

What Happened to Paul

Philippians 1:12-26
David H. Roper

As we continue our study of the book of Philippians, we come to verse 12 where Paul begins a brief description and discussion of his circumstances. Whenever someone writes us a letter we want to learn from it what their condition is, and so Paul includes this information as he writes to the church in Philippi. First he gives a word of greeting and an expression of thanksgiving. Then he prays for them and tells us something of his condition. He prefaces his remarks with this statement in verse 12:

Now I want you to know brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel.

Whenever you see the expression "I want you to know" or the negative side of it, "I don't want you to be ignorant," occurring in Paul's writing it is almost always an introduction to a remark of great significance. So he is not merely updating them on his condition. He wants them to know something about his condition that is extremely important. He begins by talking about what happened to him. The Greek says, literally, "I want you to know the things that have happened to me."

In order for us to know what had happened to him, we have to go back about four years. Paul doesn't tell us in Philippians precisely what had occurred, but in the book of Acts Luke tells us in some details of the events leading up to the writing of this book. Four years before this Paul had gone to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. He had been worshiping in the Temple and, because the Jews of the city thought he had brought a Greek into the sanctuary, they had dragged Paul out into the street, had beaten him very severely, and had nearly lynched him. It was only through the action of a very alert Roman soldier that his lynching was averted. Paul appeared before the local Roman authorities. A riot was hatched against his life. Forty Jews took a vow not to eat nor drink until they had killed the Apostle. So he was spirited away under cover of darkness to Caesarea where he was protected.

He languished in prison in Caesarea for two years, for there he had appeared before Felix, the Roman Governor Felix hoped to extort some money from Paul, and while he was waiting for payment he kept him in prison. Finally, because of Paul's appeal to Caesar, they put him aboard ship and sent him to Rome. On the way he suffered shipwreck and was forced to winter in Malta where he was snake bitten. In the Spring he went on to Rome and was placed under house arrest there for at least a year, perhaps eighteen months, before the writing of this book. During this time he was chained to Roman soldiers in four-hour shifts.

I am sure that few of us have ever gone through anything quite like that and most of us probably never will. You would expect a man who had undergone that kind of treatment, and who had been jailed for at least four years, to be very frustrated. Paul was a very aggressive, hard-driving, go-for-broke type of person who wanted to preach the gospel where it had never been preached before. He waited to found churches where no churches existed. But for four years now he has been hemmed in and inhibited. Yet you do not hear one word of complaint from him, not one word of discouragement. He is not depressed, doesn't feel frustrated nor impeded in any way. He doesn't feel that God has put him on the shelf. He doesn't hold up his chains and moan piteously and try to attract attention to himself. Throughout the book there is a note of confidence and excitement and enthusiasm about what God is going to do.

He tells us in this passage that his imprisonment, far from being a negative experience, has become very positive. It has issued in two results. The first he gives us in verse 12: ". . . my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel." The first result is that the gospel is spreading rapidly, and he describes that for us in verses 12 through 18. Then in verse 19 he gives us the second result; "For I know that this

[imprisonment] shall turn out for my deliverance That 1,5, the Apostle himself is being saved. So, as someone has said, "Paul was neither frightened, frazzled, nor finished." He was excited about the possibilities of his circumstances.

Let's look at the first result in more detail. He describes the progress of the gospel as twofold. The first aspect occurs in verse 13:

. . . so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else.

The praetorian guard was a unit of ten thousand picked Roman soldiers, the elite men of the Roman Empire. These were the Bill Toomey's and the Mark Spitz's of the first century. The guard was, essentially, Caesar's personal body guard. They were quartered in the Emperor's palace. They were paid higher wages than any other soldiers. They were granted Roman citizenship, which was a great honor They had been instituted by Augustus Caesar some seventy years earlier, so they had a great heritage and tradition. They were courageous, brilliant, sophisticated, strong young men. They served for 12 years and then were retired. As the years went by a large number settled right in Rome and so they became an extremely potent political as well as military force, and they enforced their will on the Senate and on the people. Their candidate was always confirmed as Emperor by the Senate. They were, essentially, the king-makers of their day a very, very powerful group of young men.

If you were going to evangelize the Roman Empire you could not pick a more strategic group with which to begin. These were the opinion makers, the leading men of the nation, the men who went in to become commanders in the military and leaders in politics. And what was happening was that those men, in four-hour shifts, were being chained to the Apostle Paul. You can imagine what that must have been like! They looked over his shoulder as he wrote the books of Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon, and hundreds of other pieces of literature which we don't have available today. They listened as he talked to the leading Jews who came in to inquire about his faith and as he shared the gospel with others who visited him. And during dull moments of the day I am sure he shared the gospel with the young man who was chained to him.

