

THE OPTIMISTIC PRISONER

PHILIPPIANS 1v.12-30

From these verses we can see that Paul is very clearly not a glass half empty type of person – nor is he a glass half full person. He is a glass full to the brim and overflowing person. Full of joy – whatever the circumstances. In fact the word for joy or rejoice is used 16 times in this short letter. Paul's heart was so full of joy in Christ that it could not help to overflow to those around him and those he was writing to.

In this part of the letter Paul was reporting on his situation to the Philippian Christians who had supported him. He doesn't attempt to deny that he is in a difficult situation, but his attitude is one of seeing opportunities rather than the problems. An optimistic prisoner indeed! The contrast between the obvious facts of the situation and Paul's feeling could not be greater.

“Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.” v.12

What had happened to Paul was arrest, detention for a couple of years, storms, shipwreck and detention again. He faced trial and possibly being put to death. He knew that and he knew the Philippians knew it too.

You would think that all that would make someone feel defeated, depressed, downhearted – but not Paul. He was concerned that his fellow Christians should not feel defeated, depressed or downhearted on his behalf or because it looked as though his ministry was ended and the spread of the gospel halted.

No way. Paul being a prisoner meant that he had a guard with him and (whether they wanted to or not) they heard him talk about Christ – to his visitors, as he dictated his letters, and as he talked to them directly. As the shifts of guards changed so more of them would hear the gospel.

People all over Rome would be talking about Paul, his forthcoming trial, the legal aspects of his case – for he was not an ordinary criminal but a member of a Jewish sect that had a habit of upsetting people. The

Christians in Rome would have been given added opportunities to talk about Jesus as Paul's case was discussed.

"Because of my chains most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly." v. 14

While Paul was in prison some fellow Christians were exploiting the situation and trying to increase their influence and power within the church. They were most probably those who wanted all Christians to follow Jewish laws and practices.

The Philippian Christians had their own divisions and difficulties – every church does. Paul urges the Philippians to

.."stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel". v. 27

The love that Christians have for one another and their unity in Christ is one of the most powerful witnesses to Jesus. Paul knew that well and urged his fellow Christians to live that way.

But even when that didn't happen, when some preached Christ with envy and rivalry in their hearts, he could still see that good could come – because people still heard the good news of Christ and His love for them.

"But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice." v. 18

And Paul also rejoiced because of the love and prayers of the Philippian Christians and because of the Holy Spirit. They led him to believe that he would be allowed to live and carry on his ministry. In verse 25 Paul says *"I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith."*

The other possible outcome to Paul's situation was death. And given any choice in the matter that would have been his preferred option. This passage in Philippians contains the most wonderful summary of what it means to be a Christian:

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” v.21

Paul was torn between the two options – he would welcome death because that would mean being with Christ – which is *“better by far”*

However he knew he still had work to do;

“..it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body” v.24

Paul’s life had been totally changed by his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road, and since then his life had been focused on Jesus and on spreading the good news to others.

Yes, his situation was dire, yes he had suffered and was suffering for Christ’s sake, yes he was in prison and he faced future suffering – maybe even a very painful death – and yet he could rejoice. He could rejoice because the facts of his imprisonment and suffering were vastly outweighed by the fact of his relationship with Christ. Christ was his life. Paul could see beyond the immediate facts of what was happening to him to what was the really important fact – Jesus and the love of God. Not optimistic but clear sighted and singleminded.

Paul also knew that he was not special – what was true for him as a christian was true for others too. So he could write to the Philippians that they should not be afraid of opposition.

“For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.” v.29,30

Paul knew that the Christians in Philippi faced opposition, persecution, arrest and imprisonment just like him. But he knew also that the same Holy Spirit would be with them to encourage and strengthen them. He knew too that his own experience of faith and joy in the midst of difficulty would be an inspiration and encouragement.

Paul could clear-sightedly see that the purposes of God were not blocked or hindered by his suffering and imprisonment, but in fact the gospel was spread even further. So although the facts looked bad on the surface and Paul’s feeling of joy seemed out of place – Paul looked at the really important fact that for him to live was Christ and to die would

be gain. The really important fact that Jesus died and rose again. The really important fact that the Holy Spirit assured him of God's love and his own salvation. Looking at these facts it is no wonder that Paul was joyful.

What about us? What can we learn from St. Paul and his attitude to his suffering?

We are not likely to be arrested for being a Christian in this country- but it can still be difficult, still take courage to stand up for Jesus in our secular world. When we face opposition, difficulty, struggle we can learn from Paul to face it fearlessly and even joyfully – knowing that we can gain courage and strength from the Holy Spirit and the loving prayers of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

If we feel that our plans for our Christian ministry or for the advance of the gospel have been blocked by our circumstances – then maybe we should pray for insight to see how God is using and could use us in his service – despite or even because of those circumstances.

But above all what we can learn from Paul is to focus on what is really important - the fact of God's love for us in Jesus, which never ends. And we can learn too that for us it is also true – to live is Christ , to die is gain.

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