

Philippians 1:1-18a

Two weeks ago we heard about Paul's missionary journey in Philippi. Today we look at Paul's letter to "all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi." Here, Paul identifies himself and Timothy as "servants of Christ Jesus." Previously, the slave-girl of Acts identified Paul's party as "slaves of the Most High God."

This intentional form of self-address is used by Paul to evoke a connection in the mind of his readers, between the imperial household and the household of God. In both cases, the status of the slave is actually one of honour. In the imperial household, slaves served the bureaucracy of the government. They were state officials and even provincial governors, occasionally exercising influence and actual power. In short, to be a member of the imperial household, even as a slave, was to be a person of derived status, because the status of the slave was based on the status of his master. Because the slave was an extension of his master, whenever he spoke it was the same as hearing it from the master himself.

Paul is saying the same is true when we belong to the household of God. As an apostle, Paul is the mouthpiece of Christ his master. He does not speak on his own behalf. He speaks on behalf of God through Christ. Philippians is a joyful friendship letter from Paul to one of his congregations, very different from his other letters where he addresses problems and conflicts. This is a prison letter, and prisons in the Roman

world were no more than a glorified pit. Ancient prisons forced prisoners to look outside the prison to get even their simplest needs met. Food was one of these needs. Without the help of those outside of prison, the jailed would have starved to death. So when Paul speaks indirectly of the Philippians' assistance in this letter, he is referring not only to their spiritual encouragement but also to their material support.

Despite the letter's themes of slavery and imprisonment, this letter is known for its message of joy and rejoicing, beginning with the greeting: "Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy." The source of joy is not personal affection, but strong and effective focus on mission: "for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now."

When you put together the ideas of joy and trial, it sounds like an oxymoron. Joy should be something that takes place in pleasant times, good times, not difficult times. This may be why we have too narrow a view of joy. Paul presents us with a joy deeper than anything we could conceive with our minds. It is a joy not dependent on circumstances. It is present in the delightful and good times, as well as the difficult and painful times.

Paul's situation was not easy. He was isolated from friends and family. It was a lonely time and a frustrating time. He was unable to do what he

loved doing best. For over two years he had been kept from preaching in the synagogue and teaching in the churches. He was unable to debate the learned men of the city, which was Paul's passion and where he really seemed to "shine".

Paul had lost any sense of personal freedom. He was chained to a Roman guard by a short chain on his wrist. He had absolutely no privacy. Even the most private acts were witnessed by the guard. Every private word was heard by the guard. How demeaning and dehumanizing! Paul had many struggles in his life. In his second letter to the Corinthians, he shares some of his story:

I have been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.

Talk about trials and tribulations! It was certainly challenging for Paul to remain positive and joyful. But in spite of all that has happened, Paul

continues to rejoice. The important point is that Paul is a bold example that things do not always go well with followers of Christ. Times sometimes are difficult. Circumstances can be bad. Difficult times come to those who have been living faithful lives, yet they like to believe that godly people are spared difficult times. We seem to think that when hard things happen in life it is a sign that something is wrong with our spiritual life. Not true!

Things may be going well for you. Perhaps you are healthy, wealthy, popular and things are running smoothly. But that doesn't imply that your blessings prove that God approves of you more than others. If this were true, then it would mean that Paul and the rest of the apostles were not spiritually advanced. At the same time, it is important to see that the chains you wear do not mean God has turned away from you. Your chain may be a devastating illness, financial stresses, emotional struggles, relationship problems and you may feel that you are walking under a perpetual dark cloud. Faithful people sometimes endure chains of life just like the unfaithful ones.

This is what Paul writes to the Philippians as he faces his own difficult circumstances. "And I want you to know, my dear brothers and sisters, that everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News. For everyone here, including the whole palace guard, knows that I am in chains because of Christ. And because of my imprisonment, most of the believers here have gained confidence and

boldly speak God's message without fear."

Paul could have grumbled. He could have been bitter, or discouraged. But he wasn't. Instead, Paul declares that his circumstances are being used by God. He points to two positive results of his circumstances. First, the Imperial guard had heard the Gospel. The Imperial Guard was a group of elite soldiers, stationed in Rome. They were there primarily to protect the Emperor. These men also served as guards over the prisoners, and Paul was bound to one of these men with a short length of chain on his wrist. Every four hours the guard would change. Some of the guards were harsh, some were friendly. Yet, instead of being bitter about this invasion of his personal "space," Paul saw an opportunity. He realized that he was not only chained to the soldiers, but they were chained to him!

Paul had a "captive audience." For four hours at a time Paul could talk to these men about Jesus Christ. Six different men each day! And apparently, his witness was effective. Paul remarks that because of his imprisonment, the gospel of Jesus Christ was known throughout the whole Praetorian Guard. God used Paul's situation to "light a fire" under some of the other believers. Perhaps they were encouraged to carry on Paul's work while he was unable to do the work himself. Maybe these people were inspired by Paul's example. Whatever the reason, the message was being proclaimed more boldly because of Paul's situation. Sometimes, we can experience this kind of situation: a church

experiences a crisis and the people rally together and work through the crisis. A person contracts a disease and others rally around them with practical expressions of love, or the attitude of the person suffering spurs others on.

There are a couple of principles we can learn from Paul as to how to find joy in difficult circumstances, First, we learn that **though we cannot control our circumstances, we can control our response to them.** We don't have to despair when tough times come. We don't have to withdraw. These are choices we make. Paul reminds us that whether a difficult circumstance defeats us or deepens us, depends on how we respond to it. Theologian Dr. Paul Tournier wrote,

Good and evil, in the moral sense, do not reside in things, but always in persons. Things and events, whether fortunate or unfortunate, are simply what they are, morally neutral. What matters is the way we react to them. Only rarely are we the masters of events, but (along with those who help us) we are responsible for our reactions. Events give us pain or joy, but our growth is determined by our personal response to both.

It is our natural response to feel sorry for ourselves. It is natural for us to wonder, "Why me?" But, nevertheless, we can CHOOSE to be joyful. We can choose to trust the Sovereign hand of God even when we don't see clearly. We can choose to believe that God is indeed working for the good, even though the evidence seems illusive. It won't remove the pain,

but it will enable us to live joyfully in spite of it.

One of the most inspiring, joyous stories to come out of the 1996 Olympics was that of a runner named Derek Redmond. He ran the 400 metre race for the American team. Like most athletes, he had trained years and years for this moment. His own father had been his trainer and coach.

During the race, Redmond was 'way out front when the unthinkable happened. His Achilles tendon snapped! He stopped running, but he kept going. Rather than leave and be carried away on a stretcher, he chose to drag his leg and limp toward the finish line. The crowd stood up cheering as Redmond continued, in great pain, limping toward the finish line. He slowed almost to a stop because the pain was so great. Just then, a man ran out on the field and wrapped his arm around his waist. Redmond placed his arm over the man's shoulder, crying, and the two of them finished the race together, father and son.

Later, in an interview, Derek Redmond said, "My father was the only one who could have helped me, because he was the only one who knew what I'd been through, the only one who knew my pain." The sports metaphor Paul so often reaches for is running. Running is about endurance. It's about finishing. Many of us will finish our races limping with the father's help, but when we reach the end, we will be met by overwhelming joy!

Secondly, Paul teaches us that **we need to look for opportunities rather than wallow in our liabilities**. Paul saw an opportunity to share with those he would not encounter any other way. He used his chains as a teaching tool to strengthen others. He chose to dig deeper rather than to be swept away. We too have choices.

You can grumble about being stuck at home or you can take that time to read, write and pray - something you've always wanted to do. You can grumble about financial stresses or you can use it as a challenge to find contentment and joy in things that don't cost money. You can grumble about your illness or you can use the time to deepen your faith and to minister to others. Consider the many people we may encounter in the difficult times of life: doctors, nurses, other patients, social workers, troubled people, neighbours, friends, and others who have experienced similar sorrows. If we stop feeling sorry for ourselves, and look around for opportunities to glorify God, we will be astounded. And we will find joy as we use those opportunities for God's glory.

