

“What is the Right Attitude in Suffering?” (Philippians 1:12-26)

From the last Sunday, the new season has been started, which is “Living worthily of the Gospel,” the sermon series on Philippians.

At the beginning of his letter to the Philippians, Paul gave thanks to God for Christians at Philippi for their partnership in the gospel (1:5). And he shared his prayer that they may be filled with the fruit of righteousness to the glory and praise of God (1:10-11). And, he said to them, you are to be the light of the world and make the gospel shine (2:16).

“Yeh, I want to do that, but this is a difficult situation. And I’m so busy and tired. If only things got better.....” “There is an obstacle. If only the obstacle was removed....” “There are people who criticize me for what I do. If only they would cooperate with me....” “When I do this, perhaps I will be envied by those who don’t do this. If only their hearts and attitudes would be changed.....” “I tried it, but I couldn’t do it well. I would rather not even try than try again and fail.” “I may be hated if I’m different from others. I had better do what everyone else is doing.”

If this is you, like me, Paul wrote this letter for you. Today’s message is for you.

Here is Paul’s conviction, “He who began a good work in [and among] you will carry it on to completion. (1:6)”

The situation is difficult. There are hardships, and tons of problems. There are so many things we cannot do anything about. But the gospel is surely advancing. God will carry it on to completion. Where does Paul’s conviction come from? What is the right attitude in suffering, facing challenges and hardships? Paul talked about his situation and his attitude. Let’s listen to him.

1. Advancing the Gospel

Phil 1:12

I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel.

“The traditional view has been that Paul wrote Philippians from imprisonment in Rome, sometime after the beginning of Paul’s imprisonment recorded in Acts 28.”¹

Christians in Philippi also heard and knew that Paul was imprisoned. Paul wrote to them and let them know how he was doing.

What he wrote was not how difficult and inconvenient his life in prison was. Nor was it the physical pain and emotional humiliation he was experiencing. And of course it wasn’t his grudges and complaints against Roman soldiers and hostile Jews.

What he wanted them to know was that his imprisonment had been used for the advancement of the gospel.

One thing is that he himself was sharing the gospel there in prison. And some people started to believe in Jesus as a result.

v.13

so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ.

The guards kept watch over Paul day and night, 24/7. They were always watching what Paul was doing, and they heard all that Paul had spoken. Gradually they understood Paul. “Oh, this guy is in prison, because of his faith in Christ. He is in chains, because he’d been preaching the gospel. And he is still talking about it! He must be crazy, or it must be true...” Now, not only palace guards, but all other people also heard the gospel through Paul. Even some of those who belong to Caesar’s household started to believe in Jesus (4:22). The gospel is surly advancing because he is in prison.

Not only that, but also something more extraordinary is happening.

v.14

and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.

¹ *Children’s Ministry resource Bible*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993, p407

It is not just Paul alone who speaks the word of God, but other Christians are also boldly sharing the gospel, so the Word of God is spreading through them. And it is not just apostles and elders but most of the brothers and sisters who share the Word of God. Were they always active in sharing the Word of God? No, they weren't. But because of Paul's imprisonment, they have been made confident in the Lord, and started to speak the Word boldly without fear.

When Paul freely visited places and preached the Word of God, they used to just listen to him. But now that Paul was imprisoned, they received great confidence and the Word of God started to move actively in them. It sounds weird, right?

Sometimes we are too busy asking God to bless our plans for him, to listen to him and let him do his work in us and through us. We humans think if the situation become ready, if we have no restriction and work freely in good environments, then we will have a good result. So we become busy in preparing and arranging the environment. We think, "When that restriction is cleared, the issue is solved then I will do it. While there is this obstacle and this problem, there is no way it will succeed. So let's pray and I will wait until the situation gets better."

But Paul says something totally opposite. "Because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. (v14)" The very imprisonment of Paul brought the advancement of the gospel. It's a good lesson for us that sometimes ideas of man and what God does are very different.

vv.15-17

Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. ¹⁶ These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; ¹⁷ the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment.

Not everyone spoke the Word of God with the same motives. Some spoke it from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. Some spoke out of love, but others out of selfish ambition, intending to increase Paul's suffering in prison.

