

Sermon Given by

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At the Evening Service on 17th January 2010

Philippians 1:12-18a - "No stopping the message"

John Harper was born in Glasgow in 1872. When he was about fourteen years old, he became a Christian and from that time on, he began to tell others about Christ. At seventeen years of age, he began to preach, going down the streets of his village and pouring out his soul in passionate pleading for men and women to be reconciled to God through Christ. Throughout his life he was always on the look out for opportunities to tell people about Jesus. Perhaps the most famous example of this gospel-heartedness was at the very end of his life - the way he reacted when a passenger on the Titanic. He was so gripped by the gospel that in a time of great turmoil and distress after the ship had hit the iceberg, a time when the temptation would be to try to look after no.1, his focus was not in on himself but outwards towards the many people around him who were in imminent danger of dying without knowing Christ. He knew God's amazing grace. He knew what would happen to people if they didn't receive it. Survivors reported that as the Titanic went down, he ran through the ship yelling, "Women, children, and unsaved into the lifeboats!" and began witnessing to anyone who would listen. Only 706 people survived the sinking of the Titanic. Of those 706, 700 of them were on the lifeboats – just 6 were pulled out of the water. Some months later it was discovered that one of the 6 rescued from the water was saved twice that night. At a church prayer meeting in Hamilton, Ontario, a young Scotsman stood up in tears and told the extraordinary story of how he was converted. He said: "I am a survivor of the Titanic. When I was drifting alone on a bit of debris that awful night, the swell brought Mr Harper, of Glasgow, also on a piece of wreck, near me. 'Man,' he said, 'are you saved?' 'No' I said, 'I am not.' He replied, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.'" "The waves bore him away, but, strange to say, brought him back a little later, and he said, 'Are you saved now?' 'No,' I said, 'I cannot honestly say that I am.' He said again, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved,' and shortly after he went down; and there, alone in the night, and with two miles of water under me, I believed." "I am John Harper's last convert." Throughout his Christian life John Harper was a gospel opportunist. Even in the icy waters of the Atlantic Ocean he didn't so much see a terrifying problem but a golden opportunity.

As we come to look at this next chunk of Paul's letter to the Philippians we see that he too is in a tough spot. He's already mentioned his prison chains in v7 and in v12-18 he tells us more about his circumstances. He's in a tough spot; he could have been down in the dumps, full of frustration and self-pity but rather than being concerned for himself, he's concerned for the prison guards. Like John Harper he doesn't see his hardship as a problem but as a God-given opportunity. What matters to him v18 is that Christ is preached – that is what he delights in. His governing concern is for people to hear about Jesus. In any and every circumstance, that is his number one priority. As Paul awaits his trial in Rome and he knows it's highly possible that the outcome may result in his death, he recognizes that God has sovereignly ordered his circumstances so that his prison guards should hear about Jesus. But why is it that Paul is telling this to the Philippians? The answer comes from understanding something of the Philippians' own situation and if we have a sneaky look ahead to the end of chapter 1, we see that the Philippians, like Paul, were in a tough spot.

This is clear from what he writes to them v28, "*without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.*" V29 "*For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe*

on him but also to suffer for him, since (v30) you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear I still have."

So, like Paul, the church at Philippi is facing hostility from outside the Christian community. And that's not all, in the same way that we see in v15-18 that Paul was facing rivalry and envy from within the church so too we see from verses such as 2:3 that the Philippians had to contend with this rivalry from within as well. This is why Paul writes v12 I want you to know...Once we understand the situation the Philippians are facing, we can see that this part of the letter is tailor-made by Paul to encourage his gospel partners in Philippi in the conflict they're facing from without and from within. Paul's aim is that all the saints at Philippi and at Little Shelford join with him, and see every circumstance and situation in which we find ourselves as an opportunity for the gospel.