So you being to wonder who was really the prisoner, as these young men were trying to live out their quiet pagan lives but were dragged in and chained to the Apostle Paul! And one by one they were being reached and led into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ. As someone has pointed out, Caesar unwittingly became the Chairman for Evangelism of the Roman Empire. In chapter 4, verse 22, Paul sends greetings from the saints there in Rome and he says, "especially those of Caesar's household". That, of course, is the praetorian guard. One by one these choice young men, the elite of the Empire, were finding Christ.

Now who would have conceived a plan like that? Only the Lord. In our wildest dreams we couldn't imagine anything like that. If Paul had sat down to try to contrive some strategy to reach the Roman Empire he would never have thought of going this way, despite the fact that this group was so strategic because it would have been impossible for him to break into this privileged group. And yet the Lord, in his wisdom and power, worked it out so that Paul could have a witness to these young men, and so the gospel was spreading throughout the Roman Empire.

There is another aspect of the progress of the gospel that Paul describes for us in verse 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.

Not only was the gospel spreading among the praetorian guard, but the other Christians in Rome were breaking silence and were beginning to speak out. They were emboldened by the Apostle's witness and they were beginning to share the gospel wherever they went. Most of them did, but regrettably not all. Some did not. But most of them were doing so.

We have a very interesting first century description of the Apostle Paul. It is probably accurate. He is described as a very small, frail man with bowed legs and a large nose. And he was baldheaded! He describes himself as

not impressive in appearance, and he says that his personality and presentation were not particularly powerful or persuasive. He was just a very ordinary looking and sounding individual. You can imagine what must have been going on in the minds of the Christians in Rome: "If that little guy can do what he is doing right there in Caesar's palace, anyone can do it!" So they were beginning to speak out, and the gospel was spreading throughout Rome.

It was not easy to witness in Rome, no easier than it is today. Christians were despised, harassed, and persecuted. They were ostracized from the best groups. A bit of graffiti that dates from this period has been preserved on a wall in Rome. It is a picture of a young man on his knees worshiping a figure on a cross. The figure has an ass's head. Underneath is the caption, "Alexaminus worships his God." That is what the people in Rome thought of Christians. They worshiped an ass. So it wasn't any easier for them to break silence and to begin to proclaim the gospel than it is for us. But they were emboldened by what Paul was doing. They realized that by trusting in the Lord (notice verse 14: not by trusting in Paul, nor did they believe that it was Paul's persuasive ability, but by trusting in the Lord) they could begin to open up and to speak out, and so the gospel was spreading throughout Rome.

What this tells me is that there is no conceivable circumstance that cannot become an opportunity for the gospel to spread. It can be a hospital bed that you find yourself in, a wheelchair, a job that is dull and boring and grinding, a home in which you find yourself virtually a prisoner because you have small children to care for. There is no circumstance that cannot provide an opportunity for God to open doors for the spread of the gospel. Far from being a hindrance or an impediment, this very obstacle, that is, what appeared to be an obstacle, became an opportunity for God to display himself in great power through Paul and so the gospel was spreading.

Some of you may know who Brian Sternberg is. I don't know this young man personally. I know that some years back he was a very promising pole vaulter. But he broke his neck in a trampoline accident and since then has been paralyzed from the neck down and is lying in a bed up in Seattle. I understand from talking to people who live up there that Brian Sternberg's house is the place to go if you want to find encouragement and to have someone minister to you, because this young man met the Lord as a result of this accident and his life was transformed. And now he sees that bed as simply an opportunity for him to display the majesty of Jesus Christ.

So, you see, there is no conceivable circumstance that cannot become the same for us, if we are willing to make ourselves available to the Lord and to his ability to work through us. Paul says that the first result of his imprisonment, is that the gospel is spreading. It is not a hindrance. It is simply an opportunity, a door that is open to him.

There is a puzzling note in verse 15:

Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; [He is referring to the members of the Christian church who are beginning to evangelize.] the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice.

It is puzzling that Paul would be so indifferent to these people. He says that their motives are not right. I don't understand exactly what is behind this statement. Perhaps they were enemies of Paul who were trying to make his imprisonment more galling and to prejudice Nero against his case by sharing the gospel. This possibly would have caused additional trouble for Paul, who was in prison because he was preaching the gospel. Or perhaps these were people who saw Paul's imprisonment as an opportunity to gain advancement for themselves. Now that he was locked away from the church they could, by preaching, gain positions of power and authority in the church. I really don't know. And Paul says that it really doesn't matter. What matters is that the gospel is being preached.

