

Christ Proclaimed; Christ Exalted

by Steve Zeisler

Have you ever observed the fact that life is not fair? Have you ever been tempted to think, "I don't deserve this. Why do these things always happen to me?"

"Hacksaw" Reynolds, the San Francisco 49'ers' linebacker, got his nickname because once, caught in the throes, of frustration, he sawed a 1953 Chevy automobile in two. I was thinking of him lately because our two family cars may be candidates for similar treatment. Our cars have broken down five times in the last month. The breakdowns all happened at the worst possible times- during driving rain storms, at night, in heavy traffic, etc.

I am not telling you this because I am pleading for your sympathy. I have been forced by the passage of Scripture we will be looking at today, and by other things that God has done in my life, to conclude that God wants us to go through such circumstances because he has some good things in mind which will result from the hassles he puts us through.

Consider Philippians 1:12-26 with the question, "What should be my response to the circumstances God puts me in?" in mind. Paul begins this section by relating to the Philippians what his own circumstances are, and I think we can learn some very important things from this passage about how to relate to our circumstances.

Now I want you to know brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well -- Known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of Cod without fear. Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; 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, thinning 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. For I know that this shall turn out for my deliverance through your prayer 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. 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 you. 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.

Paul says his circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel. We know a little about Paul's life in the four or so years before he wrote this letter. (At the time he wrote it he was a prisoner in Rome, chained to a Roman guard, facing death, perhaps, at the hand of Caesar.) In the years preceding this time, Paul's circumstances included violence at the hand of mobs, imprisonment, death threats, public ridicule, attempted extortion, a storm at sea, shipwreck, a snakebite, and now house arrest in Rome. His circumstances have been extremely difficult, trying and frustrating, but that is not his theme song in this letter. He doesn't ask, "Why is this happening to me? Didn't Christ come to make life pleasant for me?" No, Paul does not allow himself to indulge in that kind of thinking.

The question he does ask is, "How fares the gospel? Are my circumstances providing greater opportunity for the cause of Christ to go forward? If the answer is Yes, then I will rejoice, whatever the cost to me. " It was

costly for Paul to see the gospel advance, yet that brought him joy because that was what mattered to him.

The theme that runs through this book is the commitment the Philippians and the apostle Paul held in common to participate in the gospel (verse 5). They shared together a deep, heartfelt commitment to Christ. They were participants, they were soldiers together in this cause and this mattered very much to them. It is because the Philippians were so enthusiastic for what God was doing in the world that Paul can offer this analysis about his own circumstances.

There were two primary ways in which Paul viewed himself as a gospel participant, two ways in which the "gospel is making progress," as he says. The first is summed up in the phrase in verse 18, "Christ is proclaimed." People who had lived in darkness, who had not known the love of God for them, people who had not heard that God became a man and died on a cross so that they could be free heard that good news, and that gives Paul great joy.

The second way the gospel was making progress was in the advance of the truth of the good news of Christ in Paul himself. The gospel was advancing and taking over more and more areas of his life. Christ was being more thoroughly formed in him. Paul summarizes that with the phrase in verse 20, "my earnest expectation and hope that . . . Christ . . . be exalted in my body whether by life or by death." There was cost involved in both of these things; they did not come easy. Life for Paul, as it does for many of us, seemed hard, but it was worth it

Let's look at the first sense in which the gospel had advanced, the proclamation of Christ, which Paul highlights in verses 12--18. Paul mentions three ways in which he can see greater proclamation taking place. The first is in verse 13, where he says, "My imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else."

The praetorian guard were the handpicked officers who were in exclusive service to Caesar. They were the cream of the crop of the young men of Rome whom Caesar had in his personal service as a kind of police force. Because Paul was a prisoner who had appealed to Caesar, the praetorians were guarding the apostle. He could have looked at his circumstances and complained because he was chained every day to a Roman guard, but he did not. Rather, he thought, "Every day I have an opportunity with a man who is chained to me to speak the gospel to a captive audience." Four times a day, twenty-four hours a day, members of this elite corps were chained to this fascinating man and heard him talk about remarkable events which had taken place in Jerusalem. They heard Paul interview his friends; they observed him as he wrote these letters.

We learn the result of these circumstances from a delightful, almost tongue-in-cheek, reference Paul makes in chapter 4, verse 21 of this letter, and that is that many of these guardsmen had come to Christ:

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household [the praetorians who had come to Christ.]

Paul realized that his chains had become the means through which men were coming to Christ.

