

How God's Sovereignty transforms Set-backs into Set-ups Philippians 1:12-18

One of the greatest challenges we face as Christian men and women is *the threat to our confidence in the goodness of God when circumstances turn bad*. Therefore one of the greatest needs we have is the faith to believe that God exercises providential control over every dimension of our lives and will transform even the worst and most aggravating of tragedies into an opportunity for the advancement of the gospel and the praise of his glory.

The passage that we are looking at today is one remarkable example of what I have in mind. As you know, Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians while in prison. Scholars differ as to whether he was imprisoned in Rome or Caesarea. I'm inclined to believe it was in Caesarea that he found himself, but if it turns out to have been in Rome, the principles remain the same.

The circumstances through which Paul found himself incarcerated in Caesarea are recorded for us by Luke in Acts 22-25. Having been arrested while in Jerusalem, Paul's enemies were plotting to assassinate him. So determined were they on ridding themselves of Paul that Luke tells us they took an oath neither to eat or drink until he was dead.

Paul's nephew, his only relative ever mentioned in Scripture, caught wind of the plot and informed the Roman authorities. Paul was quickly transferred to Caesarea and there was entrusted to the oversight of the governor, a man named Marcus Antonius Felix. The year was 59 a.d. For the next *two years* of his life, Paul remained a prisoner in Caesarea and from that place wrote this letter to the Philippians that is the focus of our study.

In the meantime, the Philippians had undoubtedly become concerned with Paul's condition and welfare as well as the progress of the gospel. Will the message of the good news come to nothing? Will the church disappear? Is Paul's ministry at an end? After all, the Apostle Paul himself is behind bars. What can God possibly accomplish with his beloved servant in chains?

God's sovereignty in our setbacks (1:12-14)

The reason I know that the Philippians were asking precisely these questions is because of what Paul says in v. 12. His opening words, "I want you to know, brothers" (v. 12a) strongly suggest that the Philippians had sent a message with Epaphroditus (2:25) or someone else expressing their concern for Paul's welfare and asking for information on what had happened to him. They wanted to know about his condition and the circumstances that had led to his imprisonment.

Paul's chief concern is to reassure them that what had happened to him *in no way hindered the progress of the gospel, but in fact had served to advance it!* Paul is unusually silent about what exactly had happened to him. He refers to his experience rather cryptically as "*what has happened to me*" (v. 12b) or as the NASB renders it, "*my circumstances.*"

Even more remarkable is *the complete absence of self-pity*. He makes no attempt to generate compassion for himself. There's not a single word of complaint. There's no griping about the Romans, no bitterness toward other Christians, no resentment toward God; no "why me, Lord?" Rather, Paul looks on his situation in prison as *a divinely orchestrated set-up* designed to get the gospel into a place where it otherwise might never have reached.

[Permit me to get ahead of myself in the text by directing your attention to v. 16 where Paul says, "I am put here for the defense of the gospel." He doesn't mean "put here" by the Roman military or by a civil authority. The word might better be translated, "I was appointed" or "I was destined" by God to be here in these chains.]

The Philippians undoubtedly thought that Paul's imprisonment would be a hindrance to the gospel. After all, *what could Paul possibly do in chains?* Paul's response must have come to them as something of a shock: "Actually, my

chains, rather than serving as a barrier to the proclamation of the good news have **enhanced** the spread of the gospel." The word translated "advance" (v. 12b) was often used to portray people cutting down trees and removing barriers in order that an advancing army might continue its march forward.

Here is what Paul is trying to teach them, and what I hope you and I can learn as well: ***Those things which from the human perspective seem to be obstacles of defeat are by divine providence transformed into instruments of victory.*** Other biblical examples:

Joseph was sold into slavery by his own brothers, yet God used his presence in Egypt to prepare the way for his people to find hope and food and safety in the midst of famine.

At the time of the Exodus, the people of Israel found themselves trapped by *Red Sea*, seemingly easy prey for the armies of Pharaoh. God used what appeared to be an inescapable tragedy to magnify his power and authority.

