

# THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL

## COME, LORD JESUS

### GOD’S PRISONER

#### *Paul Expresses Joy in Prison*

The Book of Acts tells how joy characterized those who followed Jesus even in the midst of suffering. Acts concludes with the Apostle Paul’s arrival in Rome where he was placed under house arrest. Going to Rome as a prisoner opened a door for Paul’s ministry that would turn out to be far more influential for the cause of Christ than if he had shown up there as a traveling evangelist. Part of Paul’s time was spent in letter writing. His letters to the churches were not rants over his circumstances instead they were Spirit-filled Words that still touch hearts today. One of the churches he wrote to was the church at Philippi in Macedonia, one of his ‘divine stops’ on his second missionary journey. The Philippi church began with a group of women, including a woman named Lydia. It was to this church that he wrote perhaps his most intimate and personal letter. In that letter he expressed joy in the midst of suffering. Today’s lesson is taken from a portion of that joy-filled letter.

Suffering for the cause of Christ is not unique to Paul’s time. Our study guide for this lesson relates the story of Richard Wurmbrand, a Romanian Christian minister of Jewish descent. In 1948, he publicly said Communism and Christianity were not compatible. As a result, he experienced imprisonment and torture by the Romanian Communist regime including being hung upside down, beaten, prodded with red hot pokers, cut with knives, starved, forced to stand in nail-lined coffins, and thrown into freezers until he lost consciousness. He was told that unless he recanted his faith and stopped preaching God’s Word, his wife and son would be tortured and killed. He would not recant. After serving a total of 14 years, he was ransomed from prison. He and his family later immigrated to America and eventually he wrote the book, *Tortured for Christ*. During his incarceration, it was strictly forbidden to preach to other prisoners. It was understood that whoever was caught doing this received a severe beating. Wurmbrand said, ‘A number of us decided to pay the price for the privilege of preaching, so we accepted their terms. It was a deal. We preached and they beat us. We were happy preaching; they were happy beating us so everyone was happy.’ Wurmbrand like Paul found joy in the midst of trouble.

From Paul’s letter to the Philippians we realize that he saw the events in his life through the lens of service to Christ. How we think in times of adversity determines our joy. Joy in our Christian life is found in direct proportion with our walk with the Lord.

#### **Joy in Seeing the Gospel Advance**

*Read Philippians 1:12-18 (ESV)* <sup>12</sup> *I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, <sup>13</sup> so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. <sup>14</sup> And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. <sup>15</sup> Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. <sup>16</sup> The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense*

*of the gospel.* <sup>17</sup> *The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.* <sup>18</sup> *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,*

It had been Paul's desire to go to Rome as a preacher instead he went as a prisoner. We recently studied the events that led to Paul's incarceration in Rome. Paul realized that all of these things happened to him for the purpose of advancing the gospel. The Greek word for advancing was a term that described engineers preparing a road for an advancing army and removing obstructions such as rocks and trees. Paul's circumstances removed barriers to the advancement of the gospel.

David Jeremiah believes that Paul being chained to Roman guards 24 hours a day opened the way for approximately 3,000 personal witnessing opportunities over a two-year period. If he had come to Rome as a 'free man', it is highly unlikely that his personal witnessing list would have been that high.

Everyone's circumstances are different. It is a fact that everyone does not have the same witnessing opportunities. However, when we look through the lens of the gospel of Christ, as Paul did, we will be able to visualize our circumstances as tools for spreading God's story. Charles Haddon Spurgeon was a famous British preacher. After the birth of their twin sons, his wife, Susannah, never regained her full physical strength. At the time in which Mrs. Spurgeon lived, many ministers living in England were given such a poor wage that they could barely feed their families, let alone buy books to help them grow spiritually and improve their ministries. God gave her a burden to share her husband's books with pastors who were unable to purchase them. This burden soon led to the founding of the 'Book Fund'. As a work of faith, this fund provided thousands of pastors with tools for their work. All this was supervised by Susannah Spurgeon from her home. It was Susannah's special pioneer ministry for witnessing in a unique way.

Susanna Wesley was the mother of nineteen children. We can only imagine how busy her days would have been. Yet, her ministry for Christ was teaching her children to know the Lord. Out of that large family came John and Charles Wesley, whose combined ministries shook the British Isles with their preaching of salvation by faith alone.

At six weeks of age, Fanny Crosby was blinded, but even as a youngster she determined not to be confined by the chains of darkness. In time, she became a mighty force for God through her hymns and Gospel songs including such hymns as Near the Cross, Tell Me the Story of Jesus and Blessed Assurance to name a few.

Because of Paul's positive response to adversity, others became bold in their own testimony. We may never know this side of heaven how our reactions as Christians affect others. Our response to adversity can cause either a negative or positive response in others. Praising God in our times of trouble encourages others. Remember: griping and whining and complaining will do nothing for the spiritual growth of others.