That does not mean that Paul liked chains. In fact, we know the contrary from a very powerful scene in Acts 26, where Paul is speaking to Herod Agrippa, who has come to hear what he has to say. Herod asked Paul, "Do you think that in so short a time you can persuade me to become a Christian?" Paul replied, "Short time or long, I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains." Then he held up the manacles on his arms. Paul did not like chains any more than you or I would like them; he did not like his circumstances, but he rejoiced that God was using them. That meant much more to him than the anguish he suffered.

Last week we heard a remarkable testimony from a family whose house burned to the ground. This family lost everything but the clothes they were wearing as they ran from their home. The father, a man new in Christ, regarded the loss they suffered as an opportunity for the gospel to advance, in that his neighbors who did not know Christ were touched by what happened. This family also has had opportunity to minister to the family

and friends of a very troubled boy who is suspected of arson. Their suffering had produced a chance for people who did not know Christ to hear, and in that they rejoiced. Joni Erickson sees her chains, her wheelchair, as an instrument through which God is leading people to Christ; and in that she can rejoice.

So the first way in which the gospel was being advanced because of Paul's imprisonment was that the praetorian guards were hearing about Christ.

The second thing Paul highlights that was causing the gospel to be proclaimed was that some men and women in the Lord were emboldened to speak the gospel. Because Paul was in prison they had now taken on the responsibility of speaking of Christ around Rome. I imagine that what happened was that the senior leader, the respected, wise and experienced Paul, was unavailable for a time so the younger ones were thrust forward.

Again, this cannot have been easy for Paul because he did not like being restricted. He wrote these words in Romans 15,

It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation. Rather, as it is written: "Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand."

Paul longed to be able to move freely about and tell people about Christ; he did not like being imprisoned in Rome. But he realized that because of this, many others were being set free to minister.

Ray Stedman has been a pastor in this church for almost thirty years. He has told me more than once that there is nothing he likes better than preaching to, pastoring and teaching this congregation. But over the years God has called him to do other things on many Sunday mornings. As a result, a number of younger preachers have come stumbling forward. Frightened, inexperienced younger men have been thrust forward and have had an opportunity to preach because the wise, experienced, senior figure was not available. Although Ray would love to be in this pulpit this morning, he is willing to let others have a chance and he rejoices in their ministry. I think that is what Paul experienced when he wrote this letter. He saw others doing the things he wished he could do, and he rejoiced for them.

The third way in which greater proclamation of the gospel occurred due to Paul's circumstances was because of the boldness of men with evil motives, Paul says. A group of people in the church in Rome were now emboldened to speak up for the wrong reasons. Evidently, this is one of the first references to politics in the church of Christ. Certain groups within the body wanted to expand their influence. Grasping, greedy individuals who, perhaps, were genuine in their commitment and in their theology, were selfishly trying to use Paul's imprisonment as a chance to siphon off the respect that people felt for him and win for themselves positions of authority and influence. Again, this was not an easy situation for the apostle.

A very poignant note is sounded by Paul at the end of 2 Timothy. Paul is in prison for the last time in his life. Winter is coming; he is lonely; he longs for a copy of the Old Testament to read. He asks Timothy to come and see him, telling him, "All in Asia have turned against me." That is a tremendously painful cry. It hurt Paul when fellow-Christians turned against him. Yet, if the gospel goes forward, if more people hear of Christ as a result, Paul is saying, then he will rejoice.

I commend that attitude to each of us. Don't ask, "Is this fair? Do I deserve this? Why doesn't somebody else have to go through this for a change?" Rather, ask the question which Paul asked of himself, "Is Christ's name being proclaimed? Are my circumstances providing an opportunity for more people to come to Christ?" As for myself, I am beginning to wonder if God has something in mind for my car mechanic. Why am I spending so much time with this man?

The second way in which Paul says the gospel advances is within the heart of a man or woman of God. The word that is translated "progress" in verse 12- "the greater progress of the gospel"-- is the same word Paul uses in verse 25, where he says, "I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith." In the first instance, the gospel progresses by being preached to people who had not

previously heard it; and in the second, the gospel progresses because there are some Christians whose hearts need to be taken over more thoroughly by Christ, who themselves need to progress in the faith.

Paul tells the Philippians about the questions he asked of himself and the wrestlings of his own heart before he came to the conclusion that, as far as he could tell, he was confident that God would send him back to Philippi to minister for their progress. What he is doing, in effect, is telling the Philippians of the progress Christ is making in him as a man of God.

We can summarize Paul's longing for growth by looking at the statement in verse 19, where he says one of two things will result, "My life may result in shame to me or it may result in exaltation to Christ." That is a good test for us also. Are our thoughts, our actions, our lifestyle resulting in the exaltation of Christ, or is shame the result?