Paul knew some people intended to stir up trouble for him while he was in prison, but Paul didn't see this situation negatively.

v.18

What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice.

Paul says, “Some people intend to increase my suffering, but Christ is still proclaimed in this situation. So because of this I rejoice. I think this situation will continue for a while. So I will continue to rejoice, because Christ is preached.”

Please don't misunderstand. Envy and rivalry are not good virtues. Paul calls them the works of flesh, sinful nature (Gal 5:19). Of course, making someone suffer cannot be a good deed. Even if that action produces a good result, the action itself can never be seen as good and right.

Here what is important for Paul is not in what situation he is placed, but that Christ is preached; not how others see him, think of him and treat him, but what matters is that Christ is testified and the Word of God is spoken.

2. Living out who you are in Christ

vv.19-21

for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰ It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.

The gospel is advancing. That is Paul's joy. Where does this sense of values come from? This comes from his identity. What is his identity? To live is Christ. He says “this is me: I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. (Gal 2:20)” So his desire is that Christ will be exalted in his body (v.20). And he explains “You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body. (1 Cor 6:19-20)”

I have seen a movie called “English Patient.” It's an old, plain, low-key movie. I don't think many people have seen the movie.

A man went into a desert in search for help, as his girlfriend had been injured and was waiting for him in a cave. In the pitch-dark cave, under a flashlight, she started to write in her diary her thoughts as she just waited for him, unable to

do anything else. As days just passed, the light of the flashlight became weaker. She thought, “The battery is almost gone. This may be the end. What a happy person I am that I can just think about you day and night.”

She didn’t consider herself as an unfortunate injured person. She didn’t see herself as a miserable person in such a hopeless situation in darkness. In that hardship, in the pitch darkness, her identity was a beloved, a person who loves. She was there as a beloved, a person who loves, regardless of her situation and condition.

For us, Christians, the right attitude in suffering is, don’t give up being who you are in Christ, live out who you are in Christ in every possible way.

Remembering my identity, who I am. By remembering “To live is Christ,” my identity will become clearer and I can own “who I am” more and more. If I am not careful, I tend to forget it, be overwhelmed by the surrounding circumstances, be influenced by the words of others, and lose sight of who I really am. If you lose yourself, you have no joy.

We must live true to ourselves regardless of circumstances, the attitudes of others. To live is Christ. The word “Mission,” when written in Japanese, is written as “how to use life”. Why was life given? So that Christ will be exalted through me. That is why I am here, why you are here. That is why I was given life, why you were given life.

When we think of this, we will come to know what is the best thing to do in each situation we are in.

3. Advancing the growth of the community’s faith

vv.21-26

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. ²³ I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; ²⁴ but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. ²⁵ Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, ²⁶ so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Paul said “To live is Christ” and continued right after that, “To die is gain.”

The word “death” has a negative feeling. The separation from the loved ones. Succumbing to disease. And probably there is also fear of the unknown world. But Paul says death is not “to lose” but “to gain.” He says it is far better than to live, even he desired to die.

If we think of the situation in which Paul was placed, we can understand why he says, to die was far more desirable than to survive on the earth.

Death is the end of his life on the earth. It's the end of the time he lives with his physical body. In other words, it's the end of all his pains and suffering he experiences because he has a physical body. Paul was in chains in prison at that time. And he had been imprisoned, been flogged, and been exposed to death so many times up to that point. He labored, toiled, and has often gone without sleep. He has known hunger and thirst, and has often gone without food. He has been cold and naked (2 Cor 11:23-27). Death, for Paul, is the day of deliverance from all these sufferings.

Death is the day of victory when he finishes the race of faith, and receives the crown of righteousness (2 Tim 4:8). That is the day when salvation is completed, when the body of death is removed and the glorious body is given (1 Cor 15:52).

And death is the day of celebration when he will meet his beloved Christ face to face.

So he says, “My desire is to depart this life and be with Christ, which is far better than living in this physical body on the earth.”

If he just thought about himself, death was far more desirable for him. But he had another important thing. That was the wellbeing of Christians in Philippi. They needed Paul for their progress and joy in faith.

He was torn between the two thoughts. If he just thought of his own benefit, to die was gain for sure. But if he thought of Philippian Christians' faith and joy, it was more necessary for him to remain in the body. To choose one means to sacrifice the other. What did he do?

