



Minus to Plus

Phil 1:12-20

We have begun to explore this letter from Paul, imprisoned in Rome to the church he established in Philippi. We have seen that it was a positive letter – one between a church and church leader where there was care and mutual admiration. They must have felt very sorry for him as they had heard he was in jail. After all, it was his missionary activity that had brought them to Christ and their church into being.

For them, was it a discouragement to hear he was a prisoner in Rome awaiting an appeal to Caesar? Possibly and now we see Paul showing them some perspective. Take a look at this glass of water. It's half empty – or is it half full? It's a question of perspective. We find here the same message as we found in Exodus last year: we have a God who turns our minuses to pluses. It's just a question of looking to see the way in which our God turns our earthly obstacles and transforms them into His divine opportunities.

So what perspective change does Paul give to them?

◆ The Gospel has gone where it has not gone before

To boldly go where no man has gone before as Star Trek began. Paul was taking the gospel to a place it had never got to – right into the court of Caesar. He was chained to Roman guards – possibly Caesar's special Praetorian Guard; the most elite legion 9,000 strong. Jail enabled him to reach men that other Christians couldn't. His guards are hearing the gospel – it's going right into the heart of the Roman Empire! And here he recognises that he has been put in a unique position:

12 I want you to know, my brothers and sisters, that the things that have happened to me have really helped the progress of the gospel. 13 As a result, the whole palace guard and all the others here know that I am in prison because I am a servant of Christ.

It may have looked bad from Philippi but Paul knew he had been sent there by God right back when he was imprisoned in Jerusalem – Acts 23:11 That night the Lord stood by Paul and said, "Don't be afraid! You have given your witness for me here in Jerusalem, and you must also do the same in Rome." And there he was. Was his presence in the palace effective. Look over to chapter 4.

Phil 4:22 All God's people here send greetings, especially those who belong to the Emperor's (Caesar's) palace

Never assume that because you have adversity or that things don't go quite as you envisaged that God doesn't know what He's doing. Because He does; of course He does – but He often just asks us to trust Him and through that trust we stick close to Him and grow more in Him.

Philip Yancey tells of the summer he and Dr. Paul Brand sailed the coastlines of Britain and France. There was one particular cove which had a notorious reputation for the destruction of many ships and vessels. Jagged rocks were numerous - and hidden just beneath the water's surface EXCEPT FOR ONE NARROW ROUTE AND COURSE. The route was not direct - and often zigzagged. It did not look like the right way. However you had to trust in the captain who knew the harbour - and had gone on before to mark off the route. He shares "Similarly, God does not ask that we figure out the reason for each change in our direction, or look on apparent obstacles with frustration. Rather, He wants us to accept the circumstances He permits in our lives and respond in obedience and trust even when they appear confusing and contradictory."

It's true isn't it. Then we look at what God is doing in the world today and the Gospel is growing fast in what we would think the most unlikely places – where free speech is suppressed and where the authorities or the population are hostile to the gospel – China, the Middle East, the Indian Subcontinent. God has His ways,

we need to hear His voice and trust. Paul did and got to speak to Caesar – and in the process also wrote some memorable letters.

So what about us? Are we chained to something tonight? A job we hate, family problems you can't fix, financial problems that look overwhelming, something from your past that you can't deal with, health problems that trouble you, loss of a loved one. You know, it's the toughest places that we find ourselves in life that God can use to change us and change other people and advance His kingdom. Look at God. Ask Him to open your eyes to see the possibilities and allow Him to take you through the situation and make the difference in your life and in the lives of others.

◆ Others were raised up to preach in his absence

14 And my being in prison has given most of the brothers and sisters more confidence in the Lord, so that they grow bolder all the time to preach the message fearlessly.

15 Of course some of them preach Christ because they are jealous and quarrelsome, but others from genuine goodwill. 16 These do so from love, because they know that God has given me the work of defending the gospel. 17 The others do not proclaim Christ sincerely, but from a spirit of selfish ambition; they think that they will make more trouble for me while I am in prison.

18 It does not matter! I am happy about it — so long as Christ is preached in every way possible, whether from wrong or right motives.

Never ever think you are indispensable in God's kingdom and the church can't do without you. God always raises up those He wants to do His work. If someone is taken away as Paul had been, God replaces the. Sometimes they are not direct replacements, because absence can lead to something new taking its place. So, the loss of a great Christian leaders usually results in others being raised up. I remember that in the case of David Watson, who was Rector of Holy Trinity Brompton, a great Bible teacher, evangelist and apologist for the Charismatic Movement. When he died, people mourned the loss of someone who had shown such great potential. What a loss! What a hole in God's work? No, not really. His replacement was the less well known Sandy Millar and his obscure curate Nicky Gumbel. And it was out of their ministry at Holy Trinity Brompton that Alpha appeared. The rest is history now. Alpha has been one of the great evangelistic initiatives of the last decade or so. And all because God took a key man. Never think you are indispensable – you're not.

Paul's absence encouraged others to fill the void – but not always people that he personally approved of. Denominations are not new to the Christian faith and Paul was often opposed for the wrong reasons. We know from 1 Corinthians about what sort of factions there were – Paul – Apollos – Peter. Paul didn't like them and particularly opposed pro-Jewish legalistic factions. But he also saw the way in which however perfect or imperfect their preaching was that Jesus name was being preached and made known. The bottom line is that we are all imperfect, yet God takes our imperfect words and ways and can still bring good out of them. Human beings may divide themselves on doctrinal issues or even pettier things than that, yet God can take even that and bring glory to Himself. Just look around and ask God to show you just what the Holy Spirit is doing. It's amazing what He does and who with. Never limit God when all He has to work with are sinful human beings like you and me!

Many Christians, maybe a few of us can get discouraged by all the "false teachers" or at least dodgy Christians we see on TV and hear on radio, read about, see on the internet. But remember that much of their error is interspersed with truth and God is able to use them to lead others who are seeking the truth a little closer to His truth and astonishingly does. I've come across plenty of people who first came to Christ through some of the most bizarre spiritual environments. Dodgy teachers will be held accountable for their error; let's be clear about that. James notes (3:1) that teachers will be judged more harshly than others because of the ability we have to lead others astray if we act in the flesh, but we can at the least rejoice that to some degree, Christ is preached, even by some of the most bizarre preachers!

Paul was an important leader raised up of God, but the Jesus whom he preached about was even greater. We don't focus on the man but on Jesus. We don't focus on the denomination, but look to what God is doing and recognise how the Holy Spirit usually has to use even the most imperfect people to further His work.

◆ Honouring Christ whether he lives or dies

So bearing in mind that we have a Saviour who's bigger than us and a church that's bigger than what we have here what should our aim be?

And I will continue to be happy, 19 because I know that by means of your prayers and the help which comes from the Spirit of Jesus Christ I shall be set free. 20 My deep desire and hope is that I shall never fail in my duty, but that at all times, and especially just now, I shall be full of courage, so that with my whole being I shall bring honour to Christ, whether I live or die.

Paul was confident that God knew what He was doing so in his situation all he wanted to do was honour Christ whether he lived or died. Paul lived like he was dying: trying to honour Jesus in the time left God had given him. God wants us to get our lives into perspective. Whatever our situation, God has placed us in it and we need to look for the opportunities in it.

It was a 99 degree September day in San Antonio. Two women were running around a car in near hysteria. One was a mother, the other an aunt. The object of their frenzy was a 10-month-old baby accidentally locked inside the car. A neighbour attempted to unlock the car with a clothes hanger. But soon the infant was turning purple and had foam coming from her mouth. It had become a life-or-death situation when Fred Arriola, a wrecker driver, arrived on the scene. He grabbed a hammer and smashed the back window of the car to set her free. Was he proclaimed a hero? He said, "The lady was mad at me because I broke the window. I just thought, What's more important - the baby or the window?"

What's important in our life situation this evening? Can we trust God to take us around the turns of life's journey without revealing all of the reasons ahead? This is a good test of whether our trust and choices coincide.

Lord, open my eyes to see what you are doing, give me ears to hear your voice and the wisdom to follow You.

Prayer

Rejoice, rejoice, Christ is in you. - He turns our weaknesses into opportunities

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Scripture Quotes TEV*