

Pentecost 19
Philippians 1:12-18a
October 11, 2009

Dear Christians for whom God works only good even under most difficult circumstances.

What should Christians do when times are hard for Christians? And the kind of 'hard' I am especially thinking about is specific hardship on account of people's faith in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It is like having the Apostle Paul under arrest for years. First in Caesarea, the Roman capital of the province of Judea/Galilee and area, and now for two more years in the capital of the Empire, Rome.

Well, St. Paul is giving us much encouragement here in these precious verses of Philippians. Philippi was the home of the first Christian congregation the Apostle founded in Europe. The Apostle and this congregation had always had a great loving concern for each other.

Paul assures these Christians, and us today, that

God- given Opportunities to Proclaim God's Word Will Come Under All Circumstances.

The Apostle Paul more than two years earlier had been taken into custody in Jerusalem; really it was more of a case of protective custody. But accusations were made against him. These accusations were unfounded as the ones the leaders of Jerusalem had leveled against the Savior of the world thirty years earlier. Once again, to protect Paul's life from assassins, the Roman captain, Lysias, had Paul transferred out of Jerusalem to Caesarea.

There are a lot of similarities between our judicial system and Rome's, not all of them good. One not so good similarity is that the gears of justice sometimes moved slowly. The governor then was Felix. Rome recalled him after only a few years because of incompetence. Paul sat in jail the whole time. Then Festus became governor. He moved on Paul's case quickly and it led to Paul appealing his case to Rome.

Can you imagine how hard it must have been for the Apostle Paul to be confined that long? In Rome, he was not in a prison or jail but under house arrest with a Praetorian (palace) guard present at all times. Though, during this arrest, Paul could receive people and, obviously, could write and send letters wherever he wished – like to Philippi – Paul is the man who had carried the Good News of the Savior throughout Asia Minor and much of Eastern Europe. Now he had not been able to go anywhere for years. Well, that's not quite true, is it?

He got to Rome. He had wanted to come to Rome to preach the Gospel there, the center of the Roman Empire, for years! He had made plans to do so, but something always happened to keep that from happening. Well, now he was there! "Yes," you say, "but

under house arrest.” Just imagine the sorrow, the worry, the fear that fact must have caused so many Christians in those days!

One of the reasons Paul sent this letter was to take away that sorrow and replace it with joy, to take away the worry and replace it with confidence, to take away the fear and replace it with faith. Paul is still illustrating what he had earlier written to the believers in Rome, “All things work together for the good of those who love God, who have been called according to God’s purpose.”

Whether Paul was under house arrest or whether he was out spreading God’s Word, God’s purpose was the same, to rescue people from sin and death, from Satan and hell.

His time in Rome, as he made his case in court, had already made it clear to everyone that Paul was no criminal, non trouble-maker. The only reason Paul had been arrested is because he had preached the Good News that Someone named Jesus had died on a cross but had risen from the dead on the third day in order to assure everyone that God had forgiven them because of Jesus.

What a blessing that was for Christianity throughout the empire! The reputation of the Christians was being cleared and the truth about the message called the Gospel was getting out.

When our Bible-based Christian faith is slandered and attacked, ridiculed and insulted, as it is again today, we should use that as a reason to speak the true message and clearly deny the falsehoods being spread. We must not be quiet. We must not go into hiding. We need to speak God’s Word more and louder!

Well, Paul said that because he had a praetorian guard with him at all times, he was able to talk with them. They got to hear what Paul said to all the people who came to him there in Rome. And that was many people, including many other pastors! They also got to hear Paul defend the Gospel in court. They, in turn, were talking to others about Paul’s case, not just to other soldiers, but to their families and friends. The Holy Spirit was working within the Palace Guard. They were the elite troops of Rome. Included in their assignment was their version of our Secret Service. As a unit, they had great influence on the government! God turned Paul’s confinement into an opportunity to reach a whole new group of people with the Good News about Jesus.

And, as word got around, about Paul and the truth of God’s Word, the Christians in Rome used the improved atmosphere in Rome, gained courage, and more and more of them began openly sharing that Gospel.

True, a few of them were negatively motivated. They’d been there working as Christian preachers long before Paul ever arrived. And they were a little miffed that Paul was getting so much publicity. They wanted a little praise and honor, too! Sound familiar? – pride, envy like last week with Miriam and Aaron against brother Moses!

Others, however, preached the Gospel, truly loving Paul, and understanding that God was using Paul to proclaim the Gospel in high places and to clear the Gospel of all the lies unbelievers had been speaking about the Gospel.

We are sinners. It is sad to see pride and envy and petty jealousies spring up among called workers or within congregations. I'm sure we, too, need to admit that our motives for what we say and do, even in connection with "church work" are not always pure and loving. For this let us repent. Let us ask our Lord Jesus to help us defeat the sin in us and the devil's temptations and move us to serve our Lord, one another, and the world in love, love for our Savior, love for all those for whom Jesus died on the cross.

Yes, Paul rejoiced that no matter what the precise motivation, Christ – the heart and soul of the whole Gospel – was being preached more and more boldly by more and more people.

What a comfort that God works in and through His Word even when our motivations for telling it are not always pure and perfect. Thank You, God! And Thank You, Lord for turning difficulties and set backs and troubles into opportunities for sharing the Gospel.

God-given Opportunities to Proclaim God's Word Will Come under All Circumstances.
Amen.