

CLEVERLY DISGUISED OPPORTUNITIES

I.

George Galatis grew up in a Greek Orthodox home but was never especially religious. Church to him was a big bore. His father did read the Bible regularly, and that left a positive impression upon George. In 1977 Galatis graduated from the University of Tennessee with a degree in engineering. He moved to Connecticut, and in 1981 he got married. The following year he earned a Masters Degree in nuclear engineering and then went to work for Northeast Utilities.

According to George, **“I did not start looking into my relationship with Jesus Christ until I was 28 years old, when a friend gave me tapes from a Texas Bible teacher. A former military man, he presented the judgment side of God, and as a result I used it as a book of judgment and not of love. Though I learned a lot about the Bible, I really didn’t grow any closer to God.”**

A couple of years after that George encountered the most difficult trial in life that he had yet experienced. He began to have problems in his marriage. In 1988 his marriage fell apart. George was wiped out. He began attending a divorce recovery class in a church south of Hartford, Connecticut. He says, **“In 1989 I fell on my knees and put Christ on the throne of my life.”** George began to grow spiritually. His life started to come together.

Tough situations in life can make us or break us. They make some people better. They make some people bitter. They result in the promotion of truth by some and the withdrawal from truth by others. Difficult circumstances draw some people closer to the Lord, and drive others away from Him. For Christians the times of greatest suffering are often the times of greatest advance. Even pandemics can serve a purpose in God’s sovereign plan. If we can learn to recognize difficult circumstances as cleverly disguised opportunities for advance, great things can happen.

Last week, as we began a study of the New Testament book of Philippians, we saw that the Apostle Paul (PROJECTOR ON--- SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY) visited Philippi in Greece on his second missionary journey in about 51 AD. He and Silas, along with co-workers Luke and Timothy, established a church there. (PAUL IN ROME) Ten years later Paul was hauled off to Rome to stand trial for charges of causing a riot in Jerusalem. The apostle was put under house arrest, apparently chained to a Roman guard.

The Philippians heard about Paul’s situation and were understandably concerned. Here was the founder of their local church and the leading spokesman for Christianity in the Gentile world now a prisoner in Rome. So they sent one of their leaders, a fellow by the

name of Epaphroditus, to encourage him and to bring money to him and to find out how he was doing.

I.

So Paul sent this letter back to Philippi with Epaphroditus. It provided them, and it provides us, with advice about how to live above our circumstances. We looked at his introductory greeting and expression of love last week. Now in vv. 12-14 Paul tells the Philippians that **WE NEED TO SEE TOUGH CIRCUMSTANCES AS OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH.** (I.WE NEED TO SEE TOUGH ...) In v. 12 he says, **“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel...”**

The Philippian Christians might have expected Paul to talk about how his circumstances (PROSKOPEN/PROKOPEN) had proven to be a “hindrance” to the gospel, which in Greek would be *proskopen*. But instead his circumstances had proved to be an “advance” for the gospel, which in Greek was *prokopen*.

Before he makes any kind of reference to his own personal living conditions or feelings about them, he talks about the progress of the gospel. There was great news on that front. The gospel was advancing. It is always easier to understand difficult circumstances if we can see some reason or purpose for them. Here Paul interprets the meaning of his circumstances for his readers and explains that there is a purpose for them. Because of his situation growth related to the gospel was occurring on two fronts.

A.

First, there was **QUANTITATIVE GROWTH.** (I. WE NEED TO... A. QUANTITATIVE GROWTH) In v. 13 the author finishes the sentence begun in v. 12, **“...so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.”** Paul has made it clear why he is a prisoner. It is not because of any misdeeds on his part, but only because he has been preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. He has said that with words, and those words have been supported by behavior that backs them up. Left unsaid is the reality that service for Christ does not guarantee a problem-free life.

