In His Letter to the Philippians

by T. Austin-Sparks

The gospel is the good news of Christ's triumph, and it is experienced by those who are captivated by Christ, leading to joy, victory, and triumph in their lives.

Scripture: Philippians 1:3-5, Philippians 1:7, Philippians 1:12-13, Philippians 1:16-18, Philippians 1:20, Philippians 2:22, Philippians 4:1, Philippians 4:3, Philippians 4:13-15
Topics: "Joy in Christ", "The Gospel"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks explores the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians, emphasizing that even in his imprisonment, Paul remains deeply connected to the gospel, viewing it as a source of immense joy and triumph. The sermon highlights the threefold triumph of Christ, Paul, and the Philippian Christians, showcasing how the gospel transforms lives and fosters a community of love and support. Sparks illustrates that true joy comes from being captivated by Christ, which leads to a life of victory and purpose, transcending personal struggles and sacrifices. He encourages believers to embrace this captivating relationship with Christ, as it is the key to experiencing the fullness of the gospel. Ultimately, the message is a call to recognize the gospel's power in our lives today.

Transcript

Continuing our enquiry into what the Apostle meant by his words "the gospel which I preach", we take in our hands the little letter written by Paul to the Philippians. Although this was one of the last writings of the Apostle - it was written from his imprisonment in Rome shortly before his execution, at the end of a long, full life of ministry and work - we find that he is still speaking of everything as 'the gospel'. He has not grown out of the gospel, he has not got beyond the gospel. Indeed, at the end he is more than ever aware of the riches of the gospel which are far beyond him.

Here are the references that he makes in this letter to the gospel.

"I thank my God... for your fellowship in furtherance of the gospel..." (Phil. 1:3,5).

"...it is right for me to be thus minded on behalf of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as, both in my bonds and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel, ye all are partakers with me of grace" (1:7).

"...the one [Preach Christ] of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel: but the other proclaim Christ of faction, not sincerely, thinking to raise up affliction for me in my bonds. What then? only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and therein I rejoice, yea, and will rejoice" (1:16-18).

"But ye know the proof of him, that, as a child serveth a father, so he served with me in furtherance of the gospel" (2:22).

"Yea, I beseech thee also, true yokefellow, help these women, for they laboured with me in the gospel..." (4:3).

"I can do all things in him that strengtheneth me. Howbeit ye did well, that ye had fellowship with me in my affliction. And ye yourselves also know, ye Philippians, that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church had fellowship with me in the matter of giving and receiving, but ye only..." (4:13-15).

You see there is a good deal about the gospel in this little letter. I say 'little' letter. This letter is like a beautiful jewel in the crown of Jesus Christ, or like a beautiful pearl whose colours are the result of exquisite pain and suffering. It is something very costly and very precious. So far as actual chapters and verses are concerned, it is small. It is one of the smallest of Paul's letters, but in its intrinsic values and worth it is immense; and as a real setting forth of what the gospel is, there are few, if any, things in the New Testament to be compared with it. What we really come to in this letter is not only a setting forth of what the gospel is in truth, but an example of what the gospel is in effect. Look at it again, dwell upon it with openness of heart, and I think your verdict will be - it surely should be - 'Well, if that is the gospel, give me the gospel! If that is the gospel, it is something worth having!' That surely is the effect of reading this little letter. It is a wonderful example of the gospel in expression.

The Letter of the Joy of Triumph

But as we read it, we find that it resolves itself into this. It is, perhaps more than any other letter in the New Testament, the letter of the joy of triumph. Joy runs right through this letter. The Apostle is full of joy to overflowing. He seems to be hardly able to contain himself. In the last chapter we were speaking of his superlatives in relation to the great calling of the Church in the gospel. Here the Apostle is finding it difficult to express himself as to his joy. I leave you to look at it. Look just at the first words, his introduction, and see. But it runs right through to the end. It has been called the letter of Paul's joy in Christ, but it is the joy of triumph, and triumph in a threefold direction. The triumph of Christ; triumph in Paul; and triumph in the Christians at Philippi. That really sums up the whole letter: the threefold triumph with its joy and exultant outflowing.