One thing is certain. The content of their gospel was straight, because Paul would never have approved an impure gospel. It would have brought a denunciation such as in Galatians. So they were teaching the truth. They were presenting the gospel in its purity, but their motives were not pure. Yet he says, "It doesn't matter as long as the gospel is being preached."

That ought to say something to us about our tendency to judge people whom we see preaching the gospel and whose motives, we know, are not really pure. It even causes me to wonder if there is ever any such thing as a pure presentation of the gospel which is not somehow tinged with impure motives. I know in my own life that I don't know my motives. I can't judge them. Jeremiah says that "the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it?" Only God knows the heart. I am certain that much of what I do is colored by personal ambition and jealousy and envy and pride. And that is true throughout the body of Christ. Only God can judge motives. We can rejoice that the truth is going out and allow God to deal with improper motives. We are not to sit in judgment and condemn, because we simply do not know the heart. So Paul says, "I am not going to judge. I am just thankful that the gospel is being preached. It is spreading throughout all of Rome." That is the first result of his imprisonment. The second result is detailed for us in verses 19 and following:

For I know that this shall turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I shall not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death, For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

The second result is the salvation of the Apostle. He is not referring here to physical salvation. He is not talking about his deliverance from prison because of what he says in verse 20, i.e., that he wants Christ to be magnified in his body whether through life or death. It doesn't matter to him whether he lives or dies. It doesn't matter whether he falls under the executioner's ax or not. It doesn't matter whether he is free or remains in prison. He just wants Christ to be magnified in his body, and it is this salvation that he knows God is going to produce as a result of his confinement.

Three tenses of the word "salvation" are given to us in the Scriptures. There is a past salvation which refers to our justification. This secured forgiveness for sin and reconciliation to God and is the foundation for everything else that God is going to do in our lives. There is a present salvation which is taking place right now and which has to do with sanctification. That is the process we talked about last Sunday which God is working out in our lives to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ. There is a future salvation which pertains to our glorification, our eventual, complete conformation to the image of Jesus Christ, that time when we will stand before him and be just like he is.

It is this present salvation that Paul is talking about here. It is the process that God is working out in his life to magnify the person of Jesus Christ. And Paul says, "My imprisonment is accomplishing that. It is working for my salvation. It is producing a greater and greater manifestation of Jesus Christ in my life." He says, "I don't care if I live in dignity or dishonor. I don't care if I am in chains or free. I don't care if I live or die. I don't really care what is happening to me as long as it is producing in my life the character of Jesus Christ. I want the majesty, the grandeur, and the beauty of Jesus Christ to break out and enlighten this frail body of mine."

This is the same thing that Paul says in II Corinthians; "I am being given over to death daily in order that the life of Christ may be manifest in my mortal flesh." As Paul's circumstances crushed him, weakened him, canceled out the areas of human wisdom and strength that he had been inclined to depend upon, he was able to lay hold of the life of Christ and Christ's life could be seen. And so Paul says, "This is the second result of my imprisonment. Not only is the gospel making progress, but I am making progress. The majesty of Jesus Christ is being seen in my life." And he sums it up in verse 21:

For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

"That's what I have learned. Living *is* Christ. Living is sharing the life of Christ, fellow shipping with him, experiencing life with him, rejoicing with him, drawing from his wisdom, participating in his strength. That is

life for me, and death simply means to gain more of Christ."

It occurred to me last week that dying is rather like getting married. Don't press that too far! When I was engaged to Carolyn I just craved being around her. For part of the time I was in the army, and on weekends I would jump in my car and race home 1400 miles simply to spend some time with her. It was just great to be with her, to do things together and to share our lives and talk through the experiences of the week together. Then when we were married it simply meant sharing more with her.

And that is what death is like for a Christian. Life right now is Christ - experiencing everything that he is. And death merely means to share more of him. There is nothing to fear. Paul says, "Therefore I don't really care whether I live or die. The important thing is that Christ is magnified in my body, and that is what my imprisonment is accomplishing.

Well, now we come to another problem here in this passage. The first problem had to do with the motives of the brethren. This one concerns Paul's own motives. He says, in verses 22 through 26:

But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. And convinced of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again.

He establishes that there are two alternatives in life and he assesses each alternative. he says, "I am either going to live or die this year." And it appears to me that those are the two broad possibilities that we face. I can't think of any other alternative! Of them Paul says, "If I live it means three things. It means Christ sharing his life and resources. Second, it means fruitful labor for me, i.e., I will have a meaningful, purposeful life. I will be accomplishing something in the world. My life will not be empty and without point. And third, it will mean progress and joy for you." And so Paul says, "Life is just great. It means Christ. It means a ministry. And it means things happening in your lives. I'm excited about life."

