

Opening Words - What's limiting you? What terrible circumstances are you in? I do not want to minimize your difficulty, but listen today and see how Paul worked through his terrible circumstances for the glory of God.

11 Phil – Your Circumstances are No Obstacle for God!

Have you ever been in a situation that was difficult and at the time you couldn't figure out why you were in it or how God could use it to bless your life or use it for His glory and for the gospel?

Paul found himself in such a situation. It was a situation that was difficult, and many could not figure out how God could bless it or use it for the advance of the Gospel. Paul was in prison in Rome. He was in Rome, not because he had been invited by the leaders to share his faith, but he was there under accusation and would be tried as one creating civil disturbance and unrest in the empire. You would not want to be tried on those charges in Rome! Above all, the Romans wanted to keep order in the land and they would do anything to shut down civil disturbance.

Paul had always wanted to go to Rome. He had felt a compulsion to go to Rome. Years earlier he had written to the church there and in his introduction to that great book we know as Romans he said he was always praying that God would open a door for him to go to Rome to encourage the church and to preach the gospel. In Romans 1:15 he said, "For my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome."

But Paul's path to that great city was an unexpected path. I'm sure that he originally thought or hoped that he would get there as he continued to start churches in ever-expanding areas. He had been to Greece and Illyricum which is modern day Albania. All he had to do was keep circling around the Adriatic Sea area to the north and west, then head south and he would be in Italy itself and could make his way down to Rome.

But God's ways are not our ways. Paul's path to Rome lay strangely through Jerusalem. Acts 21:17-28:31 tells us about that path. Paul was in Jerusalem meeting with the church and quietly going about his business. He was in the temple praying when some Jews from Asia Minor who hated him and his message of salvation for the Gentiles, saw him. They created a riot and nearly had a mob beat him to death when the Romans intervened and arrested Paul.

And so Paul started a journey that would take him from one prison to another, including a two-year stint in Caesarea. There were many intrigues going on in the court system, including a plot to assassinate Paul, all this in spite of the fact that he was illegally arrested and detained. Finally, after two years, because it became apparent that the authorities were not going to release Paul or give him a fair trial and would most likely eventually allow the Jews to kill him, Paul appealed to Caesar which was the right of every Roman citizen. So off to Rome he went, under the watchful eye of Roman guards and en route he suffered shipwreck and was almost killed by the storm and then by the Roman guards who wanted to execute all the prisoners so that none would escape when they came to Malta. But finally, after such harrowing experiences, he made it to Rome, not as preacher but as a prisoner.

His enemies must have rejoiced at his chains, but, as we know, God has a special knack for turning things around and even though Paul was a prisoner the Gospel advanced in unexpected ways.

Let's read Philippians 1:12-14 and see what Paul said to the Philippians.:

¹² And I want you to know, my dear brothers and sisters, that everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News. ¹³ For everyone here, including the whole palace guard, knows that I am in chains because of Christ. ¹⁴ And because of my imprisonment, most of the believers here have gained confidence and boldly speak God's message without fear.

What a passage of encouragement! Paul's imprisonment did not hinder the Gospel. Paul's imprisonment was actually advancing the Gospel. Paul uses an interesting word to talk about the *spread* of the Gospel. It was a word that was used for army engineers who would go ahead of an army and would devise special ways to get through difficult terrain. How does an army advance rapidly through a swamp, across rivers, over mountains, through jungles? Each of these circumstances were obstacles to armies but the engineers would break them down and devise strategies, methods, and ingenious road building skills so that armies could make rapid progress through such difficult areas.

That's the word Paul uses when he talks about the spread of the Gospel. Think again to the obstacles he faced that I mentioned earlier – beating, illegal arrest, assassination plots, arrogant power of corrupt rulers, shipwreck, hardened Roman guards who placed little value upon the life of prisoners, and now chains in Rome.

Yet none of these were too difficult for the Lord, and the Lord sent his angelic army engineers to cut paths through every one of these circumstances so that the Gospel continued to advance. Does God still do this? Let me share some stories with you I read recently from a book by an esteemed Bible teacher in our day, Warren Wiersbe. He

provided three priceless examples of the Gospel and the truth of his word advancing not just in spite of, but because of, very difficult circumstances.

The wife of the great Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon who preached in London in the latter half of the 19th century is the first story. Shortly after their marriage Mrs. Spurgeon became an invalid and was confined to her home. But during this time, a burden was placed upon her heart to take her husband's eloquent sermons, bind them into books and make them available for pastors who could not afford them. Thousands of pastors benefited from reading the sermons of Spurgeon and multiplied the effect of his sermons. I am one of those pastors, who early in his career read many of his sermons and benefited. Spurgeon's wife was confined because of physical limitations but God used her situation for the advance of God's word. She could say with Paul: *Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel.*

What could be worse than having that kind of limitation? Well, how about blindness? Have you heard of Fanny Crosby. When she was six weeks old, the doctor put the wrong kind of medication into her eyes and blinded her – certainly a heartbreaking tragedy for her family.

But as Fanny grew up, her spiritual sight far made up for the lack of physical sight. She developed a fervent love for Christ and determined that she would not let her blindness limit her. She became a highly educated woman and advocated for the care and education of the blind in the United States. She spoke before Congress and was a good friend of a man who would become a president of the United States, Grover Cleveland. She lived to be 95, and is most famous for the writing of over 8000 hymns with over 100 million copies printed.

Ira Sankey, who was the music leader for the revival campaigns of D.L. Moody attributed the success of their campaigns to her hymns that so moved people. I have to believe that her blindness, this terrible circumstance, actually freed her from the distractions of daily life and helped her to focus on her relationship with Christ and the development of her spiritual eyesight. She would say with Paul: *Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel.*

Perhaps you are not infirm or blind. My guess is that most of you listening are not this way at all. But maybe you feel limited in some other way. Sometimes, it seems that our children can limit us, especