

Good Results From Bad Circumstances
Philippians 1:12-26
Part 1

We have begun our study in the book of Philippians. The theme of this book is joy. After the introduction to this epistle in **VV. 1-2**, Paul goes on to tell the Philippians in **VV. 3-8** that he constantly thanks God for them in light of their participation in the gospel from the first day they came to faith in Christ, to the time when he wrote this epistle. This joyous reality produces a great sense of confidence in Paul. He is fully convinced that they in fact are saved, that they have a personal relationship with Jesus. But Paul did not take his present assurance for granted, so he goes on to pray for the Philippians in **VV. 9-11** **“that their love would abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment.”** He prayed this prayer in order that the Philippians would continue to be filled with the fruit of righteousness until the Day of Christ Jesus. He prayed this prayer in order that the Philippians would be ready for Christ’s return. He prayed this prayer in order that he would continue to enjoy his present assurance of the Philippians’ salvation.

Hopefully in light of what we have learned from this passage, we have committed ourselves to pray not only for ourselves but also for other believers in this very same way. There is nothing more important for us and for our brothers and sisters in Christ than to finish the race and to receive the prize.

But now we are making a transition as we come to **V. 12**. Look at how the verse begins, **“Now I want you to know, brethren,”** Paul genuinely desires that his Philippian friends might “come to know” something. What was it? Let us continue to read the passage. **“That my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel.”** Paul wanted them to know that what he was personally experiencing had resulted in the greater progress of the gospel. Paul will expand this thought all the way down to **V. 26**.

What were the circumstances that he is alluding to in **V. 12**? Was he being placed on various radio and TV stations? Was he being invited to speak to national leaders about his faith? What were the circumstances that were producing such good results in respect to the gospel? Let us read **VV. 12-14**, **“Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, (13) so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, (14) and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.”** He was talking about his Roman imprisonment.

More than anything else, Paul’s desire as a missionary was to preach the gospel. And there was no other place that he desired to preach the gospel more than in the city of Rome. Rome was the hub of the Roman Empire. Rome was the key city of its day. If Rome could be conquered for Christ, it would mean reaching millions with the message of salvation. It was critically important to Paul’s agenda. We see this agenda very clearly spelled out for us in various Scriptures.

While Paul was in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, Luke records for us Paul's future plans in **Acts 19:21**. "Now after these things were finished, Paul purposed in the spirit to go to Jerusalem after he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome." From Corinth Paul wrote in **Rom. 1:15**, "Thus, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome." Paul wanted to go to Rome as a preacher of the gospel, but instead he went as a prisoner in chains. And what we may not appreciate are the rigors that Paul endured as a prisoner even before he got to Rome.

How did he become a prisoner in Rome? The record of the events that led to this imprisonment are contained in **Acts 21:17 - 28:31**. Paul's first step in getting to Rome was Paul's initial arrest and brief imprisonment in Jerusalem (Acts 21:33 - Acts 23:10).

But he did not remain in Jerusalem very long. We read in **Acts 23:12** that the Jews banded together and bound themselves under a vow, saying they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. After the Roman commander in Jerusalem was informed of this plot, he was forced to transfer Paul at night under the guard of 200 soldiers and 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen to Caesarea. Paul's second step in getting to Rome was being transferred to a Roman prison in Caesarea (Acts 23:23). When Paul was in prison in Caesarea, according to **24:26-27**, Felix "was hoping that money would be given him by Paul; therefore he also used to send for him quite often and converse with him. (27) But after two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus; and wishing to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul imprisoned." Paul languished in the Caesarean prison for two years because he would not pay bribes to be released.

After Festus replaced Felix, he quickly decided to go to Jerusalem and meet with Jewish leadership. You would think that after two years the Jews would have forgotten about Paul, but this was far from the truth. Rather they wanted Festus to bring Paul to Jerusalem for trial. Why? According to **Acts 25:3**, they wanted him to be brought to Jerusalem so that it would give them the opportunity to once again ambush him and kill him. But Festus does not accept this plan and arranges for the Jews to come to Caesarea for Paul's trial. This leads us to the third step. According to **Acts 25:10-11**, when Paul was on trial before Festus, he made an appeal to Caesar and requested, as a Roman citizen had the right to do, that his case be reviewed by the courts in Rome. So the apostle was handed over to Roman soldiers and he was placed on a ship to be taken to Rome. Paul's third step in getting to Rome was his appeal to Caesar (Acts 25:10-11). This forced Festus to make arrangements for Paul to be brought as a prisoner to Rome. This of course led to a shipwreck near the Island of Malta which delayed their arrival in Rome by three months. In fact, Paul does not arrive in Rome until **Acts 28:16**.

The Lord wants his children to take the gospel into all the world. But sometimes in our desire to do this we may find ourselves feeling very limited. Certainly the Philippian Christians could have viewed Paul in this way. And certainly they could have concluded that Paul viewed himself in that way as well. This perception is not helpful to the cause of Christ. We cannot allow ourselves to think that our circumstances, whatever those circumstances might be, will prevent us from playing a key role in the advancement of the kingdom of God. We cannot allow ourselves to think that our circumstances, whatever those circumstances might be, will prevent

the gospel message from advancing. Paul wants the Philippians to know this.

God sometimes uses strange tools to help us play a significant role in the advancement of Christ. In Paul's case, there are three tools that helped him to spread the gospel in Rome even though he was in a Roman prison. My hope for this message is that if you in fact have a heart to share the gospel of Christ and be a part of the advancement of the kingdom of God, that you would be able to have eyes to see the opportunities that exist for you in respect to the place that God has sovereignly placed you.