"On the other hand there is death, and death," he says, "means departure," He uses a Greek term right out of his own vocation -- He was a tent maker and the term means to strike your tent, to pull your tent down. So death, for him, was merely a change of location. It was pulling down your tent and moving and setting it up someplace new. It is no big thing. It is just a departure.

Donald Grey Barnhouse in one of his books tells about a conversation he had with an elderly Scottish shepherd. This man had a terminal disease. As Dr. Barnhouse was talking to him he detected that he was very apprehensive. So Dr. Barnhouse said, "Jamie, when you were herding sheep and you saw the clouds begin to gather and shadows begin to move across the heath, and the sheep were frightened, did you get afraid?" And the old shepherd raised up on his elbow and said, "Sir, I have covenanted blood in my body. I have never been afraid of a shadow in my life!" Dr. Barnhouse took out his Bible and turned to the 23rd Psalm and read, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." He saw the light break on Jamie's face as he realized that Jesus Christ had taken upon himself the reality of death. He had only to face the shadow. So there was nothing to fear.

Paul says, "Death is just a departure, just picking up your tent and moving someplace else." And he says, "That is great, but what is even greater is that it will mean sharing more of Christ." So he says, "I really don't know which alternative I would choose." But the choice is made for him, it is really not his to make. He resolves the conflict this way. "I know that you still need me. There are still things to be done." Somehow God had revealed that his part in the church was still essential. Therefore Paul says, "I know that because you need me, I'll remain. I won't be slain in my imprisonment. I will gain my freedom because I know that my ministry is essential to you.

You see, Paul knew that the entire Roman Empire could not touch him so long as God could use him and as long as the church needed him. Augustine said, "Man is immortal until his work is done." We are immortal

until our work is done! No one can touch us, Death cannot touch you until God is through with the work that he is doing in your life and through your life.

That is why Jesus could stand before Pilate and say, "You have no power over me, You can't take my life." His work wasn't finished yet. On the cross he could say, "It is finished." The work was finished, not his life. He didn't say, "I am finished." He wasn't referring to his own death. He was referring to the work that had been accomplished. It was finished, and so he could go home. He had done everything that the Father wanted to do to him and through him, and so he was free to go home.

And that is why Paul could say at the end of his life in writing to Timothy, "I have finished the course." He knew that he would fall before the executioners ax in a matter of days or weeks because he sensed that his work was done. But until that work was done no one could touch him.

That is the way that we live, also. Therefore there can never be, for a Christian, an untimely death. We go when God has wrapped up the work he is going to do in our lives and through us, and not one second before. And when we go, others can know that it was God's time. He had finished the work.

Several years ago I was driving down Quarry Road near the Stanford campus with a young friend of mine. We were hit by a moving van. Neither of us saw it coming. He was killed instantly. I remember sitting on the curb and thinking, at first, "What a great tragedy! Here was a young man in his early twenties, very talented and artistic and creative, and he is gone." And yet the Lord gave me a real sense of peace when I realized that he had finished the work in that young man that he had set out to do. There was nothing more that he could do for him or through him. And so it was time for him to go home. So Paul says, "I know that my time is not yet come, and so I am going to remain around with you all."

We can summarize in this way: Paul says, "My circumstances, far from inhibiting me, have produced two great results. The first is that the gospel is spreading, is making progress throughout the Roman Empire, through the praetorian guard and through the church in Rome. And secondly, God is making progress in my life. This imprisonment is being used by God to create in my life the image of Jesus Christ. So it is my desire to allow this imprisonment, or my circumstances, whatever they might be, to produce that product, and to let God do whatever he wants to do in me.

The same thing is true of us. I don't know what your circumstances are this morning. You may come out of some truly grim situation. But the same thing is true of you. God will use that circumstance to spread the gospel and to magnify himself in your body. The key is in verse 20 where Paul expresses his own expectation and hope that he will "not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death," Even now! You see, we can't look at our circumstances and say, "Well, they are just too much. I can't do anything now. I will wait until things are a bit smoother." Paul says, "No, right now Christ can be magnified in your body. People can see the beauty and the loveliness of Jesus Christ in your life, and the Gospel will spread because of you."

Father, we thank you that circumstances are appointed. Paul refers to himself as "set for the defense of the gospel". His was a divine commission. He had been placed there. And Lord, we can look at our circumstances that way and see them as opportunities for the gospel to advance, and for the image of Christ to be developed in our lives. Keep us, Lord, from seeing circumstances as impediments and help us to see them as opportunities to advance. We thank you for what you are going to do through our lives, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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David H. Roper

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