

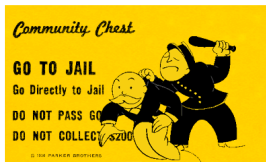
Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Philippians 1:12-30 on September 21, 2014 at Victory of the Lamb.

Series: Stuck?

Today's Focus: Advancing

“When Christ Becomes Larger Than (Your) Life”

Are any of you competitive people? Do any of you ever get competitive even when playing board games? I'm kind of like that...but in a sanctified way I hope! I trace my competitiveness back to when I was a kid in the Kuerth house and we used to have some pretty epic family game nights playing Monopoly. I was always trying to take down my dad. We had a little rivalry going on because he somehow always seemed to get around the board the fastest and was able to snatch up both Park Place and Boardwalk. That was his sure path to victory.



But of course there was one card I used to love when my dad got it. Can you guess what that card was? This one: {pic} *Go to jail. Go directly to jail. Do not pass go. Do not collect \$200.* I'd just laugh at the exaggerated look of pain on my dad's face because if you're in jail, well then you're stuck there of course at least for a turn. But him being stuck in jail was good for me because it kept my dad from advancing. And if he couldn't advance, I had an advantage.

Now that's just having some fun playing Monopoly of course—a game with fake money! But today as we continue this series *Stuck?* based on a book of the Bible called Philippians, we meet the Apostle Paul who got the “Go to jail card”. Literally, Paul was stuck now in a Roman prison when he writes Philippians. On trial before Caesar. He was preaching about Jesus Christ telling people the joyful news of the Gospel message—the message of Christ's victory over sin and death as our Savior—and look what good it did him. The man who was always on the move advancing from one place to the next, who was always starting churches in one major city after another, who was always moving the message of the gospel forward, he was confined to a cell. Locked up. Stuck. Future unknown.

You ever feel that? Like outwardly perhaps the set of circumstances that you're facing is kind of frightening or the future unknown? Maybe there's that cloud of depression that's started to settle upon you again. Or there's this on-again-off-again battle against anxiety or worry that you don't think people like you ought to have to face. Or maybe there's just a complex matrix of multiple stressors that seems to short circuit your ability to function. Or there's a sickness that lingers like an unwanted guest. Or there's a pain that's become a chronic way of life. Or there's a difficult relationship that's awfully hard to navigate. Or there's a period of joblessness that leaves you with far too much time to think. Or there's a job you actually have but which you actually hate. Or there's a feeling that your life doesn't have as much purpose as it once used to. But the result is that whatever the case might be for you, you feel stuck. There's a set of circumstances that you face, the future is unknown, and it's kind of frightening. Any of you feel stuck like this? Like you just got the “Go to jail” card?

Well today God wants to help you get out, get spiritually unstuck, and advance. You see we're going to learn from Paul who finds himself stuck in prison outwardly, yet somehow finds also a way to have joy inwardly and to live as if he's unstuck. In fact *joy* is one of the recurring themes in the book of Philippians. It's kind of a surprising thing considering the circumstances. But what we're going to learn today is **what happens when Jesus Christ becomes larger than your life**. Paul writes,

¹² *Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.* ¹³ *As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.* 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.*

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

So what's the first reason Paul says he can rejoice? He says, *What has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel*. Now if you're not a Christian and you're listening to this today, this first point—where Paul's coming from—be a little hard for you to grasp and that's ok. I'll try and help you understand even though there's a point that still applies I think to everybody. And that's that Paul simply realized his life was part of something larger than his own life. He was part of a cause bigger than himself. Friends, what are you living for that's larger than you? But you see for Paul this wasn't just any old cause. Not just any other good cause either. This was the best cause. This was the cause of the gospel—something in fact that God invites us all to be a part of just as the gospel message itself isn't just for certain people but for everybody.

Now that word "gospel" simply means the good news. It's the good news that God loves all of us more than we could ever imagine because he himself entered our world in the person of Jesus Christ and he accomplished everything for us so that we could go be forgiven and we could go to heaven. Jesus did it all and he did it perfectly well. So Paul lived his life now not to earn God's love or to appease God's anger or to try and somehow work his way into heaven but rather because he knew he already had it as God's free gift through Jesus. Paul wanted to advance the cause of the gospel of Jesus in the world for all to benefit.

But you'd think, wouldn't you, that the last way this would happen for a missionary like Paul is with him stuck in prison, right? Yet even though Paul was stuck, he didn't act like it. He still kept on preaching. Of course who was within his area of influence, his congregation, while in prison? The palace guard. Historians know this group as the praetorian guard—a group of elite Roman soldiers some of whom were probably assigned as personal bodyguards to Caesar himself who

then rotated taking charge of prisoners like Paul when they were awaiting trial before the Emperor! So Paul's stuck in prison but the gospel keeps advancing as the palace guard talked: "Hey, did you get a chance to meet that prisoner, Paul? He's not your common criminal is he? He's this calm, kind, sincere guy from out of town who keeps talking about this man Jesus who he claims rose from the dead and is the Son of God. I mean have you ever met anyone quite like this guy Paul?" So that's one way that even in his own limited area of influence Paul made the most of his life. His *stuckness* gave him special opportunities to make Christ larger than his life which he wouldn't have had otherwise. Friends, who's in your area of influence, no matter how small or insignificant that might seem, in which your *stuckness* might serve God's purpose of letting Christ become larger than your life?

