

Gospel advance

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[0 : 00] Now you might have heard me use this illustration before. It's about something called, it was a while back, I was watching a David Attenborough, one of these documentaries.

They're pretty regular, aren't they? But it's pretty staple in that. I found we were always watching the latest David Attenborough. But the one that I was watching, there was this plot on it called the Fire Poppy.

And fire poppies, they grow in sort of grassland areas, dry areas. But the interesting thing about them is the only way that they can germinate is if the smoke from a fire, it's the reason to call it a fire poppy, is that the smoke from a fire triggers the germination process.

So these plants, they're there, you don't know they're there, because they go for years, years, years without flowering. And then, if there's like a bushfire or a from the heat, what happens is everything else dies and is scorched to bits and it looks like it's completely decimated.

But the smoke from the forest fire that's destroyed everything else causes this poppy, the fire poppy, to germinate. And in the middle of the land suffering, the land completely being blitzed, you get this little poppy that needs the fire to grow.

[1 : 30] It needed the destruction for everything to happen, for it to grow. It is a peculiar way of nature, isn't it, that growth, this growth of this poppy needs everything else to suffer for it to grow.

And yet, in the midst of the suffering of the land, you get this strange beauty that happens after everything else is destroyed. The land suffers, but in the middle, something that needs fire to grow. It's unexpected, and it is peculiar. Now, this morning, as we think about Philippians, these few verses, just a small six verses, one of the things that Paul is talking about is growth in the church, or the advance of the gospel, if you like.

And what I think we notice is it is similar to what we see in the fire poppy. Because what we see is that the gospel seems to advance, not despite suffering, but because of it.

Not despite suffering, but because of it. That's what Paul is wanting to tell the Philippian church, because you might remember what I said last week, he's in prison, we think it's when he was in prison in Rome.

[2 : 43] But the gospel, the good news of Jesus, is advancing and the church is growing. You look with me what he writes to the church in verse 12. He says, Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.

What has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. It's him in prison that's made that happen.

And so that's what I want us to think about this morning, as what we see is three specific ways in how that's brought about, which Paul goes into. Three areas where we see the effect of Paul's imprisonment and the suffering that he's undergoing that has enabled the growth of the gospel that in fact wouldn't have happened without him going into prison.

And there's three things. That him witnessing, we see a gospel confidence and we see a gospel joy. So the first one is gospel witnessing, gospel witness.

We know what a witness is. If you're in court and you're called to a witness box, it means you're under oath to give a true account to what happened and what you saw, you're called to the witness box.

[4 : 02] And when you do that, or somebody in court does that, they witness, don't they, to whoever's in the room, listening in the courtroom. You could say that the same about any time, forget about the courtroom, the same principle goes to any time you tell of something you saw or heard.

When you tell about a story, about when you're on holiday, holiday, you're giving an account of what you got up to, what you saw and what you heard. You're witnessing to your holiday. What you saw and what you heard is what you witnessed.

And being in prison, Paul continues to witness. He witnesses, he speaks about what he's heard and what he's seen and what he knows and who he's encountered and the truth of what God has spoken to him about Jesus Christ, the truth of the gospel, what he's seen and heard to people he would never normally meet.

Paul is able to witness of the good news of Jesus in a way that is only possible because of his suffering, because he's in chains. Notice he doesn't witness in spite of his suffering.

It's not, it's not that he's making the best of a bad situation. But rather, the witnessing of the good news happens to a particular group of people because of the chains.

[5 : 19] You look with me, verse 13. As a result, as a result of the chains, that's what he's saying, as a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.

The prison guards watching Paul know that he's in prison because of the good news of Jesus. The people in chains alongside him, they're for all sorts of real and true criminality.

And you can bet your life Paul would have been talking particularly to them about the offer of forgiveness, to the thieves, the murderers, and who knows what. The people in Rome on the outside who knew he'd been put there.

This man, this man, do you hear about this man he's been put in prison for, for Jesus, this, this newfangled faith that he's, this man he claims to have met.

This man, Jesus, must really matter to him if he's prepared to go in prison. His message must, will it really be worth hearing perhaps if this man will go to chains for him.

[6 : 21] His chains advance to the gospel because he's able to witness to the good news of Jesus that can only happen because of his suffering. And actually, this is not the first time it's happened for Paul either.

Because the church he's writing, so the Philippine church based in Philippi, was actually started in a prison. You remember Acts 16? Paul's in prison with Silas, they're singing and praying, a huge earthquake happens and the jailer becomes a Christian and both he and all his family are baptised. That jailer, who became a Christian, would very likely have been in the church that was receiving this very letter. He would know himself that without Paul going to prison, he himself wouldn't have been a follower of Jesus and that his church wouldn't have existed.

And we have to remember that in many ways, the UK or the Western church is abnormal, is actually the freak that hasn't gone through in recent years or recent centuries the level of persecution that we've seen in church history.

Actually, ministers going to prison and Christians going to prison is actually the norm. It happens all the time in Iran, currently North Korea. There hasn't been a time in history from the beginning of the church to the end of the church when there hasn't been a Christian in prison.

[7 : 51] Iran, North Korea, example. And we may be tempted ourselves to think or see that as a setback for the church when we hear of that happening. But here what we see from Paul is that actually it's not a setback for the growth of the church because his ministry, the ministry of Jesus thrives when he's in that difficult situation.

It's such a different way of looking at difficulty that we encounter in our own lives that the living God is able to witness and does witness to different people in unique ways, not in spite of suffering and difficulty but because of it.

During COVID, we could have been tempted to think that because we couldn't meet people face to face or go to church in the same way that the people wouldn't hear about our Saviour. But people started to follow Jesus, not despite COVID but because it happened.

They started to look for answers to the existence of God and who Jesus is because all of a sudden there was a pressure to wonder and consider what the meaning of everything that was going on. And what about personal difficulty when that happens? I mean the real personal difficulty is that we're not wanting anybody to go through but that God does use.

[9 : 07] Grief, loss, hardship, illness, as hard as it may be and I really don't want to discount that it is hard. It is. But God is able and does work not despite those difficulties but because of them.

He witnesses to others when we grieve because we grieve not as others do but as those who have hope. When we struggle, when we struggle as a believing community, we rally around one another, praying for one another, providing support and when that gets known it's noticed.

We find strength from the Holy Spirit that God supplies which can't be explained and witnesses of the good news of Jesus. God works not despite our difficulties but because of them in and through them.

So that's gospel witness that only happens because of suffering. Second one is gospel confidence. So that's the first way. It's all about advancing the gospel.

The second way that it's changed to advance the gospel is the believer's confidence. They're growing confidence in the good news. They're growing confidence in the gospel. Just look with me in verse 14. And because of my chains, because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

[10:26] Now this is not what you would expect, is it? Normally, if someone is in prison, if someone who's not, who's connected to that person, is involved in the same activity that got their mate, pal, friend inside, in prison, you would normally see them distance themselves.

That's what you would normally see, I think. Unless in a unique situation. But here, the opposite happens. The Christians in Rome, where Paul's in prison, are confident, not in spite of his chains, but because of his chains.

The imprisonment encourages them to do more and without fear. A few years ago, I was given the opportunity to spend a few days with a pastor from Syria. And it was jarring, I think it was 2013, 2014, it was jarring when all the trouble was happening with ISIS.

He was flown over from Syria in secret and he shared with us how it had been. He showed us pictures of his church and how buildings next to his church didn't exist anymore from the bombings. He told us stories about how people from his church had been there one Sunday and then the next Sunday hadn't. And yet, the congregation came out every Sunday to worship. It put any suffering I had into perspective, any fears I might have about telling people about Jesus, about being associated with church into perspective because I thought, well, if he can do that in the middle of a war zone, fearing for his life and yet still being examples to his church, what's stopping me?

[12:01] You see, you might have, you know it's the same in a war zone. In a war zone, I've watched it not so long back. There was a film made by Peter Jackson documenting some of the true stories that happened in World War I when the men went over the top.

They went over the top as brothers together. They didn't leave it to one man and watch him and just get blasted to pieces but actually, they were right behind him and when one went over the top, it encouraged all the rest of the men to follow.

It gave them confidence that if he can go over and run, knowing that he might very well get killed, that they would go up and be right behind him as brothers, side by side. Paul had that effect on the Roman church.

If Paul can go to prison, then what's stopping us out here? And if the Holy Spirit can sustain Paul, then surely he can supply every need we have. There is a strange empowerment that comes that says we're not going to take this lying down.

In some ways, it reminds us that living as a Christian is a battle, a real battle, it's a war zone and we're not going to take it lying down. We're not just going to leave people and let them figure out what eternal life is for themselves, but we're going to show compassion and kindness, show Jesus has changed us and let people know with our words that he is the hope that we need, that they need for our past, our present and our future.

[13:22] That everyone needs to have a relationship with this man who changes their lives. That we're not going to look at this man in Syria and just leave him to it, but we'll back him up and we're not going to take it lying down.

We're in the trenches together and we're going to stand and be counted for Jesus' sake. Paul's in prison and we're right there with you, brother. That's what they're saying. The man in Syria for being a Christian, we're right there with you, brother and we're going to do what we can to save, for Jesus to work through us on our shores in the Scotland.

That's the mindset of a Christian. Finally, gospel joy. The final way that Paul's chains is suffering, advances the gospel, is that he himself becomes surprisingly more joyful.

You don't expect from what Paul says that his response is going to be joy. Paul's telling the Philippian church what is happening in Rome with the church, the Philippian church what's

happening in the church in Rome.

And there are two groups of people who are preaching and telling others about Jesus Christ but these two groups have very different motives. On the one hand, we have the first group that Paul mentions and they're against him.

[14 : 35] Verse 15, they preach Christ, they're telling others about Jesus but look with me, they do not think highly of Paul, they're jealous, envious of him, they don't see themselves on the same team but as a rival, envious and a rival.

