

Sep 23, 2017

Philippians 1:12-26

Discipleship 101: The Difficulties of Discipleship

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As I was preparing this sermon on the difficulties of following Jesus this, I began to think about places we face **hardship**, and I thought of **boot camp**. I have not gone through boot camp, but my brother went to the **Marine Corps** boot camp. Boot camp is known for being really hard. You constantly drill, study, workout (sit-ups, push-ups, pull-ups, running), and this all culminates at the end in the **crucible**. The crucible is a **54-hour test** where you're hungry, sleep deprived, march 45 miles, and have to problem solve as a team through different courses and obstacles. If you can make it through the crucible, you're a Marine.

I read a book that followed a Platoon through boot camp. The author described seeing a big strong recruit get so mentally worn down he punched a shower wall and got sent home. From what I can tell it's **not brute strength** that get's you through, but mental toughness, pride in the Corps, and relying on other Marines.

“Some believe that Marines are forged in a furnace of shared hardship and tough training. Shared, intense experience creates a bond so strong between Marines that nothing can stop them from accomplishing their mission.” - Military.com

What would get you through something as hard as boot camp? Pushups? Pride? A clear mission? Not wanting to let others down? As followers of Jesus we go through a type of boot camp too. In this life we face **hardships**, and like boot camp separates **recruits** from **Marines**, hardships separate **recruits** from **disciples**.

So here's our **question**. Do I want to be a recruit who doesn't make it through? Who drops out? Or do I want to be a real disciple of Jesus who makes it all the way? Do I want to be a real Christian?

Disciples embrace hardship for Christ.

Near the end of Paul's life he faced incredible hardship. He was **arrested** in Jerusalem and imprisoned for the next two years from 57 to 59 AD at **Caesarea** (Acts 24:1, 27). Then he was transported to Rome where he spent another two years in prison from 60 to 62 AD. In Rome, Paul lived by himself under “house arrest” but was constantly guarded (Acts 28:16, 30). Today's passage describes **three types of hardships** Paul faced during this time, which we may face as disciples today.

1. Suffering (v. 12-14)

Paul may be in a low-level prison situation under house arrest, but he's still **physically chained** to his guard (1:7, 13, 14, 17). Pastor and author Steven Lawson writes that his chains were about **18 inches** long and were attached to his wrists like “extended **handcuffs**,” which were attached to his guard **24/7**.¹

Can you imagine how uncomfortable this is? Your wrists would be constantly tender and sore. You'd develop a constant ache and stiffness in your forearms like **carpal tunnel syndrome**. Monica and I visited **Colonial Williamsburg** where you can put your head and arms in prison **stocks** at their town square. I did that when I was a kid because it was fun but I didn't want to be in them for even a moment this time around because they looked so uncomfortable. Paul endured this type of pain for two years but it was worth it.

¹ Lawson, Steven. *Philippians For You: Shine with joy as you live by faith* (God's Word For You Book 18) (p. 48). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

All Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version (NIV®) unless otherwise noted.

Philippians 1:14 And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

As a result of Paul's suffering, the other believers are becoming bolder and more courageous to proclaim the gospel. *Would you be willing to suffer if it somehow furthered the cause of Christ?*

In **Burma** (Myanmar) right now there's a humanitarian crisis because of a conflict between the Burmese government and an indigenous Muslim people group called the **Rohingya**. The Burmese don't recognize the Rohingyans right to live in Burma and are pushing them out. Last month Rohingya insurgents attacked Burmese police and now that government is cracking down on all forms of religion that aren't **Buddhist**, including **Christianity**. The government passed a law that said you can only practice Christianity in historically Christian zones, the places the missionary Adoniram Judson reached in the 1800s.

I knew a man in seminary who is running a **Bible school** in one of the regions that is not in the historically Christian zones. I sent a prayer request to the **prayer network** explaining how the government authorities recently called this man into their office and said he had to sign a letter indicating that he would never lead worship of Jesus or teach the Bible in Burma again. He told them "no" and that made them really mad. They said they'd already banned his Bible school and threatened to throw him in jail unless he complied.

This happened two weeks ago. How does that **make you feel**? Does that encourage you? We're probably not going to be thrown in jail for sharing what we believe here. We could lose a few **friends**, a **neighbor** could look at us weird, or maybe we could lose our **job**, but that's not going to prison. *The first hardship disciples face is suffering*. But I think what's really hard here is more **relational**. The second hardship is...

2. Alienation (v. 15-18a)

Paul not only faces difficult circumstances. He faces **difficult people**. At the church in Philippi he hears that there is a contingent who dislikes him. "Some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry" and "selfish ambition.." There are some at Philippi who are **jealous**, selfish, insecure people who are bad-mouthing him. They're saying, "You're in prison because you're guilty!" And you know who is talking about Paul this way? **Christians**. Other believers. It's not his non-believing guards that are attacking Paul, but other disciples.