Job's afflictions appeared to give Satan grounds for questioning the value of obedience, but Job's faith pointed to the sufficiency of God in even the worst of pain and trial.

No greater example of this principle can be found than what we see in *Jesus* himself, whose death on a cross appeared to be the end of the kingdom of God and any hope for deliverance and forgiveness. Yet Paul declares in Colossians 2 that the instrument of his death, the cross, was, in a gloriously ironic twist, the very means by which God defeated and humiliated the demonic forces and brought us freedom from guilt and condemnation.

Folks, this is what God does! This is what he does not only in the lives of Joseph and Job and Jesus and Paul, but in your life as well. The most adverse of circumstances, the most formidable of enemies, the most agonizing of pains, the most confusing of encounters can all be turned by God to the greater glory of God and the good of his people.

[Allow me to share with you my own personal journey in this regard, and the way that God sovereignly orchestrated my life and several incidents along the way that I initially perceived as devastating setbacks only later to discover that they were loving and divinely arranged set-ups.]

But what ***proof*** is there that this principle is valid? How did this occur in Paul's case? Well, in vv. 13-14 Paul tells us. There he cites *two effects of his imprisonment*, two examples of how his situation and adversity were used of God for success.

(1) the effect of Paul's imprisonment on outsiders - v. 13

After his arrest and being shut away in prison in Caesarea, one could easily conclude that this was the end of Paul's ministry, especially as his imprisonment dragged on day after day, week after week, month after month. If ever there were circumstances ripe for producing bitterness and doubt and disillusionment, this was it. But in God's providence, **the place** of his imprisonment as well as the **length** of it both served to thrust the gospel into higher levels of Roman society than it had ever reached before. Roman military officers, centurions, civil officials and their families were confronted with the gospel. We know that two Roman governors, Felix and Festus, as well as King Herod Agrippa, together with their wives, all heard the gospel that they otherwise might never have known. Paul refers to "all the rest" who heard that he was in jail "for Christ" (v. 13b)! My guess is that Paul was the talk of the town!

Note what Paul **does not** say or conclude from his imprisonment:

- "God has forgotten me"
- "I must have sinned horribly to deserve this"
- "I guess this means I'm no longer an apostle. God has rescinded my calling"
- "God hates me"
- "I was so looking forward to years of usefulness in the kingdom, but that's impossible now"

- "Satan has really won a victory in all this."

What, then, might they have seen in Paul that caught their attention? His patience? His gentleness when treated harshly? His courage? His unswerving loyalty to the gospel? His willingness to endure such mistreatment "for Christ" (v. 13b)? Could it have been that although innocent of any crime he was willing to be held in bonds if it meant the opportunity for others to hear about Jesus? Perhaps they *eavesdropped* on conversations Paul had with other prisoners. Perhaps they listened attentively as he dictated this very letter to the Philippians that you and I are studying? Maybe they were baffled by his prayers or more so by his songs of worship and praise?

I can't help but imagine that with each changing of the guard there were comments that passed between them: "Man, you'll never believe what I heard this Paul guy saying today. We served him food that would make anyone else puke, but he bowed his head and gave thanks to his God for lunch! What's with this guy? Actually, what's with this *God?*"

How could Paul have possibly maintained this perspective? Surely, the answer is found in what he would later write to Timothy during his final imprisonment in Rome, perhaps only days before he was beheaded by Nero:

"Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory" (2 Timothy 2:8-10).

One can imagine that when the soldiers saw Paul's joy in Jesus in spite of the pain and hardship he endured they would have taken the news back to the barracks, back to their homes, wondering aloud:

"You won't believe this guy we've got in chains. He's nothing like the other prisoners. He doesn't complain. He doesn't curse his God. He doesn't threaten Rome. He looks on the whole experience as an opportunity to share with us about this Nazarene carpenter named Jesus. He says he's the Son of God. I'm not exactly sure what to make of this, but watching this 'Paul' guy bear up so well under such oppressive conditions makes me wonder. I can't help but admit that I'm curious."

Consider the circumstances encountered by Jackie Pullinger . . .

