not for his sake but so that their joy in the Lord would overflow. Turn to Philippians 3:7-9.

### III. Conclusion

Paul had chains, he had critics, and he had a crisis. He could have gone into severe depression and questioned how a loving God whom he served whole heartedly could allow this to happen to him. But Paul didn't take his eyes off Jesus and His call to go into the world and make disciples; instead, Paul used his circumstances to reach out to the lost, give courage to the saved, celebrate the proclamation of the Gospel, and exalt God in all that God gave him. Paul was single minded: “To me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Because of this he could have joy in any circumstance.

Paul was demonstrating that God works not merely in *spite of* but *through* adverse circumstances. God doesn't work like we would, as 1 Cor.1:25 says, “The foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.” The secret to having joy in all circumstances is to look on them as God-given opportunities for the furtherance of the Gospel. We need to look for opportunities to serve God in all circumstances. We need to rejoice at *what God is going to do* instead of complaining about *what God did not do*. Our “chains” may not be as dramatic or difficult as Paul's but there is no reason why God cannot use them in the same way; to bring praise and honor to His Name.

Paul's example of selfless humility and loving service to Jesus shows that when circumstances worsen, joy can increase. When the seemingly secure things in life begin to collapse, when suffering and sorrow increase, believers should be drawn into ever deeper fellowship with the Lord. It is then that you will most fully experience the enduring joy the Apostle Paul knew so well. This joy is far greater and more satisfying than any fleeting happiness based on just the “*right circumstances*.” And this true joy from God and the Holy Spirit comes not because of circumstances but in spite of them and through them. In closing, turn to Paul's testimony in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always.”