The recipients of this message were the whole imperial guard, which is more literally the “praetorian guard.” The Praetorian Guard (PRAETORIAN GUARD) was the most elite army unit in the Roman Empire and probably the entire world. It had become a permanent unit during the reign of Caesar Augustus, prior to the time of Christ. Its members had to be of Italian descent and were required to meet strict physical requirements. They had the best equipment and were paid twice the amount that other soldiers received. At this time there were about five or six thousand troops in this unit. The Praetorian Guard was based in a camp northeast of Rome and was primarily responsible to accompany the emperor wherever he went, to maintain peace in Italy, and to protect the palace. Also these troops were responsible to guard Roman citizens who had made a legal appeal to the Emperor and had come to Rome for trial from one of the outlying provinces.

Picture what must have gone on in their involvement with Paul. What must have been a constant pain to Paul and an invasion of privacy was also an opportunity. One, or possibly two, guards were chained to Paul 24 hours a day in perhaps six hour shifts. Paul was confined to a house, but people were allowed to come to him. So those guards were there for prayer meetings, for evangelistic services, and for teaching services. They heard Christians from other parts of the empire report to Paul on the progress of Christianity. They may have even seen Paul heal people of physical problems. They listened to him dictate letters to Christians in other parts of the empire. Probably a guard, or two guards, listened to Paul dictate this very letter. They were beside Paul when he prayed. They probably heard Paul tell them directly about their need to trust in Jesus as their Savior.

This Paul was not their typical foul-mouthed rebel or murderer. He was a religious fanatic--- but a fanatic with integrity and intelligence and power and love. Paul created quite a stir. He and his message became a hot topic of discussion. The stir and the discussion increased as some of the soldiers began to trust in this Jesus themselves and to witness to others with their words and changed lives.

The praetorian guard had a high position in Roman society, and the impact of many conversions to Christ would have been felt beyond the army. The Roman officials preparing to consider Paul's case would also have had to study the Christian faith. In some periods in Roman history the emperor himself heard these appeals. But at this time, when Nero was on the throne, other high officials in government seem to have functioned as judges in these cases. So they would have heard about Paul. In Philippians #4 v. 22 we find out that there were even people in the emperor's own household who had become followers of Jesus. (PHILIPPIANS 4:22) In that verse Paul says to his Philippian Christian audience, "**All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.**"

Our congregation, more than most, recognizes the opportunities that imprisonment provides for the gospel. Besides our chaplains and our Bible studies, we have seventeen prisoners scattered around the state who have requested copies of these sermons. (PROJECTOR OFF) Lois faithfully mails them out to them every other week.

Thus one Jewish Christian fanatic named Paul was delivered into the care of the Praetorian Guard. Thus one elite Roman legion was delivered into the care of the Apostle Paul. Originally Jewish leaders in Jerusalem had brought charges against Paul of causing a riot, with the intention of stifling him and his message about Jesus. Instead, the gospel is getting an even wider hearing, now with the top level of society and government.

According to several Christian groups the two countries which have the fastest growing Christian populations in the world are Iran and Afghanistan. Besides being Islamic countries, both nations have been characterized as being among the countries of the

world that display the most persecution toward Christians. Thus it is that difficult circumstances do not necessarily stop the progress of the gospel.

We likewise need to regard trials as opportunities for the advance of the gospel. In the midst of stressful times we may meet new people, we may have people open up to us with spiritual questions who have not done so before, we may have chances to tell people about the importance of faith in Christ in ways that normally do not come along our path. These trials may be cleverly disguised opportunities for the advance of the gospel. They may result in quantitative growth.

B.

Tough circumstances may result not only in quantitative growth but also in QUALITATIVE GROWTH. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. A. B. QUALITATIVE GROWTH) That seems to be indicated in v. 14: **“And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.”** The status of Christianity in Rome at this time was shaky at best. Many regarded Christianity as a sect of the Jews, and Jews were not very popular. Ten or fifteen years earlier the emperor had kicked all of the Jews out of the city of Rome. The Romans were willing to tolerate other religions as long as they would also acknowledge the Roman gods. Christians could not do this. Many of the Roman Christians were understandably hesitant in telling others about Jesus. They were likely to be branded as unpatriotic.

Paul’s boldness in the midst of his difficult situation proved to be an encouragement to these other Christians. Christian psychologist Jay Adams cites a study that was done of children who were afraid of dogs. The psychologists experimented with a variety of different techniques to discover what the most effective treatment would be. They found out that the most effective method was to bring in other kids to play with their dogs and to do a variety of different activities with them. The fearful children observed their example and lost their own fear of dogs.

That same kind of principle was at work at Rome. The timid Christians at Rome saw Paul’s bold witness in the face of persecution and were encouraged to follow his example. When we keep the faith in the midst of trials, we can be an encouragement to others.

Tough circumstances are opportunities for growth. Often there are opportunities for others to be exposed to the gospel. Then there is spiritual growth than can occur, both in ourselves and in others. In 1992 George Galatis was sent to work at the Millstone nuclear power plant (MILLSTONE) in Waterford, Connecticut. He was there for only a short time when he began to discover serious safety problems at the plant. Among other problems he found that there were too many used radioactive fuel rods that were stored in the spent fuel pool. He found that Northeast Utilities, the parent company, was unloading all of their just used fuel rods into this pool at the same time instead of by a staggered schedule as government and industry guidelines required. The potential

danger was that the pool could boil and release dangerous radioactive gas into the atmosphere.

George wrote a memo to company officials about the problems. They sat on it. George pressured them some more. Finally they agreed to have an outside consultant come in to look at the problems. The consultant backed up George. Nothing was done. George wrote more memos. A second consultant was called in. This consultant again supported George's concerns. Nothing was done. George wrote more memos. A third consultant was called in. Again there was agreement with George's safety concerns.
(PROJECTOR OFF)

While this process went on, the company began to engage in subtle forms of harassment. George's performance evaluation was downgraded. He was offered transfers. He didn't get bonuses that other employees did. When he entered a room full of other employees, they would suddenly become silent. George felt compelled to hire a lawyer at his own expense to deal with the legal complexities of the situation.

Circumstances were tough. But tough circumstances are opportunities for growth. George had become very active in a local church. In 1992 he also remarried. According to George, his involvement with the Promise Keepers movement was a tremendous source of encouragement.

George Galatis later said, **"When I discovered the ethical breaches at Northeast Utilities in 1992 I felt God was challenging me to be an ethical role model for other men. God seemed to be saying to me, 'This is a test of your faith. I want you to stand in the gap like Ezekiel.'"** George grew in faith. But his boldness also gave courage to others, even as Paul's boldness encouraged his fellow believers. Key among those influenced by George was another senior engineer by the name of George Betancourt. Betancourt had worked at Millstone for a number of years. When George Galatis began to discover the safety problems and talk about reporting them to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Betancourt responded, **"Do that and you're dogmeat."** But as he watched Galatis and saw his integrity and commitment, Betancourt risked his own career and stepped forward to support Galatis.

II.

Let's go back to our text. In vv. 15-18 the example of the Apostle Paul teaches us that **WE NEED TO FOCUS ON CHRIST IN THE FACE OF NEGATIVE REACTIONS.**

(PROJECTOR ON--- II. WE NEED TO FOCUS ON...) When what God is doing in our lives does not sit well with others, we simply need to trust Christ and do the right thing.

A.

Verses 15-17 of Philippians 1 indicate that **SPIRITUAL GROWTH WILL PRODUCE NEGATIVE REACTIONS.** (II. WE NEED TO... A. SPIRITUAL GROWTH WILL...) When the gospel is advancing and God is at work in our lives, there will be others--- even fellow believers--- who may give us a hard time. Paul says, **"Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. 16 The latter do it out of**

love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.”

The motivation behind some of these gospel preachers was lousy. They were motivated by envy, rivalry, selfish ambition, and a desire to cause Paul trouble. The doctrine that they were presenting was apparently correct, but their motives were not.

