

Factors that result in the furtherance of the gospel

Part 1

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[00:00:00] I feel constrained to give a few words on a verse that's been considered already in Philippians chapter 1, verse 12, and also the 13th verse.

Philippians 1, 12 and 13, and I hope what's said will build up and will encourage and exhort us to a course of positive action.

Here it says in the 12th verse, But I would, ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel, so that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace and in all other places.

[00:01:08] In the Philippian epistle, Paul uses some words recurrently, joy has been one of them, rejoice, fellowship another, and the gospel is another.

And I'd like to say a few words about the unexpected results of Paul's imprisonment in relation to the gospel.

The unexpected results of Paul's imprisonment.

In the end of Acts, we see Paul in his hired house. It seems that he was in more confined circumstances now when he writes this letter. I think a brother said in the reading, it wasn't from an ivory palace that he wrote this letter, and exhorting and encouraging the saints at Philippi to rejoice, but he [00:02:01] knew something of suffering in a Roman prison. And he starts off with this, what shall we call it, disclosure formula. But I would, ye should understand, brethren.

I want you to know, he says, I want you to know what has happened to me. I want to relate to you my circumstances. He wanted to have fellowship with the Philippians, that they who had fellowship with him and had an interest in his testimony and his service might also have some feedback, have some news about his own situation.

And because of recent events, he wants to let them know what has happened, that they might know his affairs.

Of course, Tychicus would be useful in announcing to the Ephesians and the Colossians, I suppose, [00:03:02] the same sort of thing. But here Paul tells the Philippians a little of the detail.

He says, what has happened has led to the furtherance of the gospel.

Being there in prison wasn't a total disaster, but rather it served to advance the gospel.

Being in an adverse situation helped promote the testimony that was close to Paul's heart.

And in spite of obstructions and dangers, in spite of the intention, I suppose, of authorities and Jews particularly, to obstruct and to hinder and to block the advance of the gospel, I suppose they would imagine that the chief obstacle to the propagation of Christianity [00:04:03] would be to put its chief exponent in prison and have him held by the praetorian guard, maybe of 9,000 soldiers.

A classicist here would tell us if that's the correct number. They thought, well, that's got Paul locked up. That's got him dealt with. But the unexpected thing was that although his activity was curtailed and it was restricted by the actual imprisonment, nevertheless, the imprisonment resulted in a powerful witness for Christ. And this is something really unusual, something unexpected.

It's not the normal course of things.

Right in the scene of his captivity, there was a consequent triumph for Christ and for [00:05:08] the gospel.

And it was a triumph for the gospel in a pagan society.

Now, I don't know if we'd quite call Scotland a pagan society.

We think so in England, that the English are in a pagan society. I don't know how you feel up here, but, you know, it's quickly, rapidly becoming a post-Christian society and we feel the disadvantage of it.

And we're yearning for the days of Queen Victoria or something like that, the brighter and better days in the past.

But, you know, in the most difficult and the most hostile of environments, Christianity, [00:06:06] we might say, was born and developed.

It germinated in the most hostile ground. Of course, the gospel fell onto good soil and it produced fruit unto eternal life in those that received the word and they were converted. But overall, society was hostile to the gospel and it was actively hostile and persecutions arose right in the beginning, in the Acts of the Apostles. You can read about it, imprisonment, difficulties, prohibitions to preach in this name.

And then its leading exponent, as I say, Paul, indefatigable worker, labourer for Christ, ends up in prison.

He's the man who's been encouraging us to work and now look where he is. [00:07:02] What shall we do?

Give up?

Well, he wasn't for giving up.

He wasn't to look at the adverse circumstances in which he found himself. He speaks of the furtherance. Look at the word there, rather to the furtherance of the gospel, striking out. He was going forward, the message wasn't bound, the word of God is not bound. There is power in these words, in the book that you possess in your hands at the moment. God's word is not bound. I'm sure Paul believed that it would accomplish its purpose, the proclamation of that message would achieve its purpose according to the counsels of God and souls would be reached and souls would be saved. And there Paul is, in chains.

[00:08:01] Strange isn't it? Strange way to make the gospel known by a man in chains. That's not what we would do. We would organise a publicity campaign.

We'd get a celebrity to endorse our message, but God doesn't work like that.

The gospel is communicated by spiritual means and it's communicated by spiritual men and women as well.

It was made known by a man in chains, in chains for Christ's sake, for Christ's service.

For Christ he was a prisoner because of his adherence to Christ.

Because of his belief, I suppose even in the truth of the one body, that Jew and Gentile should be alike blessed.

This man who believes this is not fit to live.

But you know, we have the working of men, the Jews, Romans were involved in some way.

[00:09:09] He'd appealed to go to Caesar, still he had to be kept in charge, a prisoner. Satan was at work as well. Satan is the great antagonist against the gospel. Every hindrance that you feel, every obstacle that you perceive, you can be sure Satan is behind the promotion, the propagation, the spread of the gospel. And of course there's a great army of smooth talkers, many antichrists, peddling their false gospel, seeming to have success.

And evil, evil messages, false doctrines, seem to be progressively energetic, spreading through the world, people preferring to believe a lie already, rather than from the heart believing the form of doctrine, the pure doctrine of the gospel, which can be delivered to them. [00:10:08] And Satan is at work. But you know, Satan's craft, craftiness and his pride, in Paul's case it just prospered to his own confusion.

He thought, I've got him in prison, that's the end of that. But it meant that the gospel spread, the furtherance of the gospel, it's most remarkable, look at this, manifest in all the palace, in all the praetorium, all, there was great scope for the gospel and it penetrated many a heart, many had come under the influence of the gospel and many had submitted to Christ, I believe.

Wonderful work.

[00:11:01] What had happened by divine permission in respect of Paul's imprisonment was to be, was proved to be for the furtherance of the wonderful testimony that Paul held. God's gospel is advanced by the very act that threatened to extinguish it.

Now I'd like to, that's just a little review of Paul's situation and how it was then. Early in the Christian Church, in its history, there were efforts to purge the testimony from this planet.

But it's still going on today. You're an evidence, you're a testimony that God has triumphed.

And not only in this room, but in every locality from where you come. And not only from where you are sitting on a habitual basis on Lord's Day morning, but [00:12:05] in the neighborhood. There are other believers, may not be walking with us in quite the same way as we've understood, but there are many who have trusted the Lord. And we can rejoice in this, that God will triumph and God is triumphing. And there are many souls, many sons being brought to glory. And from every corner of the world, from every kindred, every tribe and every tongue, there will be an answer to Calvary.

As great as the work, so great will be the response. That's a very wonderful thing. But there are a couple of things I'd like to encourage us in the Gospel.

Do you feel disadvantaged? Well, I don't think any of us are in prison yet or have been in prison. Some of us have a friend. He goes under the pseudonym of B.V. Henry, been in prison, he's a brother in Sweden. [00:13:06] And he's been in prison nine times for the sake of the Gospel. It's just an example.

Nine times for preaching the Gospel in Yugoslavia. In Iraq, two or three times in prison. In Libya, they asked for 24 years in prison. He preached the Gospel so earnestly in prison he was out before 24 months were finished. The worst prisons were the Turkish prisons. They don't give you food in Turkish prisons. He's still alive today and he'd be ready to go again and preach the Gospel. He's written a book, Love Those Arabs. Well that's not sort of a current thought in Britain, but he seeks to bring the Gospel to the Muslim.

He's been in prison for the sake of the Gospel.

But we're far from going to prison.

There may be one or two preachers who are arrested and stopped and hindered from preaching [00:14:03] and their tracks are taken away.

More often it ends up in the thing being dismissed and they were wrongfully arrested or something like that.

But you know we may have other constraints. We may find other obstacles upon our path that hinder us in preaching the Gospel, in sharing the good news, of announcing the wonderful glad tidings.

It may be that we are, they're imaginary, it may be that they are real. Maybe we think our location is difficult, we're in a remote quarter, not many people come up here.

We live in a village and there are very few and everyone's heard it. Or we live in a city and there are

so many people to tell and how do we start and where do we start? And we look at obstacles like that regarding our location. There may be other difficulties. Maybe it's our station. Oh I'm only lowly, I'm not much, I'm not able to do anything.

[00:15:07] But you know the Lord Jesus took the lowest station. He was able to serve all. It wasn't a hindrance.

Maybe that our circumstances will hinder us. Maybe our home circumstances. There's much to do at home, decorating and plastering and there's been a flood and something gone wrong and I'm hindered. Or perhaps my work. I'm working too many hours. I'm not maintaining a life-work balance. And if we're thinking of a job, this is just a little byword. Make sure that you look for a job which will give you as much liberty to be with your family and as much liberty to be with the Lord's things as possible.

But maybe you're in a position where you feel hindered.

Maybe that your resources, you feel, are few. [00:16:01] Maybe you say, well we are only few. What can we do? There are 60 million people in this country, in these islands. How can we reach them with the Gospel? Few. Few loaves and fishes.

Not much.

But the Lord is able to multiply.

The Lord is able to give support and increase and prosperity and blessing. And little is much when God is in it. That can be demonstrated in many a circumstance. It may be that we lack gift. Maybe we lack education. We find all these things are hindering us in taking a step in serving the Lord. Maybe our health. We say we have inadequate health or we are disabled or too old or too young.

All manner of reasons come in to hinder us, but you know, there's an old hymn we used [00:17:01] to sing, I think at Golden Bell or something, Sunday School Chorus, there's a work for Jesus none but you can do.

There are opportunities for service for each one.

You see, the Gospel is powerful. I wonder whether we could just look at that.

Let's look at Paul's personal esteem and respect of the Gospel. Romans chapter 1.

It's very well known, but it's good to have our eye on the text. Romans 1 verse 16.

Paul, he says, he wants to go to Rome in the 15th verse, and then he says, I'm not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. That's a wonderful thing, isn't it? Paul wasn't ashamed to preach in Rome.

[00:18:03] He'd like to do that with all its imperial might, all its pomp, all its ceremony, and all the intimidation of masses of people, Gentiles.

Here would be this Jew of contemptible stature, perhaps, going there, ready to preach the Gospel.

He said he wasn't ashamed. He didn't see the obstacles, and if an obstacle came his way, he saw it as an opportunity rather for the furtherance of the Gospel.

He says here, I'm not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ. I trust none of us are ashamed of the Gospel of Christ. He had no reason to be ashamed of it, really. Why? He says, it's the power of God unto salvation. He had known its power in his own soul. The circumstances on the Damascus Road are very well known to us all, and we see what happened to him, how he had turned from going his own way, and we've been reading just a [00:19:06] little touch of it in our chapter today, in Philippians, what he was, persecuting the church, a zealot in that way, an enthusiast in persecution, men and women, taking them off to prison, our brethren.

Still men and women like that today in the world, and he says, it's the power of God. He'd known the power in his own soul, and therefore he was ready to proclaim it to others because he knew that this message was the message that could change people's lives. And there's nothing like it.

He says, it's the power of God, of God, I say.

You know, some years, a few years ago, there was that terrific sea quake which resulted in the tsunami, and we saw the power of nature sweep away, what, a quarter of a million lives [00:20:03] in a moment.

Power of nature.

Great catastrophes happen here and there, and we say, look at nature, how powerful it is, and then people are afraid of power in warfare, we see it in bombs going off in Iraq and other countries, and the power there, and then people are in fear about the atomic bomb and they're worried about what might happen in Korea. These powers are nothing compared to the power of God.

It is only the power of God that can change a soul. It is only the intervention of God that can affect the changes which are necessary to bring a lost man, to take him to heaven.

It's very wonderful to take account of that. The power of God. What I want to say about the first thing that Paul has before him is the supreme power [00:21:01] is proclaimed in the Gospel.

Supreme power. And it's a wonderful thing. It's not humanitarian relief, thank God we can do good to all men. We can do some of that. But that's not the Gospel. It's an adjunct. It's a help. It's an aid. Education.

We like to help the people to be able to read the Bible, read the hymn book, read a good book. You know, people who can read who never read a book, they're worse than people who can't read. So make sure you all read.

But education isn't the same as the Gospel.

It's not equal to it in any way. It may affect some changes. But it's only the Gospel of Christ that is the power of God unto salvation. There's nothing like it. It is the supreme power.

And Paul was proclaiming that in prison.

[00:22:01] Furthermore, he says here, it's to everyone.

And he tells who the everyone is here in our verse. To the Jew first and also to the Greek.

When we go to Christian resource exhibitions, you get societies laboring among the Jews and they say to the Jew first. Have that text. I've got a little friend, Pavlos Karagog, he says they always forget the rest of the verse.

Also to the Greek. And he doesn't work among the Greeks. But, you see, the Gospel is to everyone.

It's not only to Jew and Greek, I might suggest. It's to rich and poor. It's available for the respectable person. It's available for the dejected drug addict in the gut.

It's available for old. It's available for the young. It's available for everyone. [00:23:01] It's being offered to all. To black and to white.

To the civilized, to the uncivilized.

To the crude and coarse and to the refined. To those in palaces, to those in hovels. The Gospel has not only got the supreme message, but it is also a message which is sufficient in its embrace.

And Paul saw that.

And he was hated for it. That the Gentiles should be brought in to this blessing, which the Jews claimed narrow, exclusive rights to, according to their opinions.

But there's a further thing about the Gospel which is very attractive. And it's here, I missed the word, that believeth. You know, it's not the climbing on your knees up some stairs in Rome that'll get you to heaven.

It's not religious rights and duties. [00:24:01] It's not religious works. It's not ceremonies. It's not liturgies. It's not, I've been speaking about it, religious flesh. Doing something in order to get to heaven.

I had the most unusual circumstance come across my path. An uncle of mine died. And I didn't know, well, in the past he'd been a Jehovah's Witness, but I'd heard he'd given that up. And I went to his funeral. And I was astonished.

And they had a Jehovah's Witness minister pray. And he prayed that on the basis of my uncle's good works he'd be admitted into paradise. It's just a religion of works.

No hope.

But here it is, in its simplicity, that believeth.

What a wonderful thing. What a wonderful message we have. God hasn't made it difficult. No wonder

Paul rejoiced to proclaim this message, whether he was free or whether he was in chains. [00:25:03] Wonderful.

And his example, and what is in Paul's heart, as expressed in this verse here, touches me immensely. I think it ought to touch us. We think of our circumstances.

We're very few. Who's going to listen to us? My dear friends, dear brothers and sisters, there's scope for the gospel in this country. And there are precious souls to be brought in under the sound of the gospel. Or to read the gospel. A tract given out.

And souls are being saved in this country at this very moment.

I'm quite sure that at this present moment there are people coming to Christ in the world. And they will do until that moment when we are taken up to be with him at the rapture. If there weren't any more being saved, we'd be raptured. So souls are being saved. [00:26:01] And there's an opportunity for us. We may not be... We pass through the fields here and there was a combine harvester working. Sometimes we fancy we'd like to be like a combine harvester, gathering lots of souls. But most of us are going to be like Ruth, just gleaning in the fields in some corner. Because we're poor.

And we're insignificant. We may not be much.

But there are opportunities to labor in the Lord's harvest. And I trust that we'll all be encouraged to do it. There's one last verse I want to bring to your attention. And that's in 1 Thessalonians. And it's a very attractive verse to me. Here are some more of Paul's friends. And he writes very attractively about them. [00:27:05] 1 Thessalonians. 1 Thessalonians. Chapter 1.

Verse...

We'll just read verse 8. Verse 8.

Of course, here it's called... We have the phrase, the word of the Lord. And we see that it had to do with their testimony as well. Their faith. And that was made known. But I want to look at just this aspect of the verse. Paul uses very picturesque language. It says, for from you sounded out. Sounded out. And I think probably Mr. Vine's dictionary will tell you that that word can be rendered... [00:28:02] Sounded out like a clarion bell.

Or like a trumpet, a rallying trumpet. And it wasn't just a single blast. It went on and on and on. It wasn't a hiccup for the Thessalonians. Oh, let's do the gospel. And they do it. And then they go back to the usual activities. No, it sounded out.

Repeatedly. Repeatedly. It was a heartbeat. A heartbeat for them to announce the word of the Lord. Ah yes, there was affliction. There were difficulties. There were problems. It won't be easy to do this. But each of us will have an opportunity, I'm sure. Come before us. Once a brother said to me, you don't have to pray for opportunities, Edwin. There's 60 million in Britain already. That's a lot to pray for before we start praying for more opportunities. But there are many personal opportunities that come before us.

[00:29:06] A neighbour says, I've got a problem. I've got a difficulty. I've got to go to hospital. You say, I

know someone who can help you. I'm going to pray for you. You can speak to your neighbours about the Lord. There are many opportunities where we can give a word in season. Sometimes it's out of season. And the word can be sounded out as part of a heartbeat.

Where we're ready to declare the things of the Lord.

Even though we feel confined. Paul was really confined. We feel restricted for various reasons.

Let's see that the gospel is something that can be liberated.

And is liberating.

And there are good results attended upon the proclamation and the spread of the gospel. We needn't be discouraged. [00:30:02] We look in this place and that place. It's hard labour.

Think of the dear brethren at Woodington. They've been indefatigable in their labours, in their district. Giving out tracts.

Ostensibly poor results.

But who can tell?

We are measuring in times of 60, 70 birthdays.

But God measures in terms of eternity. And I am sure that the precious seeds sown down here will bear fruit to Christ's glory. And I do pray that all of us will be stimulated in regard to this situation in which Paul found himself. It was a difficult situation, admittedly. A very difficult situation. We're in straitened circumstances in regard to the testimony. We prayed with tears and concern this morning about it. But you know, the Word of God is not bound. And what it was in the first century, it is still in this century. [00:31:04] And just before the coming of the Lord, I believe a harvest can still be secured. For our encouragement. But for Christ's glory and honour.