

Being An Optimistic Prisoner

"Series on Philippians"

In the first year of my training to be a Pastor, everything seemed to go wrong. Lyn and I had been married a year, and we were still making adjustments to each other. Lyn had trained as a teacher, for three years, but after three weeks teaching, she had to give up. That meant we were faced with having no income. This was in the days before student loans and student allowances. I was trying to cope with being a full time student, doing study at tertiary level. Then Lyn was involved in a serious car accident and our car that we had just bought was written off. Everything seemed to be going wrong. Yet as I look back on that year, I can now thank God for those events, for it was one of the ways he used to help us grow in our faith. Have you ever been through a period in your life like that? No matter which way you turned, things seemed to get worse. You prayed hard for God to change your circumstances, and he didn't. Now you can look back on those times and see what God was doing through it all and you are glad he didn't answer your prayers in the way you wanted.

1. Thank God For Your Chains.

Paul had this dream of going to Rome as a preacher, for he knew that if he could preach the gospel in Rome, the message of Jesus would spread throughout the whole Roman Empire. He did get to Rome, but not as a preacher. He went as a prisoner in chains. We might think "What a disaster!" But Paul didn't see things that were happening to him as a disaster, but as a God opportunity to advance the gospel. He was optimistic about his circumstances, because he believed that God could use any circumstance to advance the gospel. He believed that God was in control of the events of his life. Here's what he says: **"Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly". (Philippians 1:12-14 NIV)** Do you believe that God is at work when everything in your life is going wrong? Are you optimistic about God being at work when there are no indications that God is doing anything?

If you and I were Paul, we could have written a pretty good sob story. The previous four years of his life had been nothing but trouble. It had started when he collected money for the Christians in Jerusalem. A riot began, and Paul was arrested and taken to Caesarea, where he was kept in prison for two years. During that time he couldn't preach or teach. Then he went by boat to Rome, but off the coast of Malta they were shipwrecked and he arrived in Rome in chains. For at least two years Paul was kept under house arrest. He was allowed to live in his own accommodation, but he always had to be chained to a Roman soldier, 24 hours a day. He couldn't go anywhere or do anything without Roman soldier being with him. He never had a moment to himself. Every six hours the Roman soldier would be replaced by another one, who would attach the one metre of chain to his wrist and keep Paul's company 24 hours a day.

Paul had every reason to be despondent and depressed. Four years in prison with no privacy. Never a moment's peace and quiet on his own. He couldn't pray on his own. He couldn't talk in private to any one. He couldn't preach to any one. There was always a Roman soldier there. It would drive most of us mad – but not Paul. Paul had such an optimistic outlook. He was so convinced that God was ordering his circumstances that he was actually rejoicing at being in prison. It all depends on your attitude. When you are chained to a Roman soldier you can look at that in one of two ways. You can say to yourself – "I'm his prisoner and I can't get away", or you can say to yourself "He's my prisoner and he can't get away". That was Paul's attitude. "What a blessing! God provides me with a new opportunity to talk about Jesus every six hours. I've got a captive audience, and these soldiers can't get away! And look who God is sending me. The Praetorian guard. The key soldiers of the Roman Empire."

The Praetorian Guard were an elite group of soldiers in the Roman Empire. Their job was to be bodyguard to the Emperor, and all the important rulers of the Empire. The ten thousand soldiers in this regiment were the most trusted and influential soldiers in the whole of the Roman Army. The Praetorian Guard became so influential that they eventually controlled who became Emperor. Paul is saying to these Philippian Christians "Wahoo! Look where God has put me! Right in the heart of the most powerful nation on earth. In Rome he has given me access to the most powerful men of that nation." Every time he talked to a fellow Christian that visited, those guards had to listen. Every time Paul wrote a letter to one of the churches, these fellows read it. Do you realise that these Romans soldiers read parts of the New Testament before the Christians did? This letter to the Philippians and the letters to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians – these fellows read them as they were being written! Every time Paul prayed to the Father in heaven, these fellows had to listen. They watched his lifestyle 24 hours a day. They talked with him about his faith. For them, it was like been chained to Jesus.

Paul wrote to the Philippian Christians and said "The whole Praetorian Guard know that I'm in this prison for Christ. There are ten thousand influential people in Rome who now know who Jesus is. My chain of imprisonment and has become my chain of opportunity. God has put me here for the sake of the gospel. God knows what he's doing!

