

## COLLECTIVE

# PHILIPPIANS (Lesson 2)

## Paul: A Classic Example of How to Live – Part 1

**Read: Philippians 1:12-14, 15-18**

This is the man who wanted to go to Rome as a preacher in order to testify of his faith before the emperor Nero. Instead, he wound up in Rome as a prisoner. He was a Roman citizen with every right to appeal to Caesar and await an audience before him. Instead, he was illegally arrested in Jerusalem, misrepresented before the court, incorrectly identified as an Egyptian renegade, entangled in the red tape of political machinery, and finally granted a trip across the Mediterranean, only to encounter a storm and be shipwrecked.

When he finally arrived in Rome, he was incarcerated and virtually forgotten for two years. If we looked up victim in the dictionary, Paul's picture should appear beside the word! And yet he is the man who wrote his friends the most joyous letter in the entire New Testament.

### Confident, Even Though a Victim

Read his words slowly and see if you find even a hint of resentment or negativism:

Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear (Philippians 1:12-14).

Doesn't sound to me like a guy licking his wounds or attending a pity party in honor of himself. On the contrary, he reminds us of a man in a hospital room, looking at the bleak, blank wall but determined to see the unseen. Sitting there with an iron cuff and chain on one arm, bound to a Roman soldier, Paul wrote of his circumstances as having turned out "for the greater progress of the gospel".

What a grand, positive statement! After all the man had been through, he considered the things most people would call setbacks as progress. Paul viewed his circumstances as having cleared the way "for the greater progress of the gospel" of Christ to be released.

Instead of seeing the soldier guarding his jail as a restriction to the gospel, Paul saw him as a captive audience. What an opportunity to share Christ with one soldier after another, who would, in turn, take the same message back to the barracks so the other guards might hear and believe. Instead of feeling frustrated and victimized, Paul laughed at the open window of unique opportunity offering numerous possibilities. Paul's joy was outrageous!

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How can a person think like that? The answer is neither difficult nor complicated, but it all depends on the question we ask ourselves. Either we ask the negative: “*Why did this have to happen to me?*” Or we choose the positive: “*How has this resulted for some benefit God had in mind?*”

Like Joseph said many years earlier to his brothers who had ripped him off, “*You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good*” (Genesis 50:20). With that same positive mind-set, Paul chose to count his blessings rather than list his disappointments.

Looking at everything from that perspective, he realized what seemed a waste or a detour was, in fact God's divine arrangement. What seemed like a delay had proven to be a divinely appointed opportunity for the message of Christ.

### Joyful in Spite of Others

Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defence of the gospel; the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice (Philippians 1:15-18).

Even back in that first-century era, in the earliest dynamic days of the church, not everyone who spoke for God had pure motives. Some deliberately tried to cause Paul distress. Though spiritually tough, Paul was not always above pain or personal hurt. The man must have had a few terrible days like the rest of us.

Whatever we may think of Paul, he was no perfect saint. The real Paul had a temper that got heated and feelings that got hurt. He was also not just a theological machine churning out inspired writings, but a very warm human individual who needed as much love as the next person.

You can't hurt a computer's feelings or grieve a theological concept, but you can destroy a man. Paul was destructible, but he wasn't destroyed. And it wasn't for lack of somebody trying! The perspective that he had discovered allowed him to say that he didn't really mind what happened to him so long as nothing happened to stop the gospel, because in his understanding the message preached mattered more than the man preaching.

A large part of learning how to laugh again is being broad-shouldered enough to let things be, to leave room for differences, to applaud good results even if the way others arrive at them may not be our preferred method. It takes a lot of grace not to be petty. In fact, there are so many benefits!

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If we were to paraphrase what Paul said, it would be like this:

*So, what if some preach with wrong motives? Furthermore, some may be overly impressed with themselves and take unfair shots at me. Who cares? What really matters is this: Christ is being proclaimed...and that thought alone intensifies my joy! All the other stuff, I leave to God to handle.*

To do otherwise is to clutter our minds with judgmental and borderline legalistic thoughts which become joy stealers. They rob us of a positive mindset. And what happens then? We become petty, cranky, grim people who must have everyone to be like us and agree with us before we are able to be happy.

It is important that we understand what is worth our passionate concern and what is not. Most things are not worth the trouble. But some things are. For example, when Paul wrote to the Galatians, he was so concerned about what was happening there that he exclaimed:

*But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed. (Galatians 1:8-9)*

You can see in his letter to the Galatians that Paul was angry. But to the Philippians Paul looked at what was going on around him and said, "So what?". The difference is that in Galatia the gospel was being tampered with. Some people were preaching a false message of salvation. But in Philippi the truth was being proclaimed even though Paul, personally, was being attacked.

When people mess with the message, they need to be rebuked, exposed, and corrected. But when they mess with the messenger, they need to be ignored. No big deal. Not even Paul wasted his time or burnt up a lot of energy nit-picking his way through all that. He was just thrilled that the gospel was being declared.

Some things are worth fighting for – like defending truths. But some things are just not worth the fight – like defending oneself or trying to straighten out other people's motives or changing their style. Grace says to let them be. If Paul could shrug it off and say, "So what?", then so should we. We will live a lot longer, and we will be happy again.

### **Reflection & discussion:**

- 1) How can you be confident even though a victim?**
- 2) How can you be joyful in spite of others?**