

“CHAIN” REACTIONS

What would your life be like if it were free of any kind of trouble? It’s difficult to imagine. With the global economy on the brink of collapse we are constantly reminded by the newscasts that we are in for a whole host of related troubles. The chain reaction of economic disaster will manifest itself in food prices skyrocketing, job losses and other troubles. As if you needed more trouble in your life.

Trouble is relative. What is trouble for you may not be trouble for me. We cannot measure our troubles against each other until we walk in each others’ shoes. What is certain is that in every life there will be trouble.

George Whitefield (1714-1770), the eighteenth century evangelist, spoke of trouble as thorns in your bed. If God in His wisdom allows there to be thorns in your bed, it is only to awaken you from spiritual death, and to wake you up to His mercy. Or if you are a true believer, and he still puts thorns in your bed it is only to keep you from falling into complacency. Those thorns will remind you that you still need God.

The Apostle Paul was keenly aware of this truth concerning his own troubles. We can summarize the lesson from Philippians 1:12-18 very simply: God uses our trouble to accomplish his purposes.

This is a very tough pill to swallow for several reasons. One is that we don’t often see our troubles as having any spiritual significance; they are just rotten things that happen. Two, we refuse to believe that God is at work in our little problems and they are merely the road bumps of life. And three, more often than not we come away defeated by our troubles.

I want to share with you this morning the perspective on trouble from one who lived a life of joy. For all of us, me included, we will need to exercise faith to believe this truth and to learn to laugh in the face of trouble.

Let me share with you how God uses our trouble...

1. ...to advance the Gospel

In writing to the Philippian believers Paul was very clear that they should understand this truth. He said to them, **“Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel”** (v. 12).

It is very likely that the Philippians were eager to know what was going on with Paul. They would have read and reread this letter to get a handle on his situation. Paul could have focused on his troubles and written a real pitiful story, but he didn’t. His focus was on the gospel.

In part they may have known the story of how Paul came to be imprisoned. That is why he could write briefly “...what has happened to me...” But what did happen to Paul? We talked briefly about this two Sundays ago and we can read the whole story starting at Acts 21 to the end. Here is a nutshell of the situation:

Some people started some rumors that Paul had taken a Gentile into the holy part of the Temple, and Jerusalem was up in arms, causing Paul to be beaten and almost killed. The authorities stepped in and arrested Paul, thus saving his life. Paul was then taken to Caesarea, where he was held in prison for two years, awaiting trial. He appeared before Governors Felix and Festus, and eventually before King Agrippa, giving gripping testimony about his faith in Christ. Because Paul appealed his case to Caesar, he was then sent to Italy by ship. After a terrible shipwreck, he was finally brought in chains to Rome where he was kept under house arrest for two years, as he waited for his trial before Caesar.

Now as Paul reflects upon this chain reaction of events he wants to impress upon his church that this has really served to advance the gospel. That word “advance” is a military term that has to do with clearing the way for the army. An advance team of pioneers, as they were called, would go before the army and cut a road through the forest, build a bridge or two, and basically clear the path of all obstacles.

So Paul sees his imprisonment not as a setback but as an advance, a clearing away of obstacles, so that the gospel can be proclaimed. We don't see trouble that way at all. This is a foreign way of looking at life. Yet this is how Paul saw his trouble; he saw it as an opportunity.

There is a familiar verse, a favorite we like to claim as our own, but which as often been misunderstood. Or we know it so well we forget to study it closely. Look at it carefully now: **“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose”** (Rom 8:28). Please note the words “all things”. This is not just trouble but it includes trouble. In ALL THINGS God works for the good of those who love him. Whatever trouble you face, it is not too small for God to use for his good purposes. He can use your unemployment to advance the gospel. He can use your family crisis to advance the gospel. He can even use your spiritual complacency to advance the gospel. All things, Paul said.

2. ...to encourage Bold Testimony

As proof of this odd reality, Paul continues to share his unusual journey. **“As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ”** (v. 13).

Did you catch Paul's perspective? His attitude is clear in that he does not see himself as imprisoned to the Roman authority. He said, “I am in chains for Christ.” Whenever he spoke of his chains he always implied that he was a prisoner of Christ, not of any human institution. He opened this letter saying that he was a “doulos”, translated as servant but really means to be in bondage to or enslaved to someone. Paul joyfully testifies that he is a prisoner, a slave to Christ. It doesn't matter that there are physical chains on his wrists because he is already a slave to Christ.

I want to confess that it sometimes very difficult to step into the pulpit Sunday mornings. Preachers can be discouraged by any number of things. One of those things is that I really don't think I have anything to say that you haven't already heard. Then I think, I don't really belong up here. But this truth was revealed to me some weeks ago: I am a prisoner of Christ. And I took joy in that because I am under orders from my master to proclaim Jesus. I am chained to this pulpit for as long as he wills. It may sound weird, but that gives me courage to speak; I'm just doing what I'm told.

Paul saw his trouble as an opportunity. He was chained to a guard day in and day out. Nothing could be done except under the watchful eye of a guard. This was the Praetorian Guard, the elite household guard of Caesar. These guys got better pay and better assignments than most grunts. Think of this: guards were changed every six hours. That's four different soldiers every day, 28 times a week. In two years he would have had contact with 3000 of these guards. And what do you think Paul did every time he got a new guard? “Have you heard about Jesus?” This small, bald, unassuming man, so closely guarded by elite soldiers, was the most dangerous man in Rome, because he asked each one, “Have you heard about Jesus?”

Paul wrote to Timothy about this experience and the fact that Roman soldiers were believing in Jesus and said: **“...I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained”** (2 Tim 2:9). In fact it was unleashed in that dark situation. What a paradox.

