

# **Even *Through* My Hardship God Is Working His Purpose Out!**

Phil 1:12-18a(text)

9 February 2020, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 10:30 am

(Put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)

## **Intro**

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

I have often in the past spoken about the first thirteen years after our migration to New Zealand – thirteen years of hardship in which the Lord had to humble me for the pride I had developed before our migration – pride rested in the Senior Lecturer’s position I held at a university in South Africa.

Yes, instead, God allowed for me various part-time jobs through which I tried to feed my family: weekend work in the produce department of a grocery store; and in the week, a few hours of peace-meal language teaching in various private schools; and after-hours toilet-cleaning at a school in Avondale, Auckland. Then, just as I was six years into a low-paying yet wonderful teaching position at a Bible College in Auckland, that college ran into financial difficulties and could no longer pay its staff. So, again, at the age of 49, I had to urgently (and for the n<sup>th</sup> time) go find work to feed the family. Thankfully, and out of compassion, an elderly couple in church, who were of orchid growers, hired me for a season to come help them replacing the glass roofs of their hothouses with plastic covering.

Nevertheless, here is the point I want to make:

You see, during those thirteen years of testing, I knew all the time that the Lord loved me – that I was indeed His child! And this comforting fact was confirmed for me time and time again by the encouraging sermons of Rev Dirk van Garderen; but also by my own personal Bible studies.

So, I knew all along that God loved me, but what I failed to see was how, through the hardship that I was suffering, God was working His purpose out – the purpose of the furtherance of the Gospel.

Well, perhaps today, there are some of our members here who are going through hardship. And you, too, might well know that the Lord loves you. Nevertheless, *you too* might be finding it hard to see how, through your hardship, the Lord is working His purpose out – specifically how He uses your hardship to advance the Gospel!

Well, that’s so different to the message of our text!

You see, the Apostle Paul saw clearly how, through his hardship, the Lord was working His purpose out – the purpose of advancing the Gospel!

So, here is the main message of our text: “Christian, are you facing hardship at this time? Well, then look! Even though you might not have clicked it, yet, through your hardship, God is working His purpose out; God is advancing the Gospel!”

And our text allows for us the following three points:

- Even *through* My Hardship
- Encouraged (by Examples)
- Rejoicing (in the midst of hardship)

## **Even *through* My Hardship (v.12, 13, 15, 17)**

My brother & sister, the text of our sermon this morning comes from only seven verses out of Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi (only from 1:12-18)!

Question: How, again, did it happen that Paul wrote this letter? What prompted him to do that?

Well, remember what we said in a previous sermon? The church in Philippi had sent one of their members – a man by the name of Epaphroditus – all the way from Philippi (over 1,200km) to the Apostle Paul!

Why did they do that?

Because they were greatly worried about their beloved Apostle who, about ten years earlier (and not without great pain),<sup>1</sup> had brought the Gospel to them; and had afterwards travelled at least twice through their town and ministered to them – and encouraged them in the faith!

Now they're worried about him, for he sits in jail in Rome – all because of his faith in Jesus Christ!

So, the Philippians sent Epaphroditus with a gift (probably money and clothes) to Paul!

And Paul, overjoyed by the Philippian's love in action, wrote this letter – a letter of only four chapters – in response. And then the very same Epaphroditus took Paul's letter back to Philippi!

My brother & sister, just imagine the joy and expectation on that very first Sunday morning after Epaphroditus' arrival back in Philippi!

There they are – all Philippian church members in Lydia's house, ready for worship!

And what do they expect to hear from Paul's letter? Yes, as soon as they hear those first few words of verse 12, "***Now I want you to know...***," what will be going through their minds?

Well, I'm sure the normal human expectation in every congregation member's heart would have been something like this:

- "Great! *Now* we'll finally hear whether Paul is sick or well;
- whether he is cold at night or comfortable;
- whether he gets enough food there in prison;
- whether he has enough warm clothes for the winter;
- whether he gets enough sleep;
- whether the prison guards are kind to him or whether they mistreat him;
- whether they will soon release him;
- whether he remains positive;
- and just... whether our beloved apostle is okay!"

Well, surprise! If *that's* what the Philippians *thought* they would get out of Paul's letter, then they would be greatly disappointed! You see, if they wanted to have the answers to *such* questions, they had better ask Epaphroditus, for Paul's letter was not going to tell them.

Why?

Well, because that's not how Paul looked at his own circumstances!

Indeed, instead of reporting how *he* is doing, Paul tells them how the *Gospel* is doing!

So, looking again at v.12 of our text, what comes after the words, "***Now I want you to know...***"?

Well, this: "***...that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the Gospel...***"

You see, now Paul tells how the fact that he sits in prison *because of the Gospel* has caused not only Christians, but also some enemies of the Gospel<sup>2</sup> and even some prison guards to talk about the Gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> Remember how Paul & Silas were beaten with rods and thrown in the Philippian jail – with blood oozing from their backs! (Acts 16:16-40).

<sup>2</sup> Verse 15a says, "***Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife...***" Who exactly these people were, is unsure. Some scholars think these might have been Judaizers (or the like) who proclaimed that faith in Jesus alone is not enough to save, but that one should also keep some Jewish ceremonial laws. One such scholar is Gordon Fee who says, "The best guess as to who these people might be is to be found in Paul's letter to the Romans, where he is concerned about Jew and Gentile forming one people of God as they "follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 15:5–6). That letter in effect tried to do two things: to get Jewish Christians to see how Christ brought an end to the law as a means of relating to God, and to get the Gentiles to moderate their behavior toward the Jewish believers on matters that did not count. Hence most of the letter is written from the perspective of his being an apostle to the Gentiles, trying to show that Christ and the Spirit have brought an end to the significance of Jewish boundary markers; yet the sections of exhortation, especially 14:1–15:13, are written from the perspective of the Gentiles with regard to their acceptance of Jews.

Despite Paul's insistence that the gospel is "for the Jew first" and his affirmations about Christ's being in continuity with things Jewish (Rom 9:3–5; 10:4; etc.), he also says enough things to make Jewish Christians anxious about his way of expressing the gospel. If so, then Romans was effective only in part. Our passage

Yes, after all, the soldiers in this praetorium (Roman palace guard)<sup>3</sup> would have changed guards every so often (every two or four<sup>4</sup> or six hours). And they would have been very near to Paul – Paul might even have been handcuffed to a guard.

And what did these guards see about Paul?

Well, that he's not like your average prisoner! He's not imprisoned for a heinous crime; no, only for his faith in a God-sent Saviour called *Jesus Christ!*

And, surely, these guards would have taken note of his patience, gentleness, courage and unswerving loyalty to his inner conviction!

Certainly, these guards would have heard Paul when he talked to friends who came to visit him, or when he dictated his letters to a secretary who wrote down what he was saying. They would have heard how Paul answered his judges, or what Paul prayed to God, or what Paul answered to the questions of the curious guards themselves!

So, what these guards learned from/about Paul, they began to spread. And it's not hard to imagine what they have said to one another or to their families: "We're guarding a very remarkable prisoner." "And we're convinced that he does not sit in jail because of any crime he has committed, but solely for his connection with this Jesus Christ whom he proclaims!"<sup>5</sup>

And so, the news spread from guard to guard – and to the families of guards, and even to Caesar's household (as Phil 4:22 indicates)!<sup>6</sup>

And Paul?

Well, he sees what God is doing, i.e. that not only the Christians who come to visit him, but also those who never heard the Gospel – and even enemies of the Gospel who enjoyed the fact that

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suggests that some of the Roman believers took considerable exception to Paul..." (Fee, G. D. (1999). [Philippians](#) (Vol. 11, pp. 57–65). Westmont, IL: IVP Academic).

A scholar who disagrees with such an interpretation is Thielman who says, "Those whose preaching is motivated "out of envy and rivalry" are not, as some commentators have thought, Judaizing opponents similar to the troublemakers in Galatia. Those opponents preached "a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all" (Gal. 1:6–7), a point of intense distress for Paul—but these "preach Christ," and Paul can therefore rejoice in their preaching (Phil. 1:15–16, 18a). Nor are these opponents, as others have thought, members of the group of "false apostles" who invaded Paul's Corinthian church (2 Cor. 11:13–14) and denigrated Paul for his powerless demeanor (10:10; 11:21, 30; 13:4). It is difficult to see how this group could have been encouraged by Paul's imprisonment to preach the gospel more daringly and fearlessly (Phil. 1:14). These rivals to Paul instead seem to oppose the apostle for personal reasons and to have used Paul's imprisonment as an opportunity to advance their personal agendas. Their preaching of the gospel, then, is motivated by "selfish ambition," and they imagine that as they freely seek to persuade people to join their party, Paul himself looks on with envy from his imprisonment (v. 17). Why any group would do this is impossible to determine from the distance of twenty centuries, but we know from early witnesses that Paul had a wide variety of detractors. Usually those groups preached a gospel that he considered heretical, but not always, and the rivals who stand behind this passage must belong to one of the more orthodox groups..." (Thielman, F. (1995). [Philippians](#) (pp. 57–73). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House).

<sup>3</sup> Greek *praitōrion* (πραιτώριον): "a detachment of soldiers serving as the palace guard—'group of soldiers, palace guard.' ὥστε τοὺς δεσμούς μου φανεροὺς ἐν Χριστῷ γενέσθαι ἐν ὅλῳ τῷ πραιτωρίῳ καὶ τοῖς λοιποῖς πᾶσιν 'so that all the palace guard and all others recognize that my being in prison is because of Christ' Php 1:13" (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 549). New York: United Bible Societies).

<sup>4</sup> "Since they rotated on a basically four-hour shift, Paul would have had access to several—or many—of them, from whom eventually *the whole guard* came to know the reason for his bonds, that he was *in chains for Christ*" (Fee, G. D. (1999). [Philippians](#) (Vol. 11, pp. 57–65). Westmont, IL: IVP Academic).

<sup>5</sup> For this reconstruction of how the guards could have been impacted by Paul's message, I have borrowed some words/expressions from Hendriksen, W. 2004. Exposition of Philippians (In: Hendriksen, W. ed. New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Book House. p.69 ).

<sup>6</sup> Phil 4:22 *All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household* (NASB).

Paul was sitting in prison – these all hear (and are confronted with – and had reason to talk about) the Gospel!

And as far as Paul’s physical wellbeing is concerned?

Well, what does it matter to him if he, like his Lord, is getting poured out as an offering for the Gospel!?<sup>7</sup>

After all, “Would Paul have been a true apostle if he had merely spoken about himself – *his* discomfort and *his* woes!?”<sup>8</sup>

So, what do we see about Paul?

Well, that he is not only *for* Christ but *in* Christ!<sup>9</sup>

Thus, for the onlooker – at first glance, Paul’s circumstances looked truly miserable! However, at closer inspection, one sees the deeper significance, for Paul may well be in chains, but the Gospel is going forward unfettered!

Despite appearances, God uses the supposedly foolish message of the cross to show His wisdom and power to save<sup>10</sup> – and to work out His purpose!

How does all of this apply to you & me?

Well, perhaps some of us are currently going through circumstances that are not so wonderful – perhaps even very challenging, if not daunting and disheartening; a trial or hardship you never imagined would/could happen to you!

So, you’re apprehensive – perhaps even despondent; and short-tempered with those around you; and wishing you could, already now, look at your current hardship from a blessed hindsight perspective – not just from *hindsight*, but from *heaven’s sight*! So, deep inside, you’re crying out, “Oh, I wish this hardship would now end! Yes, I wish I was already through this hardship and looking back at it so that I could see what God’s purpose was for letting me go through it!”

Well, has it struck you that even this time in your life has meaning? In fact, that not *despite* but *through* your current hardship, God is working His purpose out – yes, that God is advancing the Gospel through your hardship!?

You say, “But Pastor, I can’t see how *my* hardship can be advancing the Gospel!”

Well, then let me ask you three questions...

Firstly: is it not true that, through your hardship, God is advancing the Gospel *in your heart*!? I mean, is it not so that, through your hardship, God is purifying you like silver, and drawing you even closer to Christ than ever before? See? Through your hardship, God *is* advancing the Gospel – the Gospel *in your heart & life*!

Secondly: is it not so that the calm and trusting manner by which you are processing your hardship serves as a great encouragement for your fellow brothers and sisters in their faith – and perhaps even drawing an unbeliever to Christ?<sup>11</sup> I mean, people *are* looking!

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Phil 2:17, ***But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all.***

<sup>8</sup> Karl Barth says: “He just would not be an apostle if he could speak objectively about his own situation in abstraction from the course of the Gospel, to which he has sacrificed his subjectivity and therewith also all objective interest in his person. To the question how it is with *him* the apostle *must* react with information as to how it is with the Gospel” (Barth apud Thielman, F. (1995). [Philippians](#) (pp. 57–73). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House).

<sup>9</sup> Well-said words adopted from Thielman (ibid).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 1:18-25

<sup>11</sup> On this score, see the next point in this sermon for how Paul’s bold way of managing his hardship was encouraging other brothers & sisters!

Thirdly: how would *you* know whether, through your current hardship, God is not perhaps preparing you for more “qualified” service in His kingdom? I mean, do you not see yourself included in the second and third petition of the Lord’s Prayer – “*Your kingdom come; Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven!*”?<sup>12</sup>

My brother & sister, you see, if the Lord did not allow for me those first 13 years of my post-migration hardship, I would not have been remotely ready to become minister of the Reformed Church of Foxton. And if the Lord did not allow for me the measure of “training school” I experienced in the Reformed Church Foxton, I could not have become the minister of the Reformed Church of Wainuiomata – where I’m now – and still learning!

So, I pray that you will find from God the strength and grace to have not just a *hindsight* viewpoint of your current trial, but, like Paul, *heaven’s* sight of it!

You say, “But Pastor, what sort of help can I get to help me raise my vision (viewpoint)!?” Well, that brings us to point 2...

### **Encouraged (by Examples) (v.14 & 16)**

In v.14 Paul says that because of his imprisonment (literally, his chains),<sup>13</sup> most Christians in Rome have found more courage to speak fearlessly about Christ!<sup>14</sup>

You see, the Christians in Rome had great reason to cry out for such a helper!

After all, it was the early 60’s in Rome!

Emperor Nero’s madness was now nearly reaching its peak! And he had the church in suspicion! Every now and then, Nero would send out his soldiers on a killing spree! Christians were the target!

So, many a Christian had become timid and passive in their outreach!

Yet, in v.14, Paul tells the Philippian Christians that his imprisonment in Rome has given their Roman brothers & sisters extraordinary courage to proclaim Christ – and *that* right there at the heart of the empire where the storm clouds were brewing!

Do you & I have examples of such godly Christ-focusing people in modern times – people whose love for Christ and the Gospel can become an instrument in God’s hands to give us courage?

Well, yes, there are many!

Remember, for example, the three Christians who stood up to their powerful ruler, Adolf Hitler?

Yes, remember Karl Barth who was exiled; and Martin Niemöller who was imprisoned; and Dietrich Bonhoeffer who got executed – all three because of their Gospel-based resistance against Nazi policies!

So, look, will not the church today, as she faces ungodly laws made by secular western governments, do well by following the example of such people!<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Mt 6:10

<sup>13</sup> From the Greek word *desmos* (δεσμός): “any instrument or means of binding or tying—‘bonds, chains, fetters.’ πάντων τὰ δεσμὰ ἀνέθη ‘their fetters became unfastened’ Ac 16:26. In translating one may often use a descriptive phrase, for example, ‘those things that bound them’ or ‘things with which they were tied.’ It is generally more satisfactory, however, to employ wherever possible a more specific referent, for example, ‘ropes,’ ‘chains’ or ‘fetters’ (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 54). New York: United Bible Societies).

<sup>14</sup> Again, my brother & sister, see how for Paul *the Gospel is bigger than his personal role in making it known*. (Well-said words of Fee, *ibid*)

<sup>15</sup> Then there’s another example – that of missionary Elisabeth Elliot who went and lived and worked among the very tribe who killed her husband and four other men! Yes, she went and lived among the Auca people of Ecuador and learned their language, reduced it to writing, and explained the Gospel to them!

My brother & sister, perhaps you say, “But Pastor, you give me examples of Christians who stood up to regimes or groups – people who faced *general* crises!” Can’t you give me examples of people who faced *personal* crises – crises through which God advanced the Gospel?”

Well, yes!

There’s the example of what God has been (and is) doing through the hardship of Joni Eareckson Tada who, at the age of 18, dove into a pool without realising that the water was too shallow. So, she fractured her neck and became a quadriplegic.

At first, she experienced anger, depression, suicidal thoughts, and doubts in God.

But then God strengthened her faith, and, *through* her hardship (not just *despite* it). He shaped and moulded her so that, since that shocking accident some 52 years ago, Joni has written over forty books, recorded several musical albums and founded an organisation to accelerate Christian ministry in the disability community throughout the world.<sup>16</sup>

See? Through *personal* hardship, the Gospel is proclaimed!

Then there’s still the Australian man, Nick Vujicic<sup>17</sup> who was born without legs and arms! He had enough reason to be bitter! But God worked faith in his heart, and Nick became a passion-filled evangelist of the Gospel. People put him on a table on stage. Then he shuffles left and right while telling the audiences about the greatness of His Lord and Saviour!

And so, here is what these people, in varying ways, share in part with the Apostle Paul: onlookers look at the circumstances through which these godly people have stood up for Christ, then they receive (as v.14 says) ***far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.***

I pray that you & I will not only find courage in the example of the Apostle Paul’s God-worked bold witness – and in the witnessing of others of our times, but that the Lord may mould/shape and purify you & me to, ourselves, become in all humility encouragers of others!

Well, here’s the last – very small – point...

### **Rejoicing (in the midst of hardship) (v.18)**

My brother & sister, in verse 18 Paul explains that the net fallout of his imprisonment has been the advance of the Gospel, and that *that* – and *that* alone – is the cause of His joy!

Here is v.18, ***What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice.***

“...and in this I rejoice!”

Now, we should note: Paul’s joy is not over his imprisonment as such!<sup>18</sup> No, the pain is there!

Yes, Paul is not putting the best possible face upon a bad situation!

No, by God’s grace, Paul’s joy stems from the way he sees things – yes, from this God-worked blessing in Paul to see every part of his life – even the painful bits – as a small part within the bigger picture!

And so, touched & moved by the risen Lord Jesus Himself whom Paul once met on the road to Damascus, Paul now sees everything from the divine perspective!

My brother & sister, here is my prayer for our church family and all our loved ones – that, like the Apostle Paul, your/my relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ will be so close that we will, even in our hardship, be able to see every part from God’s perspective, and rejoice!

AMEN (2,707 words excluding footnotes)

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And so, against many obstacles, Elisabeth pressed forward in obedience and completed the work that God had given her to do. Yes, like the Apostle Paul, she was not just *for* Christ, but *in* Christ!

For more on Elisabeth Elliot, cf. e.g. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elisabeth\\_Elliot](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elisabeth_Elliot)

<sup>16</sup> For a brief biography on Joni Eareckson Tada, cf. e.g. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joni\\_Eareckson\\_Tada](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joni_Eareckson_Tada)

<sup>17</sup> “Nicholas James Vujicic (/ˈvɔɪtʃɪtʃ/ VOY-chitch; born 4 December 1982) is an Australian Christian evangelist and motivational speaker born with tetra-amelia syndrome, a rare disorder (called phocomelia) characterized by the absence of arms and legs...” (cf. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nick\\_Vujicic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nick_Vujicic)).

<sup>18</sup> No, as someone has said so well: “...that kind of morbid ‘thanking God for all things’ lies outside Paul’s theological perspective....” (Fee, *ibid*)