The Triumph of Christ

First of all, triumph in Christ and of Christ. It is in this letter that Paul gives us that matchless unveiling of the great cycle of redemption - the sublime course taken by the Lord Jesus in His redemptive work. We see Him, firstly, in the place of equality with God: equal with God, and all that that means - all that it means for God to be God. How great that is! - how full, how high, how majestic, how glorious! Paul here says that Jesus was there equal with God. And then, 'counting it not something to be held on to, to be grasped at, this equality with God, He emptied Himself'. He emptied Himself of all that, let it go, laid it aside, gave it up. Just think of what He was going to have in exchange. These are thoughts almost impossible of grasping:

God, in all His infinite fulness of power and majesty of might, in His dominion of glory and eternal fulness, allowing men of His own creation, even the meanest of them, to spit on Him, to mock and jeer at Him. He laid it aside; He emptied Himself, and took upon Him the form of a man, was found in fashion as a man; and not only that, but still lower in this cycle - the form of a bond-slave, a bond-slave man. A bond-slave is one who has no personal rights; he has no franchise, he has no title. He is not allowed to choose for himself, to go his own way, and much more. Paul says here that Jesus took the form of a bond-slave.

And then he goes on to say that 'He humbled Himself, became obedient unto death': and not a glorious death at that, not a death about which people speak in terms of praise and admiration. 'Yes', says the Apostle, 'death on a cross' - the most shameful, ignominious death, with all that that meant. You see, the Jewish world, the religious world, of that day, had it written in their Book that he that hangs upon a tree is cursed of God. Jesus was obedient to the point of being found in the place of one who is cursed of God. That is how they looked upon Him - as cursed of God. And as for the rest of the world, the Gentile world, their whole conception of that which should be worshipped was one who could never be defeated, one who could never be found in a situation which should cause him shame, one who could stand before the world as a success - that was their idea of a god. But here is this Man on the Cross. Is He a success? That is no sign of success. That is no indication of human strength. That is weakness. There is nothing honourable about that - it is disgraceful. That is humanity at its lowest.

And then the cycle is reversed, and the Apostle breaks in here, and says: "Wherefore also God highly exalted him, and gave unto him the name which is above every name; that in the name of Jesus every knee shall bow" - sooner or later; either gladly to acknowledge Him Lord, or forcedly to do so; sooner or later, in the determinate counsels of Almighty God, it shall be; "and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father". What a cycle! What a circle! What a triumph! You cannot find triumph fuller or greater than that: and Paul calls that the gospel. It is the good news of Christ's tremendous triumph. He has triumphed in that circle, and all that is included in the triumph is the gospel. We cannot stay to dwell upon it, as to why He did it, or what He effected by it, what He has secured in it. All that is the gospel. But the fact is that in that way Christ has accomplished a tremendous victory. In the whole circle of Heaven and earth, from the highest height to the lowest depth, He has triumphed. Paul finds unspeakable joy in contemplating that. That is what he calls the good tidings, the gospel - triumph in Christ.

Triumph in Paul's Own Spiritual History

Paul then comes in himself, and gives us in this letter quite a bit of autobiography. He tells us something of his own history before his conversion, as to who he was and what he was, and where he was, and what he had. Of course, it was nothing to be compared with what his Lord had had and had let go. But Paul himself, as Saul of Tarsus, had a great deal by birth, by inheritance, by upbringing, by education, by status, prestige and so on. He had quite a lot. He tells us about it here. All that men would boast of - he had it. And then he met Jesus Christ, or Jesus Christ met him; and the whole thing, he said - all that he had and possessed - became in his hands like ashes, like refuse! "I do count them but refuse".

