

*Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.* <sup>13</sup> *As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.* <sup>14</sup> *Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.*

<sup>15</sup> *It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill.* <sup>16</sup> *The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.* <sup>17</sup> *The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.* <sup>18</sup> *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. (Philippians 1:12-18a)*

## The Surprising Grace of God

How often are you really surprised? My wife and I have each pulled off one surprise party once for the other's birthday. In both cases, we were surprised. But there are lots of times when surprises don't work. Think of all the movies that were supposed to have some stunning ending and all you did was yawn when it was over. Think of all the times you knew exactly where they were going. It's hard to surprise people. That makes my job this morning difficult because St. Paul's words to the Philippians this morning should be surprising. But am I a gifted enough preacher to hold you in suspense and shock you with where God goes today? Probably not. Since most of you have been Christians for many years, maybe there's nothing here today that you haven't heard before. Maybe it will just seem like same old, same old. But I hope not, because these words reveal the undeserved love that God shows us in ways that defy human expectation. I hope at the very least today that you will wonder at **the surprising grace of God.**

### I.

St. Paul says, **"Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel."** What had happened to Paul? He was arrested for the horrible crime of preaching about Jesus. At the end of one of his missionary trips, he went to Jerusalem and his enemies stirred up a riot against him. So the Romans arrested him as the cause. They put Paul on trial, but there was no definite result. After two full years in prison, Paul appealed to Caesar to have his case settled. So he was transported, in chains, to Rome where he waited for two more years, at least, for his case to come up. Paul wrote this letter during those two years in Rome. That's what makes this statement so surprising. Paul was one of the greatest missionaries ever. He wrote a huge part of the New Testament. And he was writing to one of the congregations he had founded, to people who had been praying for at least two years that God would release him from prison. And he said, **"What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel."**

How could that be true? Doesn't it seem like God was wasting one of his best men? But the gospel did advance because Paul was in prison. He said, **"It has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly."** Everyone in the palace guard in Rome understood why Paul was in chains. The gospel was advanced because these Roman soldiers heard the good news from Paul.

But was that worth it? What would you expect to happen when a government clamps down on preaching? Don't you think it would have a chilling effect on spreading the gospel? Instead of that, most Christians were encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously. That's the part that stuns me. Why did they step up and carry on Paul's work? Were they just too stubborn to let anybody tell them they couldn't preach? No. This was faith. God sent this disaster on the Church so that his people had the opportunity to rise to the challenge. Then God worked in their hearts through gospel and moved them to live their faith. God multiplied the number of preachers. No matter how gifted he was, Paul was one man. But more preachers meant more people hearing the good news. The cause of the gospel advanced.

God's surprising grace still works that way today. God still multiplies witnesses to Christ. If you lean on me to do all the pastoral work that needs to be done in this congregation, if you imagine that teaching your children to know the Lord is the job our teachers, if you think that it's my job to bring in new members and to

share the gospel, well, you're missing the point of the Church. It isn't just my work. It's all of our work. And God tries to teach us that through lessons like this one. But if we don't learn God's lessons the easy way, God will make sure we learn then, even if it has to be the hard way.

The day may come when God takes away from Peace her pastors and teachers. And it's my experience that a vacancy is a blessing to a congregation. It teaches God's people to step up and get the work done. God sometimes allows disasters to come on churches, he even sometimes allows churches to close. But when he does that, he uses it for the good of the gospel. Through that message he works in our hearts. He gives us the gifts we need to face the challenges that life presents to us and to our church today. The Holy Spirit strengthens us through the good news about Jesus so that we step up and do the work God wants done here and now.

Do we trust him to do that? Are we ready to step up and take part in the ministry of our congregation? Or do we default to the idea that we pay pastors and teachers to do that stuff and they should do their job and leave us alone? I hope we don't have that attitude. But I wonder why it's so hard to get men to serve a couple hours a month on boards and committees. I wonder why it takes a disaster to motivate us sometimes. On one level, I know the answer: we're sinners. All sinners want someone else to do the job. All sinners want their Christian life to be easy. But God calls us all to step up and do our part and when we don't want that, we're sinning. At best, we're forcing God to teach us the lesson the hard way. At worst, we're denying our faith and asking him to send us to hell.