All this reminds me of something that most of us would just as soon forget, that ***there is no greater or more powerful witness for Christ than that which comes through our suffering and experience of adversity.*** When it's easy to be a Christian, few will take note. It is only when, according to the world's standards we should give up and become bitter and fall into despair, we instead make Christ known all the more and with joy, that the gospel advances and commends itself to the unbelieving heart.

Perhaps we should all pause for a moment and take stock in our own lives. Perhaps we should think about the worst and most unjust and inconvenient circumstances we currently face, and then ask ourselves this painful question: ***"Would anyone be interested in Jesus Christ after having watched how I reacted or listened to my words while I suffered all this?"***

(2) the effect of Paul's imprisonment on insiders - v. 14

But Paul's endurance and joy in Jesus not only had a massive impact on outsiders or unbelievers but also on insiders, that is to say, on people in the church. We see this in v. 14.

Evidently, the Christians at Caesarea had preached and borne witness to Christ and shared the gospel before, but *cautiously, timidly, tentatively*. Now they took no concern for their welfare or reputation. How do we account for this? It would appear that the example in Paul's life of the sovereign grace of God in the midst of adversity had a miraculous impact on their hearts. The ***irony*** here is that one would think that Paul's imprisonment would have the opposite effect, that it would be a deterrent to further witness, for in Paul they would see their own fate if they opened their mouths. But no! Seeing his adversity, they preach more!

Why? When they looked at how Paul viewed his setback and how he interpreted it as subject to God's sovereign, providential purposes, they suddenly realized it was foolish to be afraid of the same thing happening to them. As D. A. Carson put it: "***A whiff of persecution sometimes puts backbone into otherwise timid Christians***" (*Basics for Believers*, 24). My guess is that they reasoned among themselves something like this:

"Oh, I get it. Rather than view human hostility and opposition to the gospel as something outside God's control or a sign that God is angry or has abandoned us or an indication that we blew it and will never be of use to God again, we see that this is how God usually does things. He doesn't simply work *in spite of setbacks*. He works ***through*** them. When we look at how Paul responded to his imprisonment and what God did through his chains, we realized that God chooses to work through these means so that he will be assured of getting the glory. If that's what happening here, let's go for it!"

Once again, let's not allow this moment to pass. Perhaps we should once more pause and consider the adverse circumstances and the trials we currently face or soon will. It may be a relational breakdown with a particular person. It may be physical pain or some recurring affliction or the chronic discomfort some live with every day. It may be a demotion at work or the loss of a job. It may be utter confusion about what God has in store for us next. It may simply be that nothing appears to be turning out the way we had hope and prayed for.

How shall we respond? What can we learn from Paul's experience?

The Proclamation of Christ (1:15-18)

Paul's reference to the renewed boldness among the Christians in Caesarea in preaching the gospel leads him to an explanation that might initially strike us as somewhat odd. I want you to notice two things.

First of all, it is clear from vv. 15-17 that in Caesarea there were two groups of preachers, differentiated by their attitude toward Paul. One group loved him. They were motivated by good will and sincerity, as well as a realization that Paul had been appointed even while in prison to preach the gospel. The other group preached from envy and strife and selfish ambition, all with a view to increasing Paul's suffering and distress. Note that Paul says they "*think,*" or better yet, they "*suppose*" or "*imagine*" that I will be afflicted or disturbed or distressed by this. Far from it, says Paul. My only concern is that Christ is being preached and in that I rejoice (v. 18)!

Second, don't miss the fact that both groups preached the same message: Christ! Note carefully that "Christ" is mentioned as the content of their preaching three times in this paragraph (vv. 15, 17, 18). This means that the substance of their message was sound. *These aren't pagans* blaspheming the name of Jesus. *These aren't heretics* spreading false doctrine. These aren't men, like the false teachers in Corinth, who proclaimed what Paul called "another Jesus" (2 Cor. 11:4). They don't teach "another gospel" (Gal. 1). There is no theologically substantive difference in the message that these two groups proclaim.

