

Essays in Philippians- Always Advancing

Phil. 1:12-18

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Why? We ask this question when bad things happen to us. It is quite understandable how we struggle to see the purpose of a bad situation. Yet, Paul was enduring a bad situation when he wrote the Philippian epistle: he was imprisoned.

Throughout his work, Paul often found himself in bad situations. Even while teaching in Philippi, he and Silas were beaten and arrested. In his second Corinthian letter, he mentioned his work in Macedonia, the region in which Philippi was located: “For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within” (2 Cor. 7:5).

Paul constantly faced calamities. Being human like us, he struggled at times to endure these hardships. In a dark period in his life, he describes despairing of life itself (2 Cor. 1:8). Learning about Paul’s life, we cannot help but be impressed by his aptitude for seeing the good in bad situations. This is especially true in how he explains his imprisonment.

Opportunities of Adversity

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear (Phil. 1:12-14).

Prisons are not good places. This was especially true in the ancient world. Prisons were places the accused were detained while a court decided what to do with their case. People were not sentenced to prison in the ancient world as they are today. Also, prisons of the ancient world were filthy places. The Romans provided prisoners with nothing. Prisoners were dependent on friends or family to bring them food and other necessities while they awaited the court’s decision in their cases.

While waiting, Paul made surprising use of his time. Of course, he did not enjoy being in prison; however, he had the presence of mind to advance the Gospel. He was not overcome with bitterness towards the Romans. Instead, he tried to convert them to Christ.

Paul was successful in persuading some of the palace guards to obey the Gospel. At least, some were willing to listen to Paul. At the end of this letter, Paul indicates that some of Caesar’s household had obeyed the Gospel through his teaching (Phil. 4:22). Something good came out of something bad.

Good coming from bad is a recurring theme throughout the Bible. At the end of the saga of Joseph, he told his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Gen. 50:20). We must never lose sight of the good that can be accomplished even from a bad situation. While no one enjoys experiencing bad things, we are always able use adversity to glorify God if we choose.

In addition to the Gospel being advanced, Paul states that news of this progress encouraged other saints. If Paul could advance the Gospel in prison, certainly, free Christians could advance the Gospel elsewhere. Other Christians were emboldened by Paul’s actions.

Well, if only this was the end of the story. Sadly, other saints used Paul’s imprisonment for selfish purposes. He wrote, “Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment” (Phil. 1:15-17).

Paul’s imprisonment was only worsened by the knowledge that some were using it to discredit his reputation. How did he respond? He simply wrote, “What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death” (Phil. 1:18-20).

Paul could have listed the names of brethren who were seeking to discredit him. He could have responded at length to their character assassination, but he did not. Instead, he found peace in knowing that the Gospel was being advanced despite their maliciousness.

Now, Paul was not making light of the self-serving motives of these saints. If we are motivated by anything less than self-giving love, God will hold us accountable. Paul knew this, but he also knew that he did not have control over what these misguided saints were doing. Why waste time and energy over them? Even Jesus warned about the discouraging impact of engaging with people who are hostile to the faith (Matt. 7:6).

We could learn a valuable lesson from Paul’s wisdom. Paul was not going to allow self-serving saints to distract him from his purpose. Such focused restraint is not easy. However, such is a sign of maturity.

Conclusion

What we find in this section of Philippians is typical of the apostle Paul. He often found himself in undesirable circumstances. He often had to contend with things beyond his control. Yet, he was able to advance the Gospel and find peace.

This section of Philippians teaches us how to find the good in bad situations. How do we respond when something unjust or unfair happens to us? How do we react when other people, perhaps even other Christians, try to take advantage of us?

While we cannot always control the circumstances of life, we can control how we respond. There is always a dignified and graceful way to respond to every situation we face. The Gospel can soften our hearts, sharpen our focus, and clarify our minds. We can make wise and appropriate decisions that can help advance the Gospel to the glory God.