Paul mentioned those who *preach Christ from envy and rivalry*. Yes, even when Paul found himself in contentious circumstances, his goal was to maintain his focus on sharing the gospel. Paul did not waste time going into detail concerning what these folks were doing. Of course, being the nosy creatures that we are, we

can't help but wonder. Some think it was the Judaizers (Early converts to Christianity who tried to force believers from non-Jewish backgrounds to adopt Jewish customs as a condition of salvation.). David Legge suggests it wasn't people that were opposed to Paul's doctrine, but people who were opposed to Paul's personality. They were jealous of him indicating they were people who were still controlled by their own desires even while they were preaching the gospel.

We can find ourselves in the same predicament – being distracted by someone who is trying to get our focus off Jesus because they are jealous or envious of us. On the other hand, we also need to avoid being jealous of others who are doing the Lord's work. It can happen – their class is bigger, their church has more members, they get to sing solos, the preacher likes them best – any little thing can set off a response of jealousy within the human heart. Just stay on track doing the work you are called to do in advancing the gospel. Paul did believe that it was better for people to receive some knowledge of Christ from those whose hearts were not right rather than never hearing the gospel story. This is why Paul says *whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.*

### Joy in Exalting Christ in Life or Death

*Read Philippians 1:19-26 (ESV)* <sup>19</sup> *for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance,* <sup>20</sup> *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.* <sup>21</sup> *For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.* <sup>22</sup> *If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell.* <sup>23</sup> *I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.* <sup>24</sup> *But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.* <sup>25</sup> *Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith,* <sup>26</sup> *so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.*

Throughout his letters, Paul frequently appeals for prayers and just as frequently tells his readers he is praying for them. Don't hesitate to request prayer and don't forget to pray for others. It is very easy to be so focused on our problems we forget to pray for the needs of others. Paul did not want to be ashamed of his witness in this life most especially when he finally came into the Presence of the Lord. The Apostle John said this in ***1 John 2:28 (ESV)*** <sup>28</sup> *And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.*

Most scholars seem to agree that Paul was imprisoned in Rome twice. This first time he was under 'house arrest' and as far as I can tell, this prayer for deliverance was answered. Paul was not praying just for physical deliverance. His heart's desire was that *Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.* The second time Paul, as an old man, was imprisoned in Rome was even more difficult. This time tradition says he was placed in a dungeon-like well – the last stop for prisoners condemned to die. Tradition also says that Paul was eventually be-headed by Nero. But, he did not quit writing to glorify Christ even in his darkest hour. His second letter to Timothy was penned shortly before his death.

It may help to understand Paul's words: *for to me to live is Christ* when we consider how people of the world view life. Some say, 'For to me to live is money' but then they die and leave it all behind. Others say, 'For to me to live is the next cruise, the next big house, the next new car' and then they die and leave it all behind. Some politicians, though they would never say it aloud, think, 'For to me to live is fame and power' but then they die and lose it all. But Paul could say, as every Christian should say, *For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain*. Death does not take everything away from the one who dies in Christ. If we live, we have opportunity to reflect and share Christ here on earth; if we die, we are with Christ and nothing could be more joyous than that.

Whether or not we are living in a physical prison, we all understand Paul's words well. *I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better*. There are days in all our lives that we would just as soon leave this old world and enter the gates of heaven. But, at the same time, there is an important reason we stay – that is to share the gospel of Christ.

### Joy in Seeing Others Stand Firm in Suffering

**Read Philippians 1:27-30 (ESV)** <sup>27</sup> *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,* <sup>28</sup> *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.* <sup>29</sup> *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,* <sup>30</sup> *engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.*

Wiersbe comments that the Christian life is not a playground. It is a battleground and we are soldiers defending the *faith of the gospel*. The most important weapon against the enemy is not a stirring sermon or a powerful book; it is the consistent life of believers.

Look at what Paul **wanted** to hear concerning the Philippians, *you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel*. But look at what was actually happening. In chapter four Paul mentions two women who were not getting along with each other. Paul was encouraging the folks to be team players. Not everyone can be captain or quarterback but we are all called to support one another as a team effort for our Savior.

Next, Paul warned them not to be alarmed at those who oppose them. We hear a lot today about Christians losing our rights. Is it possible that if we were doing our job of sharing the gospel of Christ this would not be such a problem in America? Gotquestions.org comments, "The church's unique, God-given purpose does not lie in political activism. Nowhere in Scripture do we have the directive to spend our energy, our time, or our money in governmental affairs. Our mission lies not in changing the nation through political reform, but in changing hearts through the Word of God... Only as the hearts of individuals in a culture are changed by Christ will the culture begin to reflect that change."

We can be prisoners of our circumstances looking for worldly happiness that will not last OR we can be God's prisoners, like Paul, confined and shaped by the joy of serving our Master! Let's choose JOY!