Do you really believe God knows what He's doing with your life? Some of you here today feel as though you are in prison. You are looking at your circumstances, and you feel trapped. But take a look at the chain that binds you and see what's on the other end of the chain. Are you a mother that is stuck at home with preschool children and you feel like that's a prison? Look at what is on the other end of the chain. Got his given you five precious years with those children, so that you can influence them for the gospel. Those five precious years will never come round again. Are you the only Christian at your place of work? God knows what he's doing. Christ is in you and the only way your workmates can get away from the Christ that is in you is to leave their job. They get an opportunity to see Jesus close up. They will find out what Jesus is like through you. Perhaps some of you listening to this are in a hospital bed. That's not a prison. It's a place where God can use you for the sake of the gospel.

Whatever happens to us can advance the gospel if we let God use it for good. There are all sorts of circumstances that we can see as prisons. Some of you feel trapped in a marriage to an unbeliever. Others feel that your failing health is a prison and you are asking God why this is happening to you. Some of you are caring for a disabled person and that caring feels like a one metre chain that you can't escape from. But what if you saw that chain as a chain of opportunity?

Henri Nouwen, was a Catholic Priest, and an internationally renowned author and speaker. He had been a respected professor at Yale and Harvard and at the University of Notre Dame. His 40 books were translated into 22 languages and he was in demand the world over to speak at conferences. But for the last 10 years of his life, Henri Nowen felt God was calling him to live and work with disabled people. He took responsibility caring for Adam Arnett. For many years Henri would go through the same routine. It took him about an hour and a half each day to wake Adam up, give him his medication, carry him to the toilet, then to his bath, wash him, shave him, clean his teeth, dress him, walk him to the kitchen, give him his breakfast, put him in his wheelchair and bring him to the place where he spent most of the day with therapeutic exercises. Adam didn't cry or laugh and only occasionally made eye contact. His back was distorted. His arm and leg movements were twisted. He suffered from severe epilepsy and, despite heavy medication; there were only a few days when he didn't have a grand-mal seizure. His speech was limited to a howling groan, and very occasionally, one big tear would roll down his cheek. Yet when Henri Nowen was asked to deliver a lecture to a world class academic audience, he would sometimes take Adam with him, and introduce him to the audience as his close friend. More than all his wonderful writings and lectures, Henri

Nowen is remembered because he showed Adam Arnett, a man with a broken mind in a broken body, that God loved him.

Who has God put with you? Instead of tugging against your chains, thank God for them. Ask him to show you what is on the other end. Ask him to change your heart rather than your circumstances. Ask him to make you an optimistic prisoner.

2. Thank God For Your Critics.

Paul had a group of believers in Rome who opposed his ministry. They were using the gospel to further their own selfish purposes. Their aim was to get people to support them, rather than Paul. They were more interested in building their own kingdoms than building the Kingdom of God. He says: ***"It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance."*** (Philippians 1:15 – 19 NIV)

It still happens today. In one town where I was the Pastor, there was a small church with big ads in the newspaper that used to say "At last, there's a church in your area where the whole gospel is preached!" Implication – the whole gospel isn't being preached in the other churches. This same church used to advertise that they were having "The revival of the century!"

What would Paul advise us when people with impure motives bag us? "Don't worry about it! Rejoice! If Christ is being preached, no matter how bad the motives, be glad about that!" What matters is that the gospel gets preached. Thank God for your chains and thank God for your critics.

3. Thank God For Your Crises.

Paul knew there was a very real chance that he would be executed while he was in prison in Rome. Yet his attitude was that no matter what happened, whether he lived or died, he wanted Christ to be exalted. Listen to this: ***"I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me."*** (Philippians 1:20 – 26 NIV) The big deal for Paul wasn't if he lived or died. The big deal was that he couldn't make up his mind whether he would bring more glory to God through living or dying. He thought it would probably be better for them if he remained alive, but it would be better for him if he went to be with Christ. At some stage in our life, each of us will face a life and death crisis. It may come more than once, or it may be in our old age, but it will come. Thank God for those crises, for they force us to make up our minds about what is important to us. In times of crisis, all that is superficial drops away, and we are stripped down to the things that really matter. It's in times of crisis that we ask ourselves, "Do I really believe that to be with Christ is far better?" Can you thank God for your crises? Can you thank Him for your critics? Can you thank him for your chains?

David McChesney, Westlake Church in Nyon, Switzerland