We are not told why these other preachers were jealous and mean-spirited. Probably there were already house churches in Rome when Paul arrived. He was a dynamic individual. At times he displayed supernatural power. Perhaps a lot of the Roman Christians started spending more time at Paul's house than at the homes of some of the other leaders. Perhaps these church leaders got jealous of the attention that Paul was receiving. Perhaps they questioned his techniques. Perhaps they raised questions about his imprisonment. Perhaps they voiced the view that bad things, like jail time, never happen to Christians who are truly walking with God.

In any case v. 17 says that these preachers were motivated by a desire to glorify self rather than to glorify God. Some were preaching from good motives. They were doing it out of love and good will. They appreciated Paul, cooperated with him, and recognized that God had sovereignly arranged that he be a prisoner in these circumstances so that he might have the opportunity to defend the Christian message before the highest officials of the empire.

B.

What was Paul's attitude? In v. 18 Paul teaches us that **IN THE FACE OF NEGATIVE REACTIONS, FOCUS ON CHRIST**. He writes, **“What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.”**

Does that mean that motives are not important in the Christian life? No, they are important. Scripture often talks about the importance of right motives. In fact we are going to see Paul stress this in #2. But it is more important that the gospel of Christ is proclaimed. The power of the gospel is not primarily dependent on the motives and feelings of the preacher. The power rests primarily in the message.

We may shake our heads and wonder at the lifestyle and motives of some of the TV evangelists. Yet I have known people who have been truly converted to Christ through the preaching of some of the TV preachers who seem to be the shadiest of characters. I had a friend in seminary who came to Christ through one of these men who turned out to be very immoral. Yet Paul could rejoice when the gospel was going forth, even though it was coming from the mouths of preachers with questionable motives.

If we examine our own hearts I suspect that most of us would find that we rarely, if ever, are involved in Christian activities out of a 100% pure motive to glorify and serve God. Usually there are other factors that play at least a small part in our motivation. It may be a little peer pressure, a concern for what others think, a desire for recognition, a desire

for power, a personal sense of fulfillment, or guilt. But Paul indicates that the most important thing is that the gospel of Christ is proclaimed and that the work of God is accomplished. If we wait until we are certain that our motives are 100% pure before we teach Sunday school or visit the sick or share the gospel, nothing may ever be accomplished.

Why do I preach? Well, I love doing it. I want to please God. I am convinced that the gospel is right and true and important. I sense that God has prepared me and desires me to preach. But there is also that element of ego in me that likes the attention that I get from other people in standing up here. There is a certain pleasure that comes to me in feeling that I have some influence over other people. I am not sure that my motives in preaching could ever be 100% purely the desire to serve and please God. But there is some encouragement here that the most important thing is that the message of God be presented.

On the other hand we should not completely ignore our own motives for doing what we do. The more we do what we do out of a motive to please ourselves rather than God, the greater danger we pose to ourselves and others. It is dangerous to sit in judgment on the motives of other Christians. But we can examine our own. It is a good thing to occasionally stop and consider why we are doing the things that we are doing in the church or in our service to others and even in our own home. Am I bringing too much attention to myself? Am I trying to manipulate other people? Am I trying to raise my political status in the church, at work, in my circle of friends? Am I trying to make me look good by putting other people down? Am I doing or saying this thing because I am jealous of another person? If our motives are off, we can confess that to the Lord and be forgiven.

Paul was faced with considerable stresses and troubles. He was apparently not in the greatest of health. He was chained to a Roman guard 24 hours a day. He was facing a trial where the cause of Christ was going to be on the line, and his own life would be at stake. He had people coming to him for advice and encouragement. He felt a certain responsibility for churches scattered across Greece and Asia Minor that he had a part in beginning. He had Christian leaders to deal with who were motivated by envy of Paul and who were causing strife. But the focus of his attention was not the trials that surrounded him. It was not the motives of other believers. It was not even his own motives. His focus was on Christ and doing the will of God. His focus was upon getting the gospel out. His focus was on the proclamation of truth.

George Galatis was also faced with considerable stresses and troubles. But he determined to stay focused upon doing the will of God and proclaiming truth. He said, **“I find that many people are willing to quickly discharge their moral responsibility when the going gets tough, but I knew that as a Christian I couldn’t. What the utility company was doing is very evil, and they regularly destroyed those who disagreed with them. What I experienced in 1992 was a calling from God to attempt to work with these people, hopefully to convert them from their evil ways. I spent three years doing that before I recognized that I had to go public.”**

In April of 1994 George finally sent a letter to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the federal agency charged with enforcing safety regulations at the nation's nuclear generating plants, expressing his concerns about the safety violations at Millstone. He spoke to a representative of the commission, but months went by, and nothing happened. George then refiled his charges in a letter to the NRC describing 16 safety problems that were not being addressed. He continued to face what he calls "subtle forms of harassment, retaliation, and intimidation."

Four months later an agent from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission finally showed up to talk to George. This agent seemed not to take him too seriously, which was obviously upsetting. George had claimed whistleblower status, which was supposed to provide certain federal protections. But then George discovered that the agent went right out and talked to the utility officials about his interview with George, a flagrant violation of federal rules. George began to do investigation on his own and found in company files that the NRC had known about many of the Millstone violations for years. The federal agency had done nothing about them.

In June of 1995 another NRC official showed up at Millstone. He refused to talk to George. Instead he met with utility officials to help them figure out a way to get around the safety problems without closing down the plant. But then another inspector showed up. This guy had some integrity. Millstone was due to have the nuclear fuel in its generating plant replaced in a few months. But this second official recognized that there was a serious problem in how they had been doing this procedure and what they had been doing with the spent fuel rods. So he insisted that Northeast Utilities file a special request to do this "offloading," as it is called.

Interestingly enough, Northeast requested George and his supportive friend George Betancourt, to fill out the paperwork. They did it, but then George and his own lawyer filed a petition with the NRC asking the agency to deny Northeast's request. Two months later Millstone was forced to hold a public meeting to deal with the concern that citizen groups, government officials, and local townspeople were expressing as a result of finding out about the safety problems. We were living in Connecticut at the time, and the situation got a fair amount of coverage in the local press.

A Northeast Utilities vice president sent a memo to his employees warning them that **"experienced antinuclear activists"** had **"the intention of shutting the station down and eliminating 2,500 jobs."** Most of George's colleagues were not very happy with him. One of them said to George, **"You're taking food out of my girl's mouth."**

Shortly after this public meeting the NRC denied George's petition and allowed one of the three units at Millstone to shut down and off load its nuclear fuel. That was done, but Millstone 1 never reopened. Partly as a result of public pressure the NRC was forced to acknowledge the serious safety problems and keep the plant closed.

Then in March of 1996 *Time* magazine (GEORGE GALATIS TIME) did a cover story on what was going on at Millstone. On the cover of the issue was a picture of George Galatis. The fan really hit the flame then. A major shakeup took place at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. Congress began to investigate its failings. There was a shakeup at the NRC. The NRC was also forced to deal with the significant safety problems at Millstone.

George stayed on at Northeast Utilities for a while. But whistleblowers like George in this industry can forget about getting hired by other utilities, and their hopes of career advancement within the company are shot. So George eventually went to seminary and into Christian ministry.

George was mistreated and harassed and pressured for doing what was right, for promoting the truth. But in the process he grew spiritually, he encouraged others to step forward, and he experienced unique opportunities to be a witness for Christ. The Apostle Paul was likewise harassed and pressured and physically hurt for his witness. Fellow believers let him down. Ultimately he was executed for his faithfulness to Christ. But both Paul and George found their difficult situations to be cleverly disguised opportunities for growth and witness. They stayed focused on what was important and what was true. They focused on serving Christ. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Some of you are faced with difficult situations of your own. Those situations may involve work or family or health or school or something else. The challenge from our text is: What is going to be your attitude toward them? Will you succumb to the pressure? Will you go along with the crowd? Or will you determine to regard these circumstances as cleverly disguised opportunities for growth--- your own spiritual growth, the growth of others, and the growth of the gospel in the world around you?