

“Apprehended for Advancement” (Phil. 1:12-18)

1. Paradoxical Providence for the Gospel (12-13)

a. Grammatically

Conventional Frame – Unconventional Form

Walter Hansen wrote: The introductory phrase—*I want you to know, brothers and sisters*—is often called a “disclosure formula” by analysts of Greek letter forms and is found with variations in Greek papyrus letters of Paul’s day and in Paul’s letters as an introduction to a new section of a letter. The four parts of this conventional phrase are (1) some form of an expression of desire—I want or I desire, (2) a verb of knowing—to know, to be informed, or not to be ignorant, (3) the addressees—you, *brothers and sisters*, and (4) the information disclosed. This conventional introduction opens the way for Paul’s unconventional report on his circumstances.¹ Hansen continued: A conventional report would provide a detailed description of the letter writer’s situation. But even though Paul says he wants his readers to know *what has happened* to him and refers repeatedly to his *chains*, he does not give a detailed account of the events and conditions of his imprisonment. In our day, a journalist would want to have a narrative of his arrest, imprisonment, and courtroom appearances, plus some drawings of his prison and his guards, a diary of his daily activities, menus of his meals, medical records of his physical condition, and, above all, a disclosure of his feelings. But such personal matters were not Paul’s priorities. From Paul’s perspective the most important thing that had happened was the advance of the gospel.²

b. Practically

Advancement via Apprehension

- i. “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).
- ii. The reason Paul can seemingly use the standard letter form yet fill it in with what God is doing in his circumstances is that his life was all about Christ and the advance of the Gospel. Paul was consumed with that purpose and thus he acknowledged God’s providence, paradoxical though it may be.
- iii. Not only was Paul’s incarceration not a hindrance to his preaching to all people – it was a peculiar advancement. The Greek word for *advance* (*prokopē*) sounds similar to the Greek word for hindrance (*proskopē*).³
- iv. It actually makes perfect sense. It is a short cut to the Roman authorities etc.
- v. Furthermore, Paul’s imprisonment actually both brought a witness to the otherwise neglected guards and their families and civic peers, as well as prompting those outside to either inquire, refute, or promote the Gospel – which further spread the news of Jesus person and work.

2. Paradoxical Persecution of the Gospel (14-17)

a. Motive (15)

- i. Some from envy and strife. Cf. Gal. 5:20-21; Ro. 1:29; 1 Tim. 6:4.
- ii. Why not prohibit such? Paul did call out their motivation.

¹ Hansen, G. W. (2009). [The Letter to the Philippians](#) (pp. 65–66). William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

² Hansen, G. W. (2009). [The Letter to the Philippians](#) (p. 66). William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

³ Hansen, G. W. (2009). [The Letter to the Philippians](#) (p. 67). William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

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- iii. Before considering a contrast of groups I’d like to offer a group who is not mentioned in most (virtually none) commentaries, yet N. T. Wright offers this plausible scenario which no doubt happened and continues to happen. “There are some people going around talking about King Jesus who, Paul knows, don’t really mean it. They don’t believe the message; they merely want to make more trouble for him in his imprisonment. Some people have thought that these people were a rival Christian group, opposed to Paul’s specific view of the gospel. But I think it’s more likely that they are ordinary pagans who have heard what all the fuss is about and are talking about it on the street. →
- iv. ‘Have you heard?’ they’ll be saying to each other. ‘They’ve caught that strange fellow who’s been going around saying there’s a new king—a new emperor! And you won’t believe it—this new king turns out to be a Jew whom they crucified a few years ago, and this jailbird is saying he’s alive again and he’s the real Lord of the world!’ →
- v. Talk like that would be guaranteed to make people feel that Paul was a dangerous lunatic who should be kept locked up. But Paul’s reaction is to celebrate. That’s fine by me, he says. As long as people are going around saying that Jesus is the world’s true Lord, I shall be happy.⁴
- vi. Another group that D. A. Carson mentioned was a group that also characterizes some today. Apparently some of his critics thought Paul had let the side down rather badly by getting himself arrested. If, as is likely, he is writing from prison in Rome, he is awaiting trial before the Emperor, and Paul is in this situation because he himself had appealed to the Emperor (Acts 26). One can easily imagine the reasoning of Paul’s critics. Depending on how this case turns out, Paul’s appeal to the Emperor could bring Christianity into ill repute. Paul is constantly rushing headlong into things where a wiser, cooler head would have been cautious. Why did he have to go up to Jerusalem and get himself arrested anyway? He knew how much he was held in contempt there. Surely there was a better way.⁵ Carson further commented: In this case, the people Paul has in mind are those that must be understood to lie behind verse 12. They think that Paul has done damage to the Christian cause by getting himself arrested. Probably they magnify their own ministry by putting Paul down. We can imagine their pompous reflections: “It really is sad that so great a man as Paul has frittered away his gospel opportunities simply because he is so inflexible. After all, I and many others manage to remain at large and preach the gospel. One must assume that Paul has a deep character flaw that puts him in the path of trouble. *My* ministry is being blessed, while *he* languishes in prison.” Thus, the more they speak, the more their own ways are justified and the more Paul is made to look foolish.⁶
- vii. There is a difference between the Judaizers Paul condemned because of their false gospel and those preaching with selfish motives.
- viii. Although neither is good, we must acknowledge nuanced teachings and discern motives to a degree in order to protect the integrity of the Gospel. Clarity is vital!