But even at our worst, God's love still works. God in his love sent his Son to die for our laziness and our sinful desire that somebody else take care of the church's business. Jesus died for all the times we thought that we paid pastors and teachers to do that work and they should leave us alone. Jesus died and paid for all the sin in our hearts. And he rose and he forgave us. And in love, God moves us to serve. He gives us a part of his work and then he teaches us the lessons we need to fulfill our part. In love, he even does it the hard way, when that's the only way we'll listen. **God's grace is surprising: It leads God's people to step up.**

## II.

After all of that, Paul's next comment might be even more surprising. He says that some Christians "preach Christ out of envy and rivalry" and "out of selfish ambition." He says that they suppose they can stir up trouble for him while he's in chains. Of course, he contrasts that with those who preach sincerely and out of love. Wow! What a comment, huh? What kind of selfish ambition are we talking about? During Paul's lifetime being a Christian was a disadvantage politically and socially. But within the church, men like Paul generated enormous love and respect. And the devil knew that if he could make Christians jealous of each other, if he could get them to try to take each other down, then they wouldn't be working for Christ.

Throughout his ministry, there was a group of people who were always sniping at Paul. Now that it seemed like Paul was out of the picture, they were hoping to take his place in the Christian community, perhaps even hoping that the Romans would decide that they really couldn't afford to let Paul out. It's a sad comment on those men, but it's by no means something that only happened then. Church history is full of pastors and church leaders who thought that their congregations should be personality cults and who were jealous of the gifts and the popularity of other men.

But Paul had a different attitude. He said, **"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."** Paul wanted people to hear the good news and come to faith and grow in faith. And no matter what that cost him, he would rejoice when it happened. How many of us have that attitude? It's easy to be full of pride and selfish ambition. It's a miracle of God's grace when he gives us a faith that is so mature that we will suffer humiliation or personal sacrifice and rejoice when we see God's word being preached because of our loss.

Paul had that attitude because his confidence did not lie in the abilities of the men who were preaching and teaching, not even those who preached the gospel sincerely. Paul rejoiced because he knew that the real power to change hearts and lives lies in the gospel. What matters is not who is up here preaching, it's what he is preaching. The Holy Spirit works whenever Christ is proclaimed. Now if the pastor is preaching false doctrine or if no one can understand his preaching, he's not doing God's work. God requires that pastors know the truth and be able to teach. And the qualifications that God sets down include leading a Christian life because no one is going to listen to someone who talks about Jesus but then lives like a child of the devil.

But what really matters is the message because the Holy Spirit works in our hearts through the gospel. We can't always see or even feel his work. But he always works when we share what Jesus did for us. One day

this week, the children were practicing the hymn that they sang at the beginning of the service and I asked Mrs. Wilson if I could tell them a story. I told them that once I went up to the hospital to be with an elderly woman as she was dying. Her children and grandchildren gathered around her bed and they sang, "I am Jesus' Little Lamb." While they were singing that last verse, "And when my short life is ended, by his angel attended, he shall fold me to his breast, there within his arms to rest," God called that woman home to heaven. You know what happened when I told that story? A 1<sup>st</sup> grader raised his hand and said, "I've heard that story before." He was right – I told it a month or two ago in a sermon. He was listening. He understood it. That's not because I'm a great story teller. It's because the Holy Spirit works through the gospel. He touches our hearts with Christ. And we saw that this morning when those children belted out their praise to Jesus, their good shepherd.

But what if you had a pastor who opened the Scriptures to you and taught you about Jesus and you loved and respected him and then he cheated on his wife and denied his faith and finally went to hell? Would that change what God did in your heart through the word that men preached to you? No. It wouldn't. Not even if he didn't mean it. Because the gospel is the power of God. Even an unbeliever that points to Jesus does God's work. And we can rejoice in the truth even when we weep over the lies and tragedies of sinful men falling from grace. Every baptism that pastor did still counts, because he just said the words and applied the water. The Holy Spirit did the actual work. Every time he gave communion, his congregation received the body and blood of Christ because the power is in the words, "Given and shed for you." It's not in the faithfulness of the pastor.

That means that we can be glad for every pastor and teacher God calls to serve us. Who is your favorite pastor ever? You all have one. And you all probably have a least favorite pastor, too. Maybe he's boring. Maybe he talks over people's heads or maybe he's just hard to warm up to personally. Whatever the issue is, it doesn't matter. Because God works every time the gospel is preached. God works when your children hear about Jesus from you, no matter how unprepared you may feel, and he works when they hear it from their teachers, even if there are other issues that complicate their relationship. God builds you up when you hear the gospel, whether you're best friends with the guy in front or not. **God's grace is surprising: It shows up no matter who the preacher is.**

Now, maybe that doesn't surprise you at all. But even so, when you look at your life and your relationship with pastors and teachers and congregations in your history, doesn't it awe you? God gave you faith, through some sinner, somewhere along the line. God has sustained your faith through a lifetime of people who didn't deserve the privilege of sharing his Word with you or anybody else. God saved you, even though you're a sinner and he promises you that he will work through the word and the sacraments, and he will keep you in the faith until you stand with him in heaven. And he will even give you the gifts to step up and be a part of sharing that good news. God's grace is indeed surprising. Amen.