

Philippians 1:1-6, 12-14, 19-21, 27-30
The Paradox of Confidence and Adversity
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This morning we begin a four-part sermon series on the book of Philippians. Philippians is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to a church that held a very special place in Paul's heart, because it was the first church Paul established in his mission to the gentiles. And the people in Philippi who became Christians as a result of Paul's ministry obviously never forgot the significance of what Paul had done for them. This church remained fervent supporters throughout his ministry, sending financial help and gifts on numerous occasions and repeatedly expressing concern for his welfare. Their faithful and long standing support was so critical that Paul considered them his partners in ministry.

Paul begins his letter with, what for that day and age, was a standard greeting. I remember taking a typing course in high school in which I was taught the correct form for a letter. Perhaps you had a similar experience. The address of the recipient, the return address, the date and the salutation all had a proper place, and my typing teacher made sure I had them in exactly the right spot. That's similar to what we see Paul doing in the first couple of verses of Philippians 1. It was customary to identify the sender of the letter, so Paul names himself and also his traveling companion Timothy who is with him as he writes this. As for the recipient of the letter, it is addressed to "all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons." In other words, it is addressed to the church.

That address tells us a couple of things right off the bat. First, it tells us that while Paul's letter is personal, it is not private. This letter, like all of Paul's letters, is intended to be read in a worship setting, so Paul fills his letters with hymns, confessions, doxologies, prayers and benedictions. As we read Paul, we need to be on the look-out for these liturgical elements, for he intended them to shape the worship of the church. Second, in addressing Paul's readers as "saints" or "holy ones," Paul is not simply using a formal greeting devoid of meaning. Rather, Paul

is intentionally reminding his readers of God's redemptive work in their lives. They belong to God as God's covenant people, and Paul does not want them to forget that. He continues that thought with his greeting. "Grace and peace" is also not merely a formal, polite way of saying hello. It is another reminder of God's work in and among the Philippians—a way of saying that Christ brought us together and it is Christ who continues to keep us together.

The body of the letter begins by describing Paul's vigilant prayers for the Philippian church. His prayers are full of gratitude, affection, and joy as he remembers what they have meant to him and to the spread of the gospel. The language is so warm and intimate you might get the impression that Paul's initial stay in Philippi had been one of uninterrupted friendship and success. The truth is that Paul had encountered significant opposition in the city which eventually resulted in him being publicly beaten and then thrown in jail. So, Paul is not full of joy and gratitude because of having experienced Nirvana in Philippi but because he celebrates the faithfulness of those who received the gospel despite circumstances that that might have resulted in rejection instead.

Paul is also thankful for the Philippian church's ongoing commitment. These were not people who, to paraphrase one of Jesus' parables, had initially received the word with enthusiasm and joy only to fall away when the going got tough. No, the little band of believers in Philippi remained faithful even in the face of ongoing pressure and opposition. Paul uses the Greek word "koinonia" 5 times in this letter. The word means "to have in common" and is translated as "sharing" in v. 5 and as "share" in v. 7. Paul's use of the word testifies to the full identification this church has with Paul's message and mission. They are participants, partakers, and partners. We might say they are "all in."

In fact, Paul says, he is "confident" that the good work of the gospel is ongoing in their midst. According to the dictionary, confidence is: 1) a belief in one's own abilities; having the self-assurance or belief in your ability to succeed or 2) faith in somebody to do the right thing; belief or trust in somebody or something to act in a proper, trustworthy or reliable manner, as in, "I have total confidence in her judgment."

The salient question is, what, exactly, is Paul putting his confidence in? What did he want the Philippians to be confident in, and by extension, what can we or should we put our confidence in? Let's start with what Paul is not putting his confidence in:

1. A quick start or initial openness or receptivity
2. Living up to a moral code or standard
3. Sincerity or zeal
4. Good intentions
5. A strong religious heritage

As good as these things might be, none were what Paul was willing to stake his life on. Instead, Paul's confidence is in God. It is God who began the good work of faith in him and in the Philippians, and it is God who will complete it, finish it, perfect and fulfill that work "at the day of Jesus Christ." In other words, God who started the work of grace in Philippi will not abandon it half done, only partially complete. God will keep at it until the divine good work of grace is fully realized.

Paul is so sure, so confident of God's continuing work in the life of the church and in his own life, that it gives him a unique and completely unexpected perspective on his present circumstances, and I think this is where his message particularly hits home for us. You see, Paul is in prison when he writes this letter to his dear friends in Philippi. His message and ministry are not popular with the powers that be, and it has landed him in serious trouble yet again. Paul seems to be the poster child for adversity.

If we go back to the dictionary, we'll discover that adversity is defined as, "misfortune, hardship and suffering; an extremely unfavorable experience or event." For most people, landing in jail after having been beaten and publicly humiliated would fit that definition. But not for Paul. For Paul, adversity might better be defined as anything that hinders a follower of Jesus from living in a manner worthy of Christ. From that perspective, being in prison is not adversity. **It is the present form of God's grace in Paul's life.** Think seriously about that for a moment. Can you imagine being so confident of God at work in you that you see everything in your life as an opportunity for God's grace? That you are so sure of God's love working in and through you that even your suffering takes on

different meaning? That is what Paul is saying. And, in making that claim, Paul is not holding himself up as some super-saint, or holding up a religious ideal that can't possibly be reached. Paul believes that this is what the life of every believer can and should look like. That we can be so confident that God is at work in us, that we see everything, even our suffering, through the lens of God's goodness and love, as people whose lives are being molded to be worthy of Christ. When we are imprisoned by chronic pain, loneliness, loss and grief, fear, depression, rejection, or whatever the adversity may be, Paul is exhorting us to respond to our circumstances with hope and confidence.

As Paul sits in jail, it is instructive to notice what characterizes his life, as he—and we—seek to live lives that are worthy of the faith we claim.

1. Paul gets his confidence from prayer and the Holy Spirit. While he awaits Rome's judgment in his case, he is not filled with dread. Instead, his attitude is one of eager expectation and hope, and that hope is grounded in his trust in God and the efficacy of the prayers of the saints.
2. Paul promotes Jesus, not self. Paul is not interested in accolades or awards or who gets the credit as long as Jesus is proclaimed and the gospel spread.
3. Paul is focused on others. He rejoices that the gospel has progressed among his Roman guards, that there is increased courage in the church and that the activity of proclamation has accelerated.
4. Paul does not take personal attacks personally—although it is Paul who is in prison, it is clearly the gospel that is on trial and having that larger perspective gives him confidence and courage in difficulties.
5. Paul sees the advantage of adversity. A life worthy of Christ is marked by a shift of attitude from assuming that wherever the Lord is there is no suffering to believing that wherever there is suffering, there the Lord is.
6. Paul is clear on both his purpose and destiny—Paul “knows” (v 19), i.e., is confident of the outcome of events that are now beyond his control. He will be delivered. The deliverance he has in mind is not contingent upon his being released from prison or avoiding execution. What Paul anticipates with such confidence is that whether Rome says yes or no over his life, his witness in both word and conduct will honor Christ. His purpose now and his eternal destiny are certain.

So, where is our confidence? Is it firmly in Christ? If it is, then our lives will be worthy of the Savior whose name we claim. Especially in adversity, when the world would expect us to rail against God, to throw up our hands in defeat, or to drown in self-pity, we will see it differently. We will hold our adversity and our confidence together, knowing that regardless of the outcome, God is doing a good work in us. Amen.