But don't draw the wrong conclusion from what Paul says. He's not telling us that we need no longer be concerned about the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses or those theological liberals who deny that Jesus is God incarnate. It is always appropriate to ask anyone who professes to be a Christian, "Tell me, please, *which Jesus* do you preach?" Rather, Paul's point is that ***once it is determined that they preach the Jesus of the NT, once it is determined that the gospel they proclaim is the biblical gospel, we should be grateful for their work even if their motives are skewed and their style is offensive.***

Thus the sin of this second group was not that they believed and preached a gospel different from the one Paul preached. Their sin was that they were hostile to Paul himself. They didn't like him! ***They were pro-Christ but anti-Paul!*** That is horribly inconsistent and unacceptable. But at least they preached Christ!

This raises a couple of important questions.

First, why did they feel this way about the apostle? Some think that these people wanted Paul to suffer martyrdom, believing that this was the only legitimate goal for an apostle. Thus they were frustrated with the steps he took in both Jerusalem and Caesarea to preserve his life (you may recall that when arrested he appealed to his Roman citizenship). Most likely, however, they were simply guilty of ***petty jealousy***. They *envied* Paul and his influence and

his superior spiritual gifting. They were upset with all the *attention* he received. In any case, they purposely preached in a way they *thought* would be upsetting to Paul.

Second, why did Paul feel it necessary to uncover them and disclose their shortcomings to the church at Philippi?

What benefit would come from this? Let's be honest and acknowledge that Paul doesn't provide us with an answer, so we are left to speculation. My best guess is that Paul spoke of them simply to teach the Philippians an important lesson, namely, that such people do exist even in the church of Jesus Christ and that *they should neither be surprised by it or put off by it*. More important still, he wanted them to understand that the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, when preached, has the power to save and transform the lives of sinners, even though the message comes from the lips of those who are sinfully motivated. ***The virtue and saving power lie in the message, not the messenger.***

Paul in no way endorses their motives. He clearly disapproves of their heart attitude: after all, he uses some pretty harsh terms in describing them (*envy, rivalry, selfish ambition, pretense*). He wishes it were otherwise. He much prefers that the messenger's heart be in tune with the message proclaimed. But in the final analysis, he wants the Philippians to know that the gospel is still being made known even when God uses broken and selfish people.

To put it simply: what ultimately matters isn't what these people *think* about me, says Paul, but what they *say* about Jesus. In the final analysis it isn't of paramount importance to Paul that he be honored or respected by everyone in the church. "Our own comfort, our bruised feelings, our reputations, our misunderstood motives – all of these are insignificant in comparison with the advance and splendor of the gospel" (Carson, 25).

By way of practical application, don't be defensive if people are critical of Bridgeway and the way we embrace and pursue our calling as a church. Your only concern should be, "Are we faithful to the NT gospel?" And more important still, ***don't be critical of other churches in OKC*** simply because they don't worship like we do or don't orchestrate their small groups like we do or because they have a different philosophy of missions or church government or because they invest in a physical structure that differs from ours. That doesn't mean those issues aren't important. It doesn't mean we shouldn't care about them or discuss them. It simply means that ***something else is of far greater importance***. It simply means that if we discover they are preaching the same Jesus and the same gospel as we see in the NT, rejoice and be thankful!

Conclusion

There are two primary lessons that we must take away from this passage.

First, only a blind man could fail to see how robust and vibrant and life-changing Paul's perspective was on ***the sovereignty of God***. And know this for sure: Paul didn't affirm God's providential control only when circumstances turned out for his comfort and prosperity. He's lost everything: his freedom, his platform, his possessions, his reputation, and yet he knows he's precisely where he is because God appointed and placed him there. Can you and I say the same thing?

Second, we must become people of ***a singular passion***: Christ and the good news of what God has done for sinners through him. Whether or not our names are praised or vilified, whether our friends remain true or eventually betray us, whether people would pray for our release or our deaths, one thing must remain of singular and paramount importance: Is Jesus Christ being proclaimed truthfully? Is the gospel being made known? Is God being glorified?

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