⁴ Wright, T. (2004). [*Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*](#) (pp. 89–90). Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

⁵ Carson, D. A. (1996). [*Basics for believers: an exposition of Philippians*](#) (pp. 22–23). Baker Books.

⁶ Carson, D. A. (1996). [*Basics for believers: an exposition of Philippians*](#) (p. 25). Baker Books.

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- ix. Gal. 2:6-10 reveals a significant difference of application/conscience regarding different believers.
- x. However, the following verses (Gal. 2:11-14) Paul records his confrontation with Peter. I think of Alistair Begg and his hypocritical stance of not affirming illegitimate “marriages” in word yet endorsing such in deed. →
- xi. Now, we must wisely handle such occasions with obedience and discernment and love e.g. 1 Tim. 5:1; Gal. 5:15; 6:1; Jn. 13:35.
- xii. Peter was a legit Apostle of Christ and no false teacher nor apostate yet he needed real rebuke. I bring up Begg as I think he is in that category.
- xiii. Motives and persecution must be continuously examined. Why did Peter act as he did and why is Alistair (at this time) doubling down? I think it is a fear of persecution and or rejection of the Gospel. →

b. Means (16)

- i. But there is a paradox of persecution where such actually fertilizes the growth of the church by the blood of the saints. And Paul maintained that it was obvious that his chains were “actually” a catalyst for the preaching of Christ.
- ii. End of the Spear. Jim Elliot’s death actually spurred others at Wheaton College and elsewhere to join the mission field.
- iii. Such opposition is actually a sign that Jesus and righteousness is being faithfully preached cf. Mat. 5:10-12. Begg doubled down and said his answer was with the motive of preserving a relationship yet for truth’s sake we must value the Gospel over the closest of relationships cf. Mat. 10:34-39. Incidentally, v. 39 proclaims a vital paradox of salvation.

3. Paradoxical Priority from the Gospel

a. Paramount Priority

- i. As mentioned, a personal letter is consumed with the advancement of the Gospel of Christ. And this is because it is very personal. →
- ii. What is more personal than one’s identity? What is more personal than one’s destiny? What is more personal than one’s purpose? What is more personal than one’s peace and preservation? All of these questions find their fulfillment in Christ.
- iii. How can I be free from sin: selfishness, pride, anxiety, animus, jealousy, and vanity? How can I overcome the obsession of what others may think of me? How can I overcome great loss or even the threat of death? The answer is the Gospel of Christ!
- iv. Dennis Johnson shared an example of this power displayed in Christ through a parishioner. “Joy was not elderly. But by the time I met her, rheumatoid arthritis had curled her hands into tiny fists, confined her to a wheelchair, and filled her days and nights with pain. At the start of my pastorate, she had the strength to attend worship services now and then. Later came years of home confinement and repeated hospitalizations. In her own family she alone trusted Christ. If anyone had reason to complain and pity herself, it was Joy. Yet every visit to Joy brought bright encouragement to her visitors. She took the initiative in our conversations, and the questions were all about our family, our children, or others in the church. Rarely would she mention her physical pain and personal trials. Gratitude to her God and concern for others overflowed from her heart, so that we all felt that we gained far more than we gave in every contact with this tiny champion of faith and hope. →