That brings us to our first heading: **In the face of hostility from without – praise God! The gospel is proclaimed. V12-14.**

Paul understands the hostility he has been facing to have been a good thing in so far that through it the gospel has been proclaimed to many more people. V12 *"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."* We can imagine the scene, the next guard is coming to do his stint of duty - he'll be chained to Paul for 4 hours and Paul thinks: "Yippee, another opportunity to speak to a lost soul about Christ!" He doesn't think: "Oh no, he we go again, more chaffing of the wrists, more misery" he thinks "brilliant, here's my next captive audience!"

Now that ought to spur us on, in the same way that I hope we were fired up by that first reading from Acts 4 and the account of John Harper's last convert. We ought to be spurred on by the fact that Paul when he's thrown into prison can see it all in terms of gospel opportunities, especially in the relative ease of the opportunities that God gives us. We should be inspired – after all that was what happened amongst Christians in Rome. Look at v14 where Paul 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."* Here's the other impact of his imprisonment, church members have been inspired to pluck up courage and tell people about Jesus. It's my prayer that that would be the impact on us. It may be though that you're saying to yourself: "They were probably naturally bold extrovert types those Roman Christians Paul refers to in v14 and as for me, I'm just not like that; I'm more the quiet introvert type and quite honestly I can't take that much encouragement from Paul or John Harper or Peter & John because I could never be as bold and up front as them – that's not how I'm wired." If that is you, then I'd want to say: "Very few people are like those men – they are specially gifted." Praise God for them; it's wonderful that God does raise up people like them. The good news is though that we don't all have to witness in the up front way that they did. God works just as powerfully through the naturally quiet introvert type when they too are gripped by the gospel and long for others to hear of Christ.

It was 10 years ago that in a sermon at StAG I heard the story of one such shy man and I have continued to be encouraged by his story to be more bold myself in evangelism. Alexander White served for many years as a pastor of St. George's Church in Edinburgh. He used to tell about a man called Rigby whom he once met. It turned out that Mr Rigby had occasionally been attending St. George's for many years. He lived near Edinburgh, and whenever his business took him into the city he used to stay in a hotel over on to the Sunday morning in order that he could attend the morning service at St. George's. He was a very shy man who found it very difficult to share his faith with other people. So what he would do was this: on the Sunday morning he would get up in his bedroom in the hotel, go down to the hotel lobby and he would invite somebody in the lobby to come to church with him that

morning. He had made it his practice to do that for almost thirty years. Sometimes people would say, "Yes," and very frequently they said "No." However, on one particular morning he spoke to somebody there in the hotel lobby, saying, "Would you like to come to the church service? I'm just going there now." The man came with him. And God worked on that man, and in conversation afterwards Rigby was able to explain to him how to become a Christian, and helped him to do so then and there. He was so thrilled by that experience that he thought, "I must tell somebody else about it." He didn't know any other Christians in Edinburgh because all he used to do was to go to the church service and then just go back home later in the day. So, although he had never met Alexander White personally, he decided to go to the manse and tell him how his sermon that morning had been used. So he went and knocked on the door, and when Alexander White opened it he proceeded to tell him how a man he had brought to church that morning had given his life to Christ as a result of the sermon. Alexander White was very encouraged and grateful for the news, and after thanking Rigby for sharing it with him, he said, "By the way, sir, I didn't catch your name." Rigby stammered, "Oh, well, my name is Rigby." Alexander White said, "Did you say Rigby?" Rigby said, "Yes." Alexander White said, "Mr Rigby, please wait a moment. I've been waiting years to meet you!" He went back into his house and came out with a little file of letters and postcards, all from people who had found Christ at St. George's. And the thing they had in common was that each of them had been staying in a hotel in downtown Edinburgh, and a shy, reticent man had come up to them in the lobby and said, "Will you come to church with me this morning?" We don't have to be the upfront extrovert type to be used by God in evangelism. Take heart from Rigby. He didn't stand on a chair in the hotel lobby and preach a fiery sermon, he wasn't that sort but he did pluck up courage to ask individuals in his shy reticent way, if they'd like to go to church with him so that they could hear Christ preached. The Passion for Life events in February and March are events that we can take a leaf from Rigby's book – we can invite people to come and hear the gospel. Many are likely to decline the offer and we mustn't be surprised by that but some might say yes.