If you've been a Christian long enough, you know what hurts the most is not the ways non-Christians wound us, but the ways **Christians wound us**. *We can all count the many ways pastors, churches, ministries, ministry leaders, committee members, staff, and Christians who are supposed to love us, have hurt us*. It's the reason a lot of Christians walk away from the church. In my mind it's easier to face alienation from outside the church than it is from within. *What if God calls you, and me, to put up with hurt from each other so that the message of Jesus can go out? Would it be just a little easier to put up with it then?*

Disciples should expect to encounter alienation not just from the **outside culture**, but from the **inside culture** too. That doesn't make it right, but it does make it more **bearable**. Two things encourage Paul:

- First, **most believers** aren't like this. The envious ones are a minority. Most are preaching Christ "out of goodwill" and "love" because they know Paul is put in prison to defend the gospel.
- Second, although they may have **false motives** they're actually **not false teachers**. They're preaching the true gospel, and because of this Paul rejoices!

When we encounter alienation from other believers, we can pray, "Father, you know I don't like this, it's unnecessary and it hurts, but at least they're preaching Jesus and that's what really matters. Please give us joy in our suffering. Amen." *Alienation may be a hardship we face as disciples of Christ, even from other believers*. But wait, **there's more**! If you call right now, you may also receive...

3. Death (v. 18b-26)

Paul, as he is sitting under house arrest, is chained to a Roman soldier, writing this letter. He realizes that he may be found guilty and **executed**. Paul gives us a glimpse of his **greatest fear** in this moment. In verse 20 he says, “I hope I won’t be ashamed and that I’ll be courageous for Christ.” Whether he lives or dies, he wants to do so in a way that honors Jesus. Above all else, he wants to bring Christ fame.

Then he says one of the most **beautiful lines** in the Bible in verse 21, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” If Paul lives, he gets to live for Christ, and if he dies, he gets to be with Christ. He faces death courageously because he knows the options are only good.

Why do you think Paul feels this way? I know when I’m afraid or stressed, it consumes my mind. Verse 19 gives us two things that helps Paul get through: **prayer** and the **Holy Spirit**.

Maybe some of you have heard of **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**. A couple years ago **Eric Metaxas** wrote a New York Times Bestseller called *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who tried to assassinate Hitler and worked against the third Reich from within Germany. It’s an amazing story, but he doesn’t succeed, and is arrested by the Nazis and sentenced to death. What got him through his imprisonment and death was prayer and the Holy Spirit. The camp doctor witnessed Bonhoeffer’s death.

“Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution he said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. ... In the almost fifty years that I have worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.”

Prayer and the Holy Spirit got Paul through suffering, alienation, and death, got Dietrich Bonhoeffer through as well, and will get us through today. Thank you for **praying** for the **Burmese man** and his Bible school. A lot of people were praying and the Holy Spirit moved. When he went back to talk to the government, instead of throwing him in prison, they explained how to get around the issue with a **loophole**. All he had to do was re-file the Bible school as a **philanthropic organization** and they wouldn’t bother him anymore. *The Holy Spirit works through prayer, conquering suffering, alienation, and death.*

As Paul thinks about his own life, he says, “You know, I would rather die and be with Jesus because that would be great for me. But... I need to stay here so I can help you.” *Disciples embrace hardship for Christ.*

Disciples embrace life for each other.

Hands down, it would be easier for Paul to die and go to heaven. But what does he say in **v23-25**, “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.” Sometimes it’s tempting to think, “Why doesn’t Jesus just take me home? That would be so much easier than this.” If you’re **martyred** for the Lord or die in an **accident**, that’s the better thing for you because you’ll be with Christ. *But every day that God gives you life is an opportunity to love God and serve others.* Paul was willing to postpone his own gratification for the sake of the Philippians. Let’s look again at our passage to see why Paul is **embracing life** and why we should too. *First, disciples embrace life...*

1. For the lost (v. 12-14)

God called Paul into the **trial of prison** so that the gospel would spread to “the whole palace guard”—the Praetorian Guard. The Praetorians were the Emperor’s elite bodyguards who had better pay and “shorter terms of service.”² They were **loyal**, they were **warriors**, and they **needed Jesus**.

