

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Nineteenth Sunday After Trinity, October 6, 2024

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 500, 597:1-2, 527, 482, 608:3-5.

Lessons: Job 1:1-22, , 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, Matthew 16:21-27.

Sermon Text: Philippians 1:12-30.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Paul's letter to the Philippians is a very personal letter. These words in the first chapter reveal a great deal about him and what is happening in Rome, where he is imprisoned waiting for his appeal to the emperor Nero to be addressed and resolved. As you heard last week, Paul was in prison. He did not know when and if he would be released from prison, or if ever! He was ready to die and go to heaven. If the choice were up to him, he didn't know what to choose, but knew that God would choose for him. He writes ***"I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death."***

Today let's consider

PAUL'S MISSION WHILE HE WAS A PRISONER

- 1. God has work for Paul to do.**
- 2. His sufferings advanced the cause of the Gospel.**

The older we Christians become, the more anxious we are to leave this earth. We get tired of this world. We can't wait to get to heaven. We see and feel our health deteriorating. As Christians we are sick and tired of the terribly increasing wickedness in the world. And it seems that each day we learn more about how Satan, the prince of darkness, is leading men to even more horrible acts of evil.

Surely, Paul was no different. But Paul was convinced ***"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body."***

Yet he realized that God was totally in control of his life.

Just like Paul you must realize that because you are still on earth God has work for you to do – his work. Paul knew that as long as he had breath, God had work for him to do. He personally had plans for what he wanted to accomplish while on earth. But he realized that God is the one guiding all things.

Among other things, through the power of God the Holy Ghost, Paul wrote the letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and to Philemon while bound in chains. From the very positive things Paul writes in those books and from what Luke writes in the book of Acts, Paul's proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ also brought people to faith in the time he still had on this earth. It was during this time that by his willing suffering and especially by telling others about Jesus Christ and what he did for sinful man that the Holy Spirit worked faith in people.

In this very personal part of his letter to the congregation at Philippi, he writes ***"Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ."*** His imprisonment has served Christ and ***"served to advance the Gospel."*** He does not take any personal credit for this. Through his 13 letters in the New Testament, we see that he totally gives credit to God.

In this very letter to the Philippians, he writes about his being brought up as a descendant of Abraham: ***“circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.”*** (Philippians 3:5–6, NIV84) So we would have to recognize that he was what people would consider ‘a pretty good person’!

Yet in the very next words he wrote: ***“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”*** (Philippians 3:7–9, NIV84)

Surely, being imprisoned he would have to consider that he had lost things – his freedom as a Roman citizen, for example. Yet he willingly gave up his freedom – along with many other things – such as his health, his ability to do what he wanted, and his standing among the Jews in Jerusalem whom he had once served in persecuting Christians,

He writes ***“Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.”***

It is likely that Paul had a lot more freedom than some prisoners. Paul was free to speak and write about Jesus Christ and this had given his fellow Christians – in Rome and elsewhere – encouragement to boldly speak the word of God without fear.

When we look at Paul and his words, we are encouraged. When Christians today reach out with the Word of God, we are encouraged that the Word of God brought visible fruits to the visible church in Paul’s day. If Paul could rejoice while suffering for preaching Christ, we should recognize that we, too, can rejoice even when we are persecuted. Through Isaiah God promises ***“so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”*** (Isaiah 55:11, NIV84)

Think of the ways we are encouraged. In our personal lives, when we read the Scriptures, we find encouragement for the day in front of us, and forgiveness for the sins behind us. When we pray we know that “Our Father who art in heaven” will hear and respond to our prayers in the way that is best.

However, Paul recognizes that some do not preach Christ with pure motives. ***“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. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached.”***

“Envy and rivalry”. Can we imagine evil people preaching about Christ out of ***“envy”***? Did they envy Paul’s following? Did they envy the way Paul was treated and maybe thought that as a prisoner – even if he was a Roman citizen – being treated as leniently as he was? Remember, he was not locked up in solitary confinement with no way to communicate with people outside the prison. He was not sentenced to be executed and awaiting execution at this time.

The word ***“rivalry”*** suggests competition. Today we can easily see competition among churches. Churches seem anxious for “growth” – to add great numbers of people to their attendance and membership. They seek to have the largest or most beautiful building in which to gather a few hours a week. They seek to offer gymnasiums or other sports facilities to attract sports-minded people. And they seek to have some kind of “inclusive” message, which may not even speak of “sin” as “sin”. They may preach about God sending generous financial rewards or an easy life if only you give money – “seed money” some false preachers call it! And they may offer generous financial packages to people who will become their preachers. If you are aware of any television evangelists, they seem to want money and certainly look like they are well-off financially. But Scripture warns that leaders in the church should not be ***“lover[s] of money.”*** (1 Timothy 3:3, NIV84)

As a personal experience, Pastor Mehlretter reports that while attending seminary in Eau Claire, WI, he did some yard work for a woman who was on a committee to hire preachers in a liberal Lutheran church. She told him that if he didn’t have a call into the ministry, she offered to consider him for a preacher’s job with good pay when he graduated from seminary!

All such, Paul says, were not sincere in their preaching about Christ, so he obviously had some personal knowledge about how they ***“preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.”*** We know human nature and how many, many people in the world are doing and saying things only for some benefit for themselves.

But Paul also tells us that others preach Christ out of love, ***“knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.”*** God has his ways of using adversity to further his cause.

He asks: ***“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. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.”***

He ***“expect[s] and hope[s] that [he] will in no way be ashamed.”*** He knows that whether he lives or dies, ***“Christ will be exalted.”***

Paul’s great hope is expressed this way: ***“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.”***

Did he expect to see them again? He speaks here very positively about that. ***“Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your 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.”*** (Philippians 1:21–26, NIV84) And it did turn out that Paul was released from prison so that he could again serve believers personally.

He concludes this personal section of the letter with the admonition ***“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.”*** (Philippians 1:27–30, NIV84)

We, too, are to live ***“in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”*** In fact, that idea is part of our confirmation vows to remain faithful to the Word of God. We promise to live that way with the help of God and by the grace of God.

Yes, we, too, rejoice like Paul, knowing that God has given us, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the opportunity and the ability to believe in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior . And that can lead to all sorts of suffering for Christ and the truth of the Word of God. Paul didn’t know what specific struggles we have for the truth of the Gospel, but he offers hope, comfort, and the assurance of eternal life for us, too, through Jesus Christ. May we rejoice, even in our sufferings for Christ. Amen.