What were the tools God provided Paul that helped him spread the gospel?

Paul's Chains

Let us once again look at **Phil. 1:12**, "**Now I want you to know brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel.**" What were his circumstances? His circumstances certainly included all that we have just reviewed in terms of his brief imprisonment in Jerusalem, his lengthy imprisonment in Caesarea and his brief but memorable boat trip, but it also included his present imprisonment in Rome. This was the first tool that God provided Paul in helping him spread the gospel. But how could the chains that Paul was experiencing be used in this way?

Let us first of all look at the word "progress." The word translated "progress" (PROSKOPE) literally means "to strike" or "to cut" forward. It pictures certain individuals going before an army cutting a way through forests or over mountains.

Paul sees his present imprisonment as preparing the way for the gospel to spread. How was this being accomplished? Paul's chains were helping to advance the gospel through Paul's contact with the unsaved. Let us now read **Phil. 1:13**, "**so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else.**"

Who were the praetorian guard? The praetorians formed the imperial guard. Originally the group consisted of nine cohorts or in other words 9,000 troops. They were assembled originally by Augustus in 27 B.C. At first, to avoid the appearance of despotism, this special group of men were stationed outside the city and in scattered billets and barracks. In 23 A.D. under the leadership of Tiberius this force was concentrated in Rome. And over the years the size of the praetorium guard continued to increase to as many as 16,000 men. They were paid twice as much as a regular soldier. Because of their numbers and their position, the praetorian guard wielded a powerful influence in the state. The emperor often courted its favor and on his ascension would bestow liberal donations upon it.

How did the cause of Christ become well known throughout this particular group? We need to understand that when Paul came to Rome he was not placed in a typical Roman prison. He was rather, for several reasons, placed under house arrest. This is clear from **Acts 28:16**. Because he was under house arrest rather than in a typical prison, it was necessary for him to be chained to various Roman guards 24 hours a day. What particular guards was he chained too? He was

chained to praetorian guards. Each guard was very likely chained to Paul for 6 hours. How many guards potentially could have come into contact with Paul? Four soldiers a day for two years figures out to be approximately as many as 3,000 different praetorian guards.

And what would you think would be happening as he was chained to these very special, elite soldiers? They certainly were being exposed to the message of Paul. They certainly were being exposed to the gospel message, as he shared with them why he was there as he shared his personal testimony. As he was writing the various letters to the various churches. As he was receiving guests such as Epaphroditus and shared with them all that was near and dear to his heart.

And apparently these Praetorian guards did not keep this information to themselves. How do we know this? Because the passage goes on to say, **“so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else.”** If you had someone come into your life for an extended period of time who had suffered as many things as the Apostle Paul had suffered in the cause of Christ, a man of good character who claimed to have seen our resurrected Lord, I believe it would be something that you would pass to others. And they were passing the gospel story to others in their households and social circles. Paul’s chains were a tool to help blaze a trail for the gospel in the unsaved world. But this was not all.

Paul’s chains were helping to advance the gospel by energizing the church to share fearlessly. Let us read **V. 14, “and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.”** When Paul speaks of the Word of God, we should in the context of Philippians 1 consider this to be synonymous with the gospel. Certainly this would be consistent with the way Paul uses this expression in other passages such as 1 Thess. 1:6, Gal. 6:6; Col. 4:3; and 2 Tim. 4:2.

Why would Paul’s imprisonment and Paul’s chains cause this response? Let me ask you this question: Is it our responsibility to proclaim the gospel? And the answer would have to be, yes. 2 Cor. 5:20 calls all of us to be ambassadors of Christ, ministers of reconciliation. What might stop truly born again believers from doing this work? One very real possibility is fear. Somehow Paul’s imprisonment in the cause of the gospel caused them to speak the Word of God, or in other words, the gospel, without fear. Why would this be?

I believe that the answer to this question is Paul’s response to his difficulties. Rather than becoming discouraged, he was at peace. Instead of being downcast, he was filled with joy. It communicated loud and clear to the Roman church that whatever the world might do to them, they had nothing to fear. If there was any question about that, all they had to do was to look at Paul. It is not Paul’s imprisonment that makes them bold to preach the gospel; it is Paul’s response to his imprisonment.

CONCLUSION

What were the tools God provided Paul that helped him spread the gospel? The first tool was Paul's chains. Paul's chains helped to advance the gospel through Paul's contact with the unsaved. Paul's chains helped to advance the gospel by energizing the church to share fearlessly.

The same God that used Paul's chains used Moses' rod, Gideon's pitchers, and David's sling. Little did the Romans realize that the chains they affixed to his wrists might bind Paul but would release the gospel! Even as he wrote during a later imprisonment these words in **2 Tim. 2:8-9**, **"Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel, (9) for which I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal; but the word of God is not imprisoned."**

Sometimes God puts "chains" on his children to release the gospel in special ways that would not be able to happen in any other way.

Young mothers may feel chained to the home as they care for their children, but God can use those "chains" to reach people with the message of salvation. Certainly this was true of Susannah Wesley who was the mother of nineteen children, before the days of labor-saving devices and disposable diapers! Out of that large family came John and Charles Wesley, whose combined ministries shook the British Isles. Fanny Crosby could have felt chained by her blindness but used those chains to release the gospel. In time, she became a mighty force for God through her hymns and gospel songs.

The secret is this: We need to look at circumstances that we cannot change as God-given opportunities for the furtherance of the gospel and rejoice at what God is going to do instead of complaining about what God did not do.