Finally, he came to the conclusion. If I remain in the body, that will help their progress and joy in the faith. That's for sure. Convinced of this, he was determined, “As long as the Lord permits, I will remain in this body, instead of going to heaven soon to receive the crown of righteousness. I will continue to live, not for my own benefit, but for their progress and joy in the faith.”

He wrote to them, “Brothers and sisters in Philippi, please know that I won’t desire death any longer. I will put aside my desire to see Christ ASAP for now. What I desire most is your growth and joy in the faith. For this purpose, I must continue to live. When I imagine the day when I see you face to face, I started to have the power to live. I am excited to just imagine your faith growing to be more and more assured, and you becoming mature attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. I am filled with courage when I imagine that the gospel will be powerfully advancing through you, and Christ will be exalted all over the world. I thank my God whenever I remember you. What a joy to know all of you, such wonderful people! Every time I pray for you all, I am filled with joy. There is no greater honor for me to be used for your progress in the faith.”

Can you imagine how much the Philippians were encouraged when they read this letter? The Word of God gives us the same encouragement for us, too.

4. Magnifying Christ in your body

In v.20, Paul talks about his mission, the purpose of life. “Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death.”

The part is translated in NKJ, “Christ will be magnified in my body.” We are a magnifying glass to amplify how wonderful Christ is.

Before I didn’t need glasses. But now, without glasses, I can’t read small letters. When I receive a message on my phone outside, I have to open my bag and put out a case and put on glasses because I can’t read it without glasses! That’s terrible!

We Christians are like glasses to help others to see Christ clearly. Hearing of Christ, people can’t understand what it means. Even when they hear the Word of God, it is kind of blurred, they can’t get it. But because of us, they can see Christ.

Of course, it doesn’t mean that Christ is so small that we humans need to enlarge him. He is greater than anything in this world. But for those who haven’t believed in Christ and accepted Him, he seems so small and blurred, un-understandable.

It is not that we magnify Christ by force, but what we are doing is to help others to see Christ’s original greatness. That is our mission. How can we do that? That depends on each of your gifts, and where you are placed in the society.

But whatever way we use, our common mission is to show Christ to others through our way of life.

Paul said, "Whether by life or by death, it doesn't really matter to me." He could say that, because he was focusing on his mission, to show Christ to people. To live or to die only means to fulfill God's mission. To live without fulfilling His mission is the same as being dead. Even if someone dies to fulfill his mission, his death is not wasted. Only when we use our life for God's given mission, is our life valuable and it will lead to eternal life.

One day when I was taking a walk, I noticed there were some little blue flowers beside the street drain. The water in the drain was dirty, smelly and it was full of rubbish. Nobody wants to look at it carefully. But it doesn't matter for the little blue flowers. They don't care where they are, who look at them or not look at them. But they bloom with all their might because that is who they are.

Even while hanging between life and death, Paul continued to desire that Christ would be exalted in my body whether by life or by death. He knew his mission, and he lived to fulfill the purpose of his life. This gave him this bold conviction, and peace and joy resulted from his conviction.

We are also created, saved and given this life to live so that "Christ will be exalted in our body." When we lose our peace and joy, that is the very moment when we must check if we still have our conviction about this mission, and whether we are still living for it. With one another's prayer support and the help of the Holy Spirit, we will always come back to this conviction of our mission. And we will live today, the day which was given to us to show the greatness of Christ to people. Living worthily of the Gospel.

For Lifenet groups and personal reflections

1. Suppose you were in prison because of your faith in Christ, but were allowed to write anything to people outside. What would you write to them?
2. Think about the opposite of "To live is Christ, to die is gain." With what words would you fill in the blank? "To live is my _____, _____ is gain."

3. What image do you have about death? What is Paul's understanding about death? (Phil 1:23, 3:14, 3:23; 1 Cor 15:52; 2 Tim 4:8)

4. "Christ will be magnified in my body." Have you ever experienced Christ through someone, not as a head knowledge, but as a tangible fact?

5. "Christ will be exalted in my body."

- Do you have peace and joy? Do you have conviction about this mission? Are you living for it?

- Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to help and guide you to live out this verse this week.