And then there's the fact that with Paul in prison, the rumor was going around Rome that Paul is there specifically because of the gospel of Jesus, which only then brought a higher profile to the gospel message itself. So then rather than causing other Christians to hide their identity or to think, "O woe is us, we're just this little group living here in big hostile Rome"... all kinds of people were actually emboldened to share their faith in Jesus Christ. Paul says, 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.*

And even when he says that some people were proclaiming the gospel with an unhealthy spirit of competition and rivalry, Paul doesn't let that bother him or bring him down. He says, *"The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice."* Now just one quick application here about this. In the same way I rejoice, and I hope you do too, that there are other churches around us that preach the unconditional message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We're not in competition with them. And we're not trying to simply take people who already are Christians and move them into the membership of our church. I mean God be praised for the fruit of how he's blessed us as a church trying to reach unchurched people. And God be praised when people find Jesus at a church other than ours so long as they're hearing the Gospel there too. The cause of Christ is larger than our lives. It's larger than our church. The gospel is so much bigger than any of us and yet we all can play a part in it. Paul goes on...

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰ I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

²⁵ *Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith,* ²⁶ *so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.*

So not only is the cause of Christ larger than life, but to Paul...Jesus Christ himself is larger than his own life. You get what he's saying here in this section? This is huge! Paul's saying, "You know, I'm not sure what the future holds. I think I'm going to be acquitted. I think I'm going to be released. I think I might get to visit you again in Philippi. But I just don't know. My case could still go either way. I could see myself getting released and my life and ministry would go on. That would be a good thing. But I could also see myself being condemned to die while here in prison. And actually if it came down to that, that would be a good thing too. In fact there's a part of me that would rejoice in that because I know that to die and go to heaven –boy, there's nothing better than that. I just hope that whatever happens (listen to this!) I have *will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.* Literally in the Greek language of the New Testament the word translated "be exalted" means "be made large." What Paul wants is that Christ would become large in his life whether he lives or dies.

I mean, wow, right!?! Here's Paul stuck in prison and outwardly his set of circumstances seems pretty grim. There's a chance his outward circumstances won't improve and he'll soon die. Yet Paul's ok with that. Why? Because Christ is larger than his own life! Christ is larger than his own life because Paul knows that Jesus Christ has conquered death. Jesus, by his resurrection victory on Easter, has transformed the cemetery from a gloomy place to a hopeful place. Jesus, by his resurrection victory, has transformed death from something frightening into something freeing. Death for believers in Jesus actually becomes our greatest deliverance because it means going to be with the Lord in heaven. How is it that Paul can talk like this? Because Jesus has become larger than his life! That's how Paul can face the future without fear. Jesus is a bigger, stronger Savior than any of his sins or fears.

Now friends, here's the thing. You might feel stuck in the prison of your special life circumstances. And maybe for some of you the prospect of those circumstances actually advancing in your favor seems pretty bleak. You feel *stuck*. The power of positive thinking isn't just going to make your situation improve. Things aren't going to just change magically overnight. But with God on your side, they just might. You don't know. They might. So you always have hope and you can pray. But even if they don't...even if your external life circumstances do not change, you can have the confidence that God will change you on the inside. That's where God aims to do his greatest work.

Remember last week that great promise, "*God who began a good work in you, he will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 1:6). And so here's God's promise for you today: Your circumstances externally may not change. You might remain in one sense *stuck*. But no matter what, God wants to change you internally so that you keep moving forward on your faith journey to heaven. And when he brings you to the faith conviction that Jesus Christ has set you free from a fear of dying, then you are truly free to start living.

A couple years ago there was a police officer in Las Vegas named Henry Prendes. A 14 year veteran, he had just been promoted to sergeant. One day soon after, he was responding to a domestic violence call where a man was beating his girlfriend. (Sadly there's been a lot in the news recently regarding domestic violence, hasn't there?) When he arrived, he went inside the house only to find the man with an AK47 pointed at him who opened fire and ended Sgt. Prendes' life. This was terribly tragic. But what people found out later was that the last thing Sgt. Prendes had done that morning before responding to the call was he had attended a Bible study and prayed with a friend over coffee—something he did routinely on many occasions. And so on the seat of his car sat his still open Bible. You see for Henry, he truly believed that to live is Christ, and to die is gain. He was a man who was known for helping lead many others to Christ—because Christ for him was larger than his life—both in life and in death.

I pray that Jesus Christ would also become larger than life for us.

Dear Jesus, give each of us today a heart in which your peace rules. Give us confidence to know that because of what you've done for us, God is on our side and he's always for our good so that even if our outward set of circumstances doesn't change, you can change us. You can move us forward. You can even use our circumstances so that those people in our area of influence are brought closer to you. So finally, blessed Savior, help each of us look for at least one way that you might be leading us to let you become larger than our life for the eternal good of someone else. Amen.

My Next Steps

Point to Ponder: When Jesus becomes larger than your life, you're free to face the future without fear.

Treasure to Share: *I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.* (Philippians 1:20).

Action to Take: Pray for a heart that trusts that with God on your side it's always for your good so that even if your outward set of circumstances doesn't change, you can have the confidence that God will change you. Then look for ways God might be leading you to let Christ become larger than your life for the good of others!