Many people have this false idea about the gospel, that, if you embrace the gospel, if you become a Christian, if you are converted, or however you like to put it, you are going to have to lose or give up everything, you have to give up this and you have to give up something else. If you become a Christian, it will be just one long story of giving up, giving up, giving up, until sooner or later you are skinned of everything. Listen! Here is a man who had far more than you or I ever had. We cannot stand in the same

street with this man in his natural life, in all that he was and all that he had, and all the prospects that were before him as a young man. There is very little doubt that, if Paul had not become a Christian, his name would have gone down in history amongst some other very famous names of his time. But he says - not in these words, but in many more words than these: 'When I met the Lord Jesus, that whole thing became to me like refuse.' Give it up? Who will find any sacrifice in giving up a candle when they have found the sun? Sacrifice in that? Oh, no! 'In comparison with Christ, I just count it the veriest refuse'.

What a victory! What a triumph! You see, this giving up - well, put it like that, if you like - but Paul is very happy about it. That is the point. It is Paul's joy, the joy of a tremendous victory in himself.

Triumph in Paul's Ministry

But further, here it is the story of the great victory in his ministry, in his work. We recall the story of how he went to Philippi. He had set out to go into Asia, to preach the gospel there, and was on his way, when, in that mysterious providence of God which only explains itself afterward and never before, he was forbidden, checked, prevented, stopped. The day closed with a closed way, a halted journey. He was in perplexity as to the meaning of this; he did not understand it. Waiting on God during that night, he had a vision. He saw a man of Macedonia - Philippi is in Macedonia - saying: "Come over into Macedonia, and help us" (Acts 16:9). And Paul said, "We sought to go forth... concluding that God had called us for to preach the gospel unto them". So, turning away from Asia, he turned towards Europe, and came to Philippi.

Sometimes disappointment and upsetting of plans can be the very ground of a great victory. God can get a lot by putting aside our cherished plans, and upsetting everything for us. - But we continue. Paul came to Philippi. And the Devil knew that he had come, and got to work and said, in effect, 'Not if I can prevent it, Paul! I will make this place too hot for you to stay here!' And he got to work, and before long Paul with his companions were found in the inner dungeon of the prison, their feet made fast, chains upon them, bleeding from the lashing that they had received. Well, this does not seem to say much for Divine guidance! Where is the victory in this? But wait. The very jailor and his household were saved that night. They came to the Lord and were baptized. And when, years afterwards, in this other prison in Rome, Paul wrote this letter to the saints he had left in Philippi, he put in a phrase like this: "my brethren beloved and longed for" (Phil. 4:1). I like to think that the jailor and his family were included in this. "Brethren beloved and longed for". And in the same letter he says: "I would have you know, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the progress of the gospel" (1:12). It is a picture of triumph, is it not? - the triumph in his life and in his ministry.

Triumph in Paul's Sufferings

And he triumphed in his sufferings. He says something about his sufferings in this very letter, the sufferings which were upon him as he wrote; but it is all in a note and spirit of real triumph. He says: "As always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether by life, or by death" (1:20). No tinge of despair about that, is there? 'Even now, as it has always been, Christ must be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.' That is triumph. Yes, that is triumph, that is joy.

But more: he said, 'Christ manifested in my bonds'. A wonderful thing, this! Brought to Rome, chained to a Roman guardian soldier, never allowed more than a certain measure of liberty - and yet you cannot silence this man! He has got something that 'will out' all the time, and he says it has gone throughout the whole Praetorian guard (1:13). If you knew something about the Praetorian guard, you would say, 'That is

triumph!' In the very headquarters of Caesar, and a Caesar such as he was, the gospel is triumphant. It is being spoken about throughout the whole Praetorian guard! Yes, there is triumph in his sufferings, in his bonds, in his afflictions. This is not just words. It is a glorious triumph; and this is the gospel in action, the gospel in expression.

Triumph in the Philippian Christians

And this triumph was not only in Christ and in Paul, but in the Philippians. It is a beautiful letter of the triumph of Divine grace in these Philippians. You can see it, firstly, in their response; and you really need to know something about Philippi in those days. You get just a little idea from what happened to Paul. You know about the pagan temple with its terrible system of women slaves, and all that is bound up with that horrible thing. As Paul and his companions went through the streets of Philippi, one of these young women, described as having a spirit of Python, a soothsaying demon, a veritable possession of Satan, persistently followed and cried out after them.

That is the sort of city that Philippi was, and Paul finds it possible to write a letter of this kind to believers in a city like that. Is that not triumph? I think that there should ever be a church in Philippi at all is something, but a church like this is something more. And it is not only in their response to the gospel, which cost them so much. Look again at the letter, and see the mutual love which they had one for another. This is indeed a jewel in the crown of Jesus Christ. This letter has been called Paul's great love letter. The whole thing overflows with love, and it is because of the love which they had one for another. Love of this kind is not natural. This is the work of Divine grace in human hearts. It speaks of a great triumph. If there is anything to add, we may recall that, when Paul was in need, it was these people who thought about his need and sent for his help and his succour. They are concerned for the man to whom they owed so much for the gospel.

Well, all that constitutes this tremendous triumph. It is a letter of triumph, is it not? We have proved our point, I think. I repeat: This is the gospel! But Paul says that these people at Philippi, these believers, are exemplary - they are an example; and so what we have to do at the end of this review is to ask: 'Just what is the gospel so far as this letter is concerned? What is the good news here, the good tidings? How can this kind of thing be repeated or reproduced?'

The Secret of the Triumph

We are not dealing with people of peculiar virtues, a specially fine type of person. It is just man, poor, frail humanity: out of that can such a thing be repeated, reproduced? Can we hope for anything like this now? It would be good news if it could be proved to us that there is a way of reproducing this situation today, would it not? Knowing what we do know, it would be good tidings if it could be shown to us that this is not merely something which relates to an isolated company of people who lived long centuries ago, but that it can be true today - that this gospel, this good news, is for us.

How, then? Is there in this letter a key phrase? We have sought in our studies in these letters to gather everything into some characteristic phrase from each. Is there such a phrase in this letter that gives us the key to it all, the key to entering ourselves into Christ's great victory and all the value of it? Can we find the key to open the door for us into the position that the Apostle occupied - that everything that this world can offer and that might be placed at our disposal is tawdry, is petty, is insignificant, in comparison with Christ? Is there a key which will open the door for us into what these Philippians had come into?

I think there is, and I think you find it in the first chapter, in the first clause of verse 21: "For to me to live is Christ". That is the good news of the all-captivating Christ. When Christ really captivates, everything happens and anything can happen. That is how it was with Paul and with these people. Christ had just captivated them. They had no other thought in life than Christ. They may have had their businesses, their trades, their professions, their different walks of life and occupations in the world, but they had one all-dominating thought, concern and interest - Christ. Christ rested, for them, upon everything. There is no other word for it. He just captivated them.

And I see, dear friends, that that - simple as it may sound - explains everything. It explains Paul, it explains this church, it explains these believers, it explains their mutual love. It solved all their problems, cleared up all their difficulties. Oh, this is what we need! If only you and I were like this, if we really after all were captivated by Christ! I cannot convey that to you, but as I have looked at that truth - looked at it, read it, thought about it - I have felt something moved in me, something inexplicable. After all, nine-tenths of all our troubles can be traced to the fact that we have other personal interests influencing us, governing us and controlling us - other aspects of life than Christ. If only it could be true that Christ had captured and captivated and mastered us, and become - yes, I will use the word - an obsession, a glorious obsession! I think this is what the writer of the hymn meant when he wrote: 'Jesus, Lover of my soul', and when further on he says: 'More than all in Thee I find'. When it is like that, we are filled with joy. There are no regrets at having to 'give up' things. We are filled with joy, filled with victory. There is no spirit of defeatism at all. It is the joy of a great triumph. It is the triumph of Christ over the life. Yes, it has been, and because it has been, it can be again.

But this needs something more than just a kind of mental appraisement. We can so easily miss the point. We may admire the words, the ideas; we may fall to it as a beautiful presentation; but, oh, we need the captivating to wipe out our selves - our reputations, everything that is associated with us and our own glory - that the One who captivates may be the only One in view, the only One with a reputation, and we at His feet. This is the gospel, the good news - that when Christ really captivates, the kind of thing that is in this letter happens, it really happens. Shall we ask the Lord for that life captivation of His beloved Son?

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