Verse 17, they've got selfish envious, they're thinking about themselves, perhaps they want to be known like Paul is and so to make matters worse, they want Paul to suffer whilst he's in prison. This is part of the Christian church in Rome. But the second group couldn't be any more different. The second group in Rome on the other hand, they preach Christ but it's not from selfish motives. They tell others about Jesus, verse 16, out of love. They love Paul, they know why he's suffering as he is, they have good intentions. Now I don't know what you make of Paul's response to these two groups.

Personally, it is pretty incredible. You imagine how you feel, maybe how do you react if you were Paul. This group, they're kicking him when he's down and whilst they're doing that, whilst they're still saying that they're followers of Jesus themselves.

[15 : 38] Wouldn't there be the temptation if you were him to kick back, even just a little bit to get some revenge, to get your own back, my own back? Paul's response is totally wild. Look with me.

Verse 18, 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. Paul's imprisonment, his chains, they give him a clear perspective on what matters.

He's in chains anyway. And so the most important thing that matters is that Jesus Christ and his good news is announced and proclaimed. He doesn't care who's doing it, but that it happens. The good news is that Jesus Christ, God the Son, came to earth to live a perfect life, die the death of a slave in our place and be raised a new life so that everyone would call on his name to be forgiven, redeemed and adopted into the family of God.

Paul is joyful that Jesus Christ and his good news is being made known whoever's doing it. And unfortunately, that's not always what we see in the church in Scotland or across the world, is it? We've seen Christians, we've seen churches and leaders react like the first group. That instead of partnering together, they try to compete with one another. Small churches jealous of big ones seeing them as a threat, leaders disagreeing over secondary matters, there's jealousy and looking over the shoulder and selfish ambition can creep in.

[17 : 00] It doesn't represent Jesus. Now, we're not saying that we have to agree with everyone on everything, but in a church that is faithful to the good news of Jesus, we do give thanks.

Wherever the gospel is proclaimed faithfully, Jesus Christ is present by his spirit. Now, does Paul want them to mature and stop being vindictive? Of course he does.

But Paul leaves that in the hands of God, trusting that if they are true followers, that he will sort them out in his own time. He has the right perspective because he knows what really matters and what the number one thing is.

It's the most important thing, isn't it? If you see someone starving, you know they need food. If you see someone freezing, you know they need warmth and shelter, if you know someone, if you know of someone suffering from illness, does it matter how the hungry get fed?

Does it matter who gives the cold person a blanket or who gives the person who's ill cancer chemotherapy? It doesn't matter who administers what the person needs. It doesn't matter at all. What matters is that they get what they need.

[18 : 03] All of us at some point or one point or another have been spiritually empty. And the only thing that matters, the one thing, was that we heard the good news of Jesus. And it's the only thing that they need because they're spiritually empty.

Because the gospel is the cure, the solution that will fix your soul. It's the only thing that will do it. The middle man is not actually that important, the administer of it.

What matters is that it's delivered. Paul probably does care about how they treat him, but it's not his first concern. He's more full of joy, perhaps relief, that people are hearing the news they need to hear.

So have joy in the good news of Jesus today because his good news is being heard everywhere. It's being heard by people who would agree on most things. It's being heard by people who would disagree.

It's being heard by big churches and small churches, but we rejoice because it's being heard. The good news that we all need to hear, the medicine for spiritual sickness is being dispensed.

[19 : 05] And so, suffering for the gospel causes it to advance. Like the fire populates, peculiar growth.

It happens because of the fire, not in spite of it. The gospel grows because of the suffering, because of the chains, not in spite of it, so that we can witness more, with greater clarity and greater accuracy about what God has done in our lives and show that we have a hope.

We can have more confidence that we stand with those brothers and if they can do it, what's stopping us? What's stopping us when we see others going through such suffering?

And we do it with joy. We do it with joy that the gospel is being heard everywhere. we pray.

Almighty God, we do give you thanks and praise for the good news of the gospel.

We thank you of the peculiar way that you work, that you grow the church and that you cause the gospel to advance because of the suffering, not in spite of it.

[20 : 22] And so we pray that you would equip us and help us to look at those people in our world that are doing it under great pressure and stress and that we would be encouraged to fight the fight with them.

That we would not take it lying down but that we would be, you would give us courage and help us and equip us to speak of the gospel, to live it out and to not be embarrassed or feel under pressure when people speak of it.

We pray that you give us great joy and that the gospel is being heard everywhere to be prayerful and thankful for other churches even where those differences exist. And we pray ourselves when we go under when we suffer whether that's because of our faith or whether that's for other reasons.

We pray that you use it to advance the gospel and to grow the church. We thank you that the growth of the church is down to you but we do praise you that you use us. And so we pray that you bless this work with us today.

We ask for this in Jesus' name. we pray that you that we are going to allow you to try to enable you to reduce your behalf to hear your... the text of the church as an example of the church will forgive you and we pay to the church into the church and we're going to atone and so yes hear you for Jesus ■ you can spread this into the church and we hope that you are going to pay for this peace to win their Ö to