

Advancing the Gospel

Series Introduction

When we think of the apostle Paul, lots of things come to mind—his deep theology in the book of Romans, his miraculous conversion experience on the road to Damascus, his “thorn in the flesh,” whatever that was. But if you were to ask Paul himself what most characterized him, he would likely burst with his passion for the advancement of the Gospel. In his writings, he said over and over that proclaiming the Gospel was his mission:

In Philippians, when discussing people who were preaching the Gospel with wrong motives, Paul said, the only thing that really matters is that the Gospel is preached. It doesn't matter if someone is doing it with wrong motives. At least Christ is proclaimed (1:18).

In Colossians, Paul says that all his toil and all of his struggle is for one thing—to proclaim the Gospel, warning everyone and teaching them, that he may present everyone mature in Christ (1:28–29).

Toward the end of the book of Acts, when Paul had decided to go back to Jerusalem even though he knew people there wanted to put him on trial for his life, he said to the Ephesian elders who were trying to convince him not to go: *But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may accomplish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God* (Acts 20:24).

This is the man who said, *“For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain”* (Philippians 1:21). The man who said he considered all of the education and status and wealth and righteousness he had to be *garbage* compared to knowing Christ (3:4–11).

For Paul, all that mattered was advancing the Gospel. Everything else was garbage in comparison. All that he did was in furtherance of the Gospel. He gave up his former life and traveled the Roman Empire to spread the Gospel. He preached, he taught, he wrote, and worked a “day job” as a tentmaker so people wouldn't accuse him of being in ministry for financial gain. He endured intense persecution; he was imprisoned, beaten, flogged, stoned, shipwrecked, endured danger from all sides ... all of it for the sake of advancing the Gospel.

In this study, we are going to walk through several letters of Paul—Philippians, Colossians, Philemon and Titus. The first three—Philippians, Colossians and Philemon—are part of the group of Paul's letters that scholars call his “Prison Epistles,” along with Ephesians. It is believed

that these four letters were written during Paul's first imprisonment in Rome (AD 60–62). Philippians, Colossians and Ephesians were all written to churches Paul had founded on his second missionary journey and Philemon was written to his "friend and fellow laborer in the Gospel" Philemon as a plea to receive back his runaway slave, Onesimus, as a brother in Christ. The last one, Titus, is one of the three letters called the "Pastoral Epistles," along with 1 and 2 Timothy, because Paul wrote them to Timothy and Titus—two of his "sons in the faith" who were pastoring churches Paul had planted.

Though imprisonment is never fun, Paul found joy in his imprisonment because he believed it was yet another part of God's master plan to advance the Gospel. The very last verse of Acts says that he stayed there for two years, under house arrest at his own expense. But that he was free to welcome any who came to see him and was able to *preach the kingdom of God and teach about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered* (Acts 28:31).

The very first thing Paul said in his letter to the Philippians, after his traditional opening greetings and prayer, was that he really wants his church to know that his imprisonment *has served to advance the Gospel* (Philippians 1:12). Both because he has been able to witness to the imperial guard and many who visited him and because other believers have become more confident in the Lord by his imprisonment and are preaching the Gospel more boldly, without fear. And in this he rejoiced. Because his life wasn't about himself, his own comfort, his own safety. It was about advancing the Gospel.

It is our prayer that throughout our study of these letters, we will not only study Paul's passion for the advancement of the Gospel, we will catch it. And be inspired to see how we, too, can advance the Gospel in our own lives.

Background: Paul and His Mission

When we first meet Paul in the Bible, his name is actually Saul. We first see him at the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7. The other men involved in the stoning laid their coats at his feet—a symbol of his leadership in the persecution of the Church, along with the phrase in Acts 8:1 that "Saul approved of his execution." Acts 8–9 describe Saul as a young man who was zealous in his persecution of followers of The Way. He "ravaged the church," went house by house and dragged them off to prison, both men and women (Acts 8:2–3). It says that he was "breathing threats and murder" against the disciples (Acts 9:1). This was Old Testament imagery for anger—snorting through distended nostrils (Psalm 18:8–15). Luke paints a picture of Saul as a rampaging wild beast. The phrase "threats and murder" denotes the two-part Jewish judicial process and highlights Saul's great violence in his persecution of Christians. He doesn't just

make threats, he executes them. Paul himself tells the people that he was extremely zealous and persecuted the Church intensely, trying to destroy it. He believed that his persecution of the Church was part of his zeal, part of his faithfulness, part of his good works, part of his righteousness based on the law. Paul was a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, persecutor of the Church. By every standard of Jewish faith, the cream of the crop (Galatians 1:13–14; Philippians 3:6).

The book of Acts sets up Saul as the greatest enemy of the Church. He was the biggest threat, the one whom they thought might very well end the movement altogether, which makes it even more amazing that he was converted at all. And then, even more amazing is that he was the one chosen to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. While Saul was on the road to Damascus, on his way to find whatever Christians he could find there and take them prisoner in Jerusalem, he had a supernatural encounter with Jesus Christ Himself (Acts 9). Jesus stopped him dead in his tracks and brought him to his knees. He could have destroyed Paul right then and there, gotten rid of the threat. But instead, he saved him, converted him to His own side, and then used him in His mission. God took His greatest enemy and made him His star player.

God told Ananias, *“This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles”* (Acts 9:15). Right there, in the very moment of his conversion, God tells us Paul’s mission—the advancement of the Gospel. Paul was the one who would take the Gospel out of Israel to “the very ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). And that’s what he did with the rest of his life. Starting the very next day. Paul began to preach to the Jews in Damascus “at once” (Acts 9:20). And he never stopped preaching till the day he died.

And, God adds, *“I will show him how much he must suffer for my name”* (Acts 9:16). The persecutor will become the persecuted. Physical persecution for our faith isn’t something we really deal with in America today. It is difficult for us to imagine. But when Paul said yes to the call, he was saying yes to beatings and shipwrecks and prison and stoning. He, of all people, knew what would be involved because he had been doing it to others. You wonder if that is why God chose him for this particular role.

From this day forward, Paul gave up his life for the Gospel. He made the Gospel his life. He traveled all over the known world to preach, teach, and plant churches. And then went back to visit those churches to encourage them, correct them, teach them, train them. When he couldn’t visit, he wrote letters to them. Though many disciples went out and spread the Gospel, the apostle Paul, by far, converted more people and planted more churches than anyone else in that first generation of disciples.

From this point on, Paul's life was never the same, and the Church was never the same. Paul took that same laser-focus he had been using to persecute the Christians and turned it toward spreading the Gospel. He was relentless. Nothing could stop him, no matter how bad things got.

Why Does Paul Focus on Advancing The Gospel?

Simply put, because it is our entire mission. It is our whole purpose of existence as a Church. Not just our church, but the Big C Church – the Church Universal. When Jesus left His disciples, He told them that their mission, now that He was leaving them, was the advancement of the Gospel. We see this in two different places in Scripture, one at the *end* of Matthew, the passage we typically call “The Great Commission”:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. —Matthew 28:19–20a

And the other at the *beginning* of the book of Acts, just before He ascended into Heaven:

You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. —Acts 1:8

The rest of Acts—“the acts of the apostles,” what the Apostles did—is about their fulfilling that mission. And really, the rest of the New Testament is all about that one mission. And if we look back, all of the Old Testament is pointing ahead to it. The Gospel is God's rescue plan for fixing His relationship with human beings and fixing this whole broken world. The word *Gospel* means “good news.” And *apostle* means “messenger.” Our primary mission is to be *messengers* of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Everything else that we do as a Church serves this one overarching mission. To advance the Gospel.