Paul feared the prospect that his Christian life, having begun so brilliantly, might somehow peter out and become boring, useless, dry and phony. The thought of that kind of shame was abhorrent to him. On the other hand, he hungered for an opportunity to exalt and honor Christ. The former would taste as ashes to him; but the latter would be as sweet as honey. This then is the basis for Paul's self-examination: would he be put to shame, or would he exalt Christ in his body?

The striking thing is that although Paul is totally confident of the outcome of his walk in Christ, he is not for one moment complacent. He does not let his confidence produce in him a nonchalant, easygoing Christianity. If anything, this confidence creates in him more of a hunger for righteousness. In verse 6 he says he is utterly certain that God will finish what he begins; in verse 19 he says, "I know that this shall turn out for my deliverance"; and in verse 20 he says, "my earnest expectation and hope, that I shall not be put to shame in anything." Yet, at the same time, Paul has a hungry desire to exalt Jesus in his body.

Here is a statement he makes in chapter 3 which captures the same thought:

Not that I have already obtained all this or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining forward to what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3: 12-14)

It mattered very much to Paul that his life became more like the Lord's; that he be less distracted by the things of the world and more obedient to what God wanted him to do. "I strain forward to what lies in front of me," he says- despite the fact that he is utterly confident of making it. This combination of confidence and eager striving is Paul's description of the gospel, God's truth, making progress in him.

The last thing we need to notice in this section is Paul's amazing attitude that life and death are not really much different from one another. Our staff has been studying the book of Hebrews in recent weeks, and one phrase in that book has come in for some discussion among us. In chapter 2 the writer of Hebrews talks about the control the devil holds over our race because of our fear of death. That fear has enabled Satan to make countless individuals in every age perform his bidding. As they feel life slipping away from them they will do anything, promise anything, they will hurt and shame themselves in futile grasping after life.

But Paul was not concerned one way or another. He compares death with striking a tent and moving it on to the next location. What mattered to him was whether Christ was exalted or not. He is saying, "Christ could be exalted by my death. That would be good; I'd like that. Christ could be exalted by my life. That would be good; I'd like that. The exaltation of Christ is what matters to me. For the people of God there is not such a big difference between the two."

Two friends of mine have fallen in love recently. It was a whirlwind romance, where they fell in love all of a sudden. It's fun to talk to either of them because all they talk about is one another. Even when they are apart, in conversation they wonder what it would be like if the other were present. This is an illustration of what Paul is saying about his life: "For me to live is Christ. My life is filled with Christ. I talk about Christ, I think about

Christ."

My friends who have fallen in love intend to be married soon. As far as they are concerned, they are going to cross a relatively minor line then. Of course, marriage will afford them greater opportunity for intimacy, for communication with one another. But each of their lives is taken up with the other's now. Marriage will mean more of that. That is Paul's attitude about death: "To live now is Christ. If I die I will only have more. I will be more intimate with him, more able to express my love for him. It doesn't matter to me. Either way is fine with me." What a striking attitude! Paul did not care what people did to him; what he did care about is that the gospel advanced both in the world and in his heart.

Regarding Paul's discussion of life and death, there is one more thing we can mention. As far as Paul is concerned, the decision about whether he would live or die would not be made by Caesar; that decision would be made in the councils of heaven. The question to be decided would be, "Do we need Paul on the front lines any more or not?" His life would not end until God decided it was time. Paul is quite convinced of that.

I spent time last week with a woman in the hospital who has been told she has only a few months to live. I talked to her doctor, and it struck me as being slightly arrogant on his part to pronounce firm estimates about how long she will live. He is probably making a good guess, but I think for us who know the Lord our attitude ought to be, "I will die the moment the Lord wants me to, not a moment sooner. No insurance actuarial tables, no Stanford doctors, nobody is going to announce or determine that but the Lord."

Last week we saw that both the Philippian people and the apostle Paul had made a commitment to the cause of Christ which mattered very much to them; and because they were participants, this made a total difference in the way they approached life. Paul is now writing about his circumstances, telling them what is going on in his life. He does so in the context of "how fares the gospel," and he says two things the gospel is making progress because Christ is proclaimed; and, the gospel is making progress because Christ is exalted in his body, therefore, he rejoices.

We all have decisions to make about our circumstances, about the life we are called to live, about the deprivation we feel at times, about our frustrations, about wishing things were different. The Lord did not bring us into his family to make things more pleasant for us. He did so to give us an opportunity to glorify God. And if God is glorified, we can and should rejoice, then whatever is hard about the circumstances_and they were hard for Paul-- will diminish in importance. Is the gospel progressing? Is Christ being proclaimed? Is he being exalted in our bodies? We cannot ask for more.

Catalog No. 3727
Philippians 1:12-26
Second Message
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December 13, 1981

[Back to Index Page](#)

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