Here's another: Christians, mainly pastors, say that the church today is under siege. We might feel that the church is under attack and that we are living in very godless times. But pastor David Short, an Anglican minister in B.C., has it right. He said that it is not the church that is under siege. But as Christ fills us with the fullness of himself, with his grace and peace, with his unmatched joy, it is the world that is under siege. It is the town of Kleefeld, the town of Steinbach, it is the city of Winnipeg that is under siege from those who love Christ. That is why the world cringes when a true testimony of Christ is revealed. Society gets defensive when we bring Jesus into the picture, because it is under siege from the gospel. That is why there is book called the “DaVinci Code” or a movie like “The Last Temptation of Christ”; they are a dying system's feeble defense against the truth of Christ.

This is the truth. The world is under siege from you who believe in Jesus. Isn't this what Jesus said, "...on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Mt 16:18)?

God used Paul's trouble to encourage bold testimony. And God uses our chains, our trouble to encourage us to boldly testify. Whatever you are chained to, perhaps that is where Jesus wants you to talk about him.

3. ...to Motivate the Church

Can you see the reactions to Paul's chains so far? What happened to him helped to advance the gospel. One result was an opportunity to witness to his captors. Here's another result: "Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly" (v. 14).

The word "speak" in this verse is not the word for "preach." This word means ordinary, everyday conversation. It is a natural way of talking, chatting about what Christ has done for us on the cross and how he has impacted our lives. It is like telling our story at the coffee shop like we do with any other story.

How easily do we bring Jesus into our conversations? Not very easily. Some do it very naturally but for the rest of us it can be a very awkward segue. I am just talking about conversation here, not evangelism.

The other day at Monday night hockey, our brother Don Penner was telling everyone in the locker room after the game how he had taken a guy out of the play. Don then said, "Man I deserved a penalty, maybe a few." And I looked at him and said, "No Don, Jesus paid it all." Now you might think that borders on the sacrilegious or in poor taste, but in a funny way I meant it.

It would be interesting to know what Paul's tactics were in speaking about Jesus. He said in 1 Cor 9:21, "...I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some" (NLT). Whatever his tactics were, it was his trouble, his chains that encouraged people to speak about Jesus.

A good illustration of how God uses trouble to motivate the church is found in Acts 8:1. Jesus had given clear directions to his disciples before he went up into the clouds in Acts 1:8. When they received the Holy Spirit they were to go and witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. But they grew comfortable in the home base of Jerusalem. So in Acts 8:1 we read of a great persecution that broke out against the church in Jerusalem. In v. 4 it says, "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went."

Our trouble may be God's nudging us to action. Whatever difficulty you are facing right now, I want to encourage you to prayerfully put it before God and ask "What do you want me to do, Lord?"

4. ...to Reveal what we Value

Finally, Paul recognized that trouble is a refining fire that reveals who our true friends are, what are real values are, and ultimately what really matters.

"It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice" (15-18).

One thing stands out rather oddly in these verses: Paul never opposes the message these people preach.

Of those who preach out of envy or rivalry it seems that their ambition was to take advantage of Paul's imprisonment and replace him. They may have resented this "Apostle" coming to Rome and

assuming he could be an authority over them. It's not clear what their "beef" was with Paul. But one of their aims seems to have been to cause more trouble for Paul.

He never opposed their message, though. If they preached Christ, he didn't care if he didn't get credit or glory or whatever. All that mattered was that Christ was preached.

A modern day parallel might be trying to discredit a preacher who suffers an illness. A health and wealth preacher would point at this pastor's illness as a lack of faith. Meanwhile it could be the pastor's testimony of faithfulness while suffering that changes people's hearts.

See, these guys didn't get it. Trouble doesn't have to be stumbling block, to them, to us, or to anybody who has Christ in his or her heart. And if people are getting saved through our weaknesses, that is glory for Jesus. The world already thinks we are trying to be perfect. If they see us with struggles and how we cling to our faith in the midst of them, there's a good chance they will believe.

Ultimately we need to evaluate what we truly value. For Paul all that mattered was the gospel. Can we say that the gospel of Jesus Christ is all that matters to us? Trouble will reveal where our hearts run to when the hammer falls.

I am not saying that our spouses and children and jobs and what not don't matter. What I do find in Paul is a single-minded focus on spreading the news that Jesus Christ was crucified for us. If that could be first and foremost our aim then we would know the joy that comes from this focus.

Conclusion

The challenge Paul leaves us with is to train our eyes to see how our trouble, whatever it may be, can be used by God to accomplish his purposes.

Let me tell you the story of how trained eyes made a difference in one person's life:

At six weeks of age, Fanny Crosby was blinded, but even as a youngster she determined not to be confined by the chains of darkness. In time, she became a mighty force for God through her hymns and Gospel songs. The secret is this: when you have the single mind of purpose, you look on your circumstances as God-given opportunities for the furtherance of the Gospel; and you rejoice at what God is going to do instead of complaining about what God did not do.

Fanny wrote some familiar hymns. I am sure you know this one:

All the way my Savior leads me
What have I to ask beside
Can I doubt His tender mercy
Who through life has been my guide?
Heavenly peace, divinest comfort
here by faith in Him to dwell!
for I know whate'er befall me
Jesus doeth all things well;

All of the way my Savior leads me
cheers each winding path I tread;
gives me grace for every trial,
feeds me with the living bread;
though my weary steps may falter
and my soul athirst may be
gushing from the rock before me
lo, a spring of joy I see

Fanny Crosby (1820-1915)

AMEN