Paul had to endure a second trial. He was being attacked from other Christians. In the military we would say he was being threatened by "friendly fire". These were fellow believers, or at least they professed to be. They were "preaching Christ." They were not false teachers, they were teaching truth but with a contentious spirit. Paul describes the situation:

They preach with selfish ambition, not sincerely, intending to make my chains more painful to me. But that doesn't matter. Whether their motives are false or genuine, the message about Christ is being preached either way, so I rejoice. And I will continue to rejoice.

These people were not motivated by a desire to reach others for Christ. Their motive was to attack the competition! They saw Paul's imprisonment as a chance for them to get ahead themselves. They saw their service to Christ as some kind of competition.

Paul told Titus that he should warn a divisive person once, and then have nothing to do with them. Paul pleads with two women in the church at Philippi to agree with each other. Paul told the church in Corinth that cliques were stupid and destructive. He confronted false teachers, and he even stood up to Peter. We would have expected Paul to come after these difficult people. But he doesn't. Instead he simply says, "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."

So, when should we stand against difficult people and when should we back off? Paul was fierce when the gospel was perverted, he was fierce when the unity of the church was threatened, but he was passive when the attacks were personal. Paul's approach was the opposite to the way we handle things. We are immediately aroused to anger when personally attacked and often unmoved when the gospel is distorted and we want

to "stay out of it" when the unity of the church is at stake. Even when we are fierce in defending the faith, it can be a front for avenging ourselves.

Paul understood that HE was not the issue. Did he want to be liked? Most likely. Did it hurt when these men sought to use his problems for their advantage. Definitely. But Paul overlooked the personal affront and celebrated the fact that God's word was being proclaimed. God has told us not to retaliate. He has told us to leave judgment to Him. He has told us to love our enemies. And when we do what God says, we will have joy. Joy comes when we approach difficult people this way because, difficult people are diffused more quickly, when we don't fight them. If you don't "let it go" things can take on a life of their own. In the slander and opposition we are reminded of God's grace and forgiveness. Our joy is not anchored to the opinion of the crowd, but God's opinion. When we seek to love rather than strike back, we often find that our enemies become our friends.

There are three final principles we learn from Paul about dealing with difficult people. First, **we must always look at the big picture.** We are seeking to build the Kingdom of God, not a kingdom to ourselves. What people say about us is so much less important than what they say about God. We should be willing to let God use us in any way He deems appropriate if it will get the message out, even if that is at the expense of our own reputation. Our joy is anchored in God's glory, not ours.

Second, **we must remember that sometimes we have been the contentious person.** Paul never forgot that at one time he was zealous for the wrong reasons. He persecuted Christians. He sought to put them to death. He meant well, but he did wrong. Sometimes well-meaning people do hurtful things and don't realize what they are doing. We need to act with grace, even when others do not act that way toward us. Someday we may need that grace ourselves.

Finally, **we must remember that even though other people will disappoint us, God will not.** If we anchor our joy to the behaviour of others, we will ride a roller coaster all our life. People are inconsistent. We want to live godly lives, but sometimes we look more like the Devil than we do God. We need to look to God for our satisfaction and joy. We need to have a relationship with God that will still be sweet even if the entire world turns against us.

We have seen this in the lives of martyrs. They have gone to crosses to be burned, and died singing. They have been thrown to the lions and died testifying of God's greatness. They have blessed others as they have been ridiculed. They have loved even as they endured hatred. They have rejoiced even as their body was devastated by disease. They trusted God rather than men and women or the circumstances of life.

And the best example of all was a man who spent His life trying to help others. In return He was despised and rejected.

He spoke of love and was tortured and executed. And He extended forgiveness to His attackers, even as He was nailed to a cross. People will disappoint us, but God never will. He proved it at Calvary and if you give God a chance He will prove it in your life. And if we remember this, and trust God rather than others, we will have joy, even in the most difficult and challenging times. Let us rejoice!

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Holy Lord, May our love overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help us determine what is best, so that we may be pure and blameless in the sight of Jesus Christ. **Amen.**