

## **An Epidemic of Good News #4**

**Greetings, brothers and sisters in Christ! This is now the fourth instalment of, “An Epidemic of Good News,” a Bible study on Paul’s letter to the Philippians.**

**Let’s begin with a prayer...**

**O God our strength, as you accompanied Paul and your other faithful servants through times of imprisonment, unjust punishment, and persecution, so we ask that you be with us in our times of trouble and suffering. Let us know your mighty presence, here in this life, and in the life to come, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.**

**Today we’ll be looking at Philippians 1:12-26. It’s a bit long for me to read out loud, so I’ll ask you to pause this video and read it in your own Bible or read it below in the description.**

**Last time, I said that Paul is sending this letter to the congregation in Philippi as a thank you note for the gift that they had sent him—a care package to help in his imprisonment—probably some money so he could buy food. Prisons didn’t feed you back then, so you had to have some other way of getting food. At the same time, the property that prisoners brought with them into prison was protected for exactly the reason that prisoners were responsible for their own maintenance.**

**The other thing that might be helpful to know about Roman prisons, is that they were more like remand centres than prisons. In other words, they were not the punishment, but a place to hold the accused until they could face trial. Actual Roman punishments could range anywhere from monetary fines, to property confiscations, to exile, to mutilations, to execution.**

**So, Paul has not yet been tried. He is awaiting trial. And as I suggested last time, he seems to be in Rome, guarded by members of the Praetorian Guard. Somehow through this connection, word of his message has also gotten into the imperial household, as we can see at the end of this letter where he sends greetings to the people back in Philippi with the following words: “All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor’s household,” (Philippians 4:22)**

**In fact, Paul’s imprisonment seems to be acting as an inspiration for the Christians in Rome to proclaim the Gospel with more boldness. As Paul says, “most of the brothers and sisters, having been made more confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear,” (Philippians 1:14).**

## **An Epidemic of Good News #4**

But as Shakespeare put it in *The Merchant of Venice*: All the glitters is not gold. It seems that even among the Christians, people's motivations for doing things is not all good. So, Paul says:

Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. The latter proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defence of the Gospel; the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. 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; and indeed, I will continue to rejoice... (Philippians 1:15-18)

What is going on here? Well, it depends a little on what Paul means by, "intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment". Here are the two main possibilities I see:

The first is that there are members of the Christian community who feel jealous that Paul is getting so much love, approval, and attention and they want to pull some of that love, approval, and attention their own way. This was a problem that the young Christian community had to deal with from the start.

For example, among Jesus' own disciples there was a certain amount of tension among them about their own motivations for following Jesus. We read of at least two arguments among the disciples about which of them would go on to become the most important person in Jesus' new kingdom (Mark 9:33-37 & Luke 9:46-48; Matthew 20:20-28); and we read that Judas Iscariot also had questionable motives for what he was doing (John 12:6). In Acts, we read of a couple, Ananias and Sapphira, who want to get the same kudos as the other people who have sold all their properties and given the money for the Apostles to distribute to the poor, but they don't want to actually give all their money away, so they lie to Peter and tell him they're giving him everything, when in fact they are keeping some if it for themselves. Peter tells them it was theirs to do with as they wished, but to make themselves out to be more than they were was actually a sin against the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-11). Which reminds me that the thing that got under Jesus' skin more than anything else was hypocrisy.

Let's face it, from the start, Jesus' message of acceptance and inclusion and worth attracted all kinds of people: nice people, and not so nice people; honest people, and not so honest people; mature people and needy people. The purpose of life in Christ—from a practical perspective, a perspective which Paul always gets to toward the end of his letters—is to move us toward the nicer, more honest, more mature side of the ledger. For example, Paul outlines this goal in his list of the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The second possibility for what's going on here is that there are people who are not part of the Christian community who want to exploit the fact that one of the most prominent members of that community is now under arrest to make him and all the Christians look bad

## **An Epidemic of Good News #4**

by mimicking their message; or who want to mimic the message to also get attention for themselves, or to further their own business project or ego project.

Probably the classic example of this in the New Testament is Simon the Magician, or Simon Magus in Acts 8:9-24. He lived in Samaria and wowed the people there with his magic. When the Apostle Philip preached in the region and many people accepted the message of Christ and had themselves baptized, Simon did too. Why? Because he was amazed by all the powerful works of healing and casting out of demons that Philip did. Later Peter and John travelled to where Philip was to finish the work he had begun. When Simon Magus saw people receiving the Holy Spirit, he offered to pay Peter to give him this power as well. To which, Peter answered:

May your silver perish with you because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money! You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness or yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. (Acts 9:20-22)

Even Jesus had to deal with this sort of thing. In Matthew (10:40-42), Mark (9:38-41), and Luke (9:49-50) we read of an incident in which some anonymous exorcist is using the name of Jesus to cast out demons. The disciples tell Jesus that they tried to stop him because he wasn't part of their group. Jesus' approach was to look at whether this copy-cat was doing good or was doing harm. And so, Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for whoever is not against you is for you," (Luke 9:50). In other words, this other exorcist seemed to be freeing people from their troubles, so, not a problem.

And that is the attitude that Paul embraces here. "If the word of Christ gets out, I don't care how false the motivations of those proclaiming Christ may be."

Given this, I think that the suffering that Paul is talking about here is not so much that the authorities are coming down harder on them, but rather that it pains him to see charlatans doing the work to which he was expressly called. I think his suffering is an inner, emotional suffering. And so, he consoles himself, as many of us would, but saying, "What does it matter...as long as Christ is proclaimed."

But Paul is also aware that the questionable character of these false preachers could come back to undermine the Gospel. And so, he says to the Philippians:

I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance. 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. (Philippians 1:19-20)

## **An Epidemic of Good News #4**

So, it's not that Paul is worried about dying. He's worried that his proclamation of Christ will be undermined. Those who proclaim out of false motives, ultimately proclaim to exalt themselves. Paul proclaims to exalt Christ, not just with his words, but with his body, ready to lay down his life as Christ laid down his own life for Paul—and for everyone.

It's not that Paul wants to die. He knows he's more useful alive; but he is certainly prepared to die, and he knows that for himself, this would also be a form of victory, as we see in Philippians 1:22-26. (I'll let you read those verses on your own to flesh out that part of what Paul is saying.)

At the same time, Paul is confident that because he is of more use alive, he will see his beloved Philippians again.

In the next instalment, I will look a little more at that issue that Paul touched on in Philippians 1:15-18, namely, that people's motives for proclaiming Christ are not always genuine. It's worth looking at because it is something that the Church has had to deal with all along. It will also give us some of the background for the encouragement that Paul gives to the Philippian Christians in 1:27 – 2:18.

Let's close with the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come,  
Thy will be done,  
On earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
And for give us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.