

Read Scripture: Philippians 1:12-18

Bible Study Topic: Triumph in Trouble

REFLECTION

Control is big deal to most folks. Whether mentally or manually (using tools like a Day-Timer or a PDA), most of us devise daily "to do" lists and weekly agendas. How do you typically respond when life doesn't cooperate with your plans?

¹² Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, ^[b] that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard ^[c] and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴ And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

¹⁵ It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶ The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸ 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,

While awaiting trial, Paul was allowed to rent private rooms, but he was chained 24 hours a day to a soldier. As each soldier took his turn chained to Paul, he was a captive audience hearing Paul pray, read scripture, dictate letters, and receive visitors. Paul may have preached directly to the guards and taken a personal interest in them. A prisoner who cared about his guards and who had such strange beliefs as Paul had would have aroused interest among the soldiers. Paul spent two years under this house arrest in Rome (see Acts 28:16, 20, 30-31)

How does Paul feel about his circumstances (see 1:18)

I think there are a couple of principles we can gain 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. 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 [YANCEY, Searching for the Invisible p. 281]

It is our natural response to feel sorry for ourselves. It is natural for us to wonder, "Why me?" But 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.

Second, **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 that would strengthen others. He chose to dig deeper rather than to be swept away. Let me give you some examples,

- you can grumble about being homebound or you can take that time to do the reading, writing and praying you've always wanted to do.
- you can grumble about financial stresses or you can take it as a challenge to find contentment and joy in things that don't cost money.
- you can grumble about your physical condition or use your physical condition as your motivation for getting started on that exercise program you've been putting off.
- you can complain about how empty the house is with the kids gone or you can travel or look for new ways to occupy your time.
- you can grumble about your illness or you can use the time to deepen your faith and to minister to others.
- you can complain about living in a small town or you can draw from the benefits of the small town.

Think about the many people we may encounter in the difficult times of life we don't see at other times: doctors, nurses, other patients, technicians, judges, police officers, social workers, troubled people of many types, other students, neighbors, friends, others who have had a similar sorrow. 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.