So I hope you can see that Paul, by speaking so openly about himself to his gospel partners in Philippi, will be a great encouragement to them and to all Christians around the world – particularly those who face hostility for their faith. For God can take even the most vigorous hostility of those who are opposed to His gospel and use it to His advantage. In fact persecution has nearly always miraculously strengthened the church. So Tertullian a 2nd Century Christian leader famously said: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Paradoxically persecution strengthens conviction of and commitment to the triumph of the gospel. When I hear of a member of TNG - the youth group getting teased because they've stood up for the truth at school or amongst their friends I am inspired to go and do likewise. When I see others at church persevering in praying for and witnessing to friends or colleagues or family members even when the ground upon which they're sowing seems fairly stony and stubbornly reluctant, then I take great heart. It encourages me to keep plugging away in prayer and looking for opportunities. However, hostility from the outside is not the only thing that Paul and the Philippians are facing. Alongside the hostility from outside there is another problem for them and in v15-18 we see Paul's response to that problem. That brings us to our second heading.

In the face of rivalry from within – praise God! The gospel is proclaimed

In 2:3 Paul will tell them to do nothing out of rivalry or conceit and here in 1:15-18 Paul explains how he is able to rejoice in the face of envious rivalry even amongst the Christians in Rome. V15 Paul writes: *"It is true that some preach Christ out of envy or rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defence 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."*

It's a bit tricky to understand the situation in these verses because the message these people preached was good - they preached Christ – so doctrinally they were fine – they were sound and yet their motives were flawed. We know from Paul's letter to the Romans that the church there was going well. There were plenty of good keen strong and healthy Christians there. But with Paul's arrival in Rome perhaps some of those who'd seen themselves as big hitters may have had their noses put out of joint. So imagine the senior pastor of an imaginary St Helgar's church at Emperor's Gate. He's used to calling the shots around Rome. But now Paul is here he feels a little threatened, a touch eclipsed. Then there is the leader of that smaller church in a run-down part of the City, St Grudger's in Chip Street. He's always been a little bit bitter that God had not given him a more high-profile ministry. He's always carping away at the bigger churches, and at the evangelists and church planters like Paul who's ministry seems much more dynamic and glamorous.

Once Paul is imprisoned this is the perfect opportunity for any who are slightly envious of Paul to elevate themselves and their ministry at his expense. Perhaps they suggested that Paul's suffering resulted from his over-zealous activity and that his imprisonment was an unnecessary setback for the gospel. "Look how my ministry is being blessed while Paul languishes in prison." Perhaps that's what they were saying. Because of what our natures are like this envy and rivalry can easily show itself in some way, shape or form with us. So, some of our friends come to a Passion For Life event and we find ourselves thinking: "I hope I get some acclaim and applause for this from others at church – oh here comes my homegroup leader; I hope she sees me with my friends here." Or other way round, none of our friends agree to come to an event and in walks a friend from church with all the members of her book group and rather than praising God and crying out to Him to be at work amongst them, we find ourselves muttering: "Why is it that the Lord blesses her efforts and not mine?" It's surprisingly easy for selfish motivation to creep into our evangelism. So watch out for it in yourself no matter how subtly it may show itself. Paul gives us the antidote to this envy and rivalry – be it present in ourselves or others. V18 *"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."* Praise God that He can use the even the petty jealousies of small-minded Christians to bring about the proclamation of the gospel.

So two main things to take away from this passage –first: in the face of hostility from without – praise God! The gospel is proclaimed. Secondly, in the face of rivalry from within – praise God! The gospel is proclaimed.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)