Who do you know who is loyal to **this world**? Maybe you would even describe them as **combative, aggressively anti-Christian**. Maybe they’re a coworker or a family member, and sometimes you wish you could just be done with them. Have you ever thought that Jesus has **chained you to them** so that they can hear the gospel? I can think of at least a couple people who Christ has chained me too who I’d rather not spend that much time with, but they need Jesus. *Who has Jesus chained you to?*

“You are not where you are by accident. You are where you are by divine appointment, for the purposes of sharing the gospel.” - *Philippians for You* by Steven Lawson³

Do you know what happened to some of the guards Paul was chained to as they heard the gospel?

Philippians 4:22 All God’s people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar’s household.

Did you catch that? Caesar’s household! The guards are coming to Christ. The combative are becoming Christian. We embrace life, even in suffering, because God can use it to save. *Second, we embrace life...*

2. For our Savior (v. 15-18a)

In verse 16 Paul says, “I am put here for the **defense** of the **gospel**.” In the book of Philippians Paul uses the Greek word for “gospel—**euangelion**” **nine** times. That’s a lot of gospel for only four chapters. So what does Paul mean by gospel? Gospel means **good news**, but what’s the good news? *The good news is Jesus Christ himself*.⁴ When Paul speaks of the gospel, he means preaching Christ. In verses 15-18 alone we read “some preach Christ out of envy... the former preach Christ out of selfish ambition... whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached.” *Preaching the gospel is preaching Christ!* Who he is, what he came to do, how he changes our lives. *Christ himself is the gospel*.

Jesus himself faced suffering, alienation, and death. He was **bound** and scourged (John 18:12; Mark 15:1) He was **falsely accused** by those who **claimed to believe**. Instead of welcoming him, they were jealous and envious and killed him. Jesus didn’t just face the possibility of death, he faced **death itself**. Jesus has faced every hardship we can imagine and has overcome. He overcame all these hardships so that he can reach back through them to you and me and pull us through suffering, alienation, and one day death.

Do you know this Jesus? Can you say, like Paul, “for me to die is gain.” If not yet, you can today. Although as disciples we may face suffering, alienation, and even death, one day we will face Jesus and he will reward us. Jesus gives not just joy in this life but eternal life to any who **confess** their **sins** (**sin** is living in alienation from God), and put their **faith** in him. We embrace Christ, because at the cross, he first embraced us. *We embrace life for the lost, and for our Savior, and finally...*

3. For the church (v. 18b-26)

² Andrea Lorenzo Molinari, Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible, s.v. “PRAETORIAN GUARD,” 1076. [accord://read/Eerdmans_Dictionary#20216](https://www.eerdmans.com/dictionary/2021/6/p/praetorian-guard)

³ Lawson, Steven. *Philippians For You: Shine with joy as you live by faith* (God's Word For You Book 18) (p. 49). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Fee, Gordon D. *Philippians* (The Ivp New Testament Commentary Series) (p. 47). Intervarsity Press - A. Kindle Edition.

Paul knew it was better to live because he hoped to see the local church at **Philippi** again. *He's willing to lay down his life for Christ and he's willing to continue living for the local church.* I liked this **contribution** from our preaching breakfast, "Life in Christ is not just about dying and going to heaven, it's about living a life of service and of love for Christ by loving and serving the Body of Christ."

Do you realize that one of the main reasons Christ gives us breath is so that we can love his bride, the church? *Christianity is not about doing what's best for me, but about doing what's best for her.* Paul is torn between death and life but ultimately he embraces life because it gives him the opportunity to embrace a little church in the town of Philippi. If you're here and you've been **wounded** by a church, **thank you** for being here. Would you **dare** to open your arms again and begin loving a local church full of God's broken people? Come to tonight's **membership class** so you can learn what that might look like.

We embrace life for the lost, for our Savior, and for the church. My big idea is this...

We embrace hardship for Christ and life for each other.

Maybe some of you have heard of Jim Elliot. He was a Christian missionary martyred in 1956 by **Ecuadorean** natives who **speared** him and **four** other men to death. His story has been told over and over again of a life lived completely for Jesus. But did you know Jim Elliot had a brother named Bert? Bert died in 2012 at 87 years old. He was a missionary to **Peru** for **62 years** where he helped plant **150 churches**.

Bert once described his brother Jim as "**a great meteor**, streaking through the sky." The author Randy Alcorn described Bert in a similar way, "Bert was a **faint star** that rose night after night, faithfully crossing the same path in the sky, to God's glory." *Jim died heroically for Christ and Bert lived heroically for the lost, for his Savior, and for the church.* As disciples of Jesus, let's embrace every hardship God sends us with courage and embrace life fully for each other. *We embrace hardship for Christ and life for each other.*

Pastor Jonathan Romig wrote and preached this message for the people of Cornerstone Congregational Church. [Click here to listen to more sermons](#) or [click here to read our story](#).