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- v. Hearing my description of Joy, you may be inclined to think, “Some people are just born cheerful. I envy them.” That may be true of some, but I can assure you that joy did not come naturally to Joy. She struggled often with loneliness, and at times with discouragement and confusion over God’s promises and purposes. She would have been the first to insist that the resource that made her so refreshing to others came from outside herself. Because Joy’s inner reservoir was filled by streams flowing from Jesus her Lord, her joy gave the rest of us reason to trust that her Lord and ours could and would sustain our own spirits in times of trial.”⁷
 - vi. Carson commented on keeping the priority centered on Christ, for when we do so, we stay encouraged and avoid pet traditions and overemphasizing good projects. “What we must ask one another is this: What is it in the Christian faith that excites you? What consumes your time? What turns you on? Today there are endless subgroups of confessing Christians who invest enormous quantities of time and energy in one issue or another: abortion, pornography, home schooling, women’s ordination (for or against), economic justice, a certain style of worship, the defense of a particular Bible version, and much more. The list varies from country to country, but not a few countries have a full agenda of urgent, peripheral demands. Not for a moment am I suggesting we should not think about such matters or throw our weight behind some of them. But when such matters devour most of our time and passion, each of us must ask: In what fashion am I confessing the centrality of the gospel?”
 - vii. This is not a subtle plea for a denuded gospel, a merely privatized gospel, a gospel without social ramifications. We wisely reread the accounts of the Evangelical Awakening in England and the Great Awakening in America and the extraordinary ministries of Howell Harris, George Whitefield, the Wesley brothers, and others. We rightly remind ourselves how under God their converts led the fights to abolish slavery, reform the penal code, begin trade unions, transform prisons, and free children from serving in the mines.”⁸
- b. Courageous Conviction
- i. Paul faced death and was ultimately executed for Christ sake.
 - ii. In these few verses considered today we see that Paul acknowledged God’s wonderful providence. He acknowledged God’s mercy and grace by sending him and others to share the life-saving Gospel, even to his captors. He proclaimed God’s power to uphold him (in Christ) in such imprisonment and use such for a catalyst of preaching Christ. Paul praised God for all these things because Christ was His life and Christ is victorious, thus Paul was victorious in Christ.
 - iii. You may be imprisoned for Christ or you can find Christ in prison and praise God for such.
 - iv. You may be experiencing a great loss unrelated to persecution – but you can cling to Jesus in it and give glory to God and advance the Gospel through it and because of it!
 - v. We do not need to know how God is working circumstances for our good and His glory but we can know *that* He is!
 - vi. You (or I) may think that your circumstance is an obstacle to attain peace, purpose, preservation, or prosperity. Paul could not see anything as a hindrance to him as God was working persecution, imprisonment, and even martyrdom for glory. No, there is

⁷ Johnson, D. E. (2013). [Philippians](#) (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.; 1st ed., p. 54). P&R Publishing.

⁸ Carson, D. A. (1996). [Basics for believers: an exposition of Philippians](#) (p. 27). Baker Books.

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no circumstance under the sun or even under heaven that can hinder God’s purpose, peace, preservation, and prosperity for you – if you trust in His Son!

- vii. You may think otherwise e.g. how is Alistair Begg or even Peter’s hypocrisy not an obstacle? Or, how is your sin not an obstacle to what otherwise would be good? Ill motives, hypocrisy, and other sin may not be inherently good – but such are a witness to sin’s reality and thus opportunity for Christ’s remedy. I think of another recent event where the effigy of the Baphomet statue has been defended by Christian leaders as a blessed right given to us by our Constitution. It actually can serve to awaken many to the fact that it is God not government which both affords us freedom as well as the institution of government itself – not to mention how He commands all people to forsake such idols, repent and turn to Christ cf. Acts 17:30-31.
- viii. We may ultimately disagree on certain issues of conscience, roles of government, or understanding of Biblical theology or interpretation/application. But like Paul, no matter our differences, disagreements, convictions, or scary circumstances – we can rejoice – not because we are so determined, powerful, wise, or bold but because Christ reigns from heaven and over the earth and He has enabled His own to endure whatever life throws at us for He is in us and we are in Him.

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God’s ways are not our ways for they are much higher cf. Isa. 55:8-9. We must be cautious not to allow conventional wisdom or the spirit of the age or our own selfish flesh to determine what is prudent, right, or beneficial. When we fall prey to pop psychology or even popular yet unwise Christian opinion we fail to receive the blessings of God’s peace, employment, and prosperity. In fact, following counsel and conviction which seems virtuous and wise leads to discontentment and unrest. The answer to our discontentment, disappointment, and delusions is living in Christ – keeping Him first in all things. When we keep realigning to His will and purposes, we can literally have more than this world can offer. In fact, whatever haunts, derails, paralyzes, stifles, or frightens you can be used by God to advance your maturity, obedience, and peace as well as the Gospel itself. Making Jesus your first priority requires attention and commitment but it is an easy yoke said Jesus. And the rewards elevate us to defy the gravity of all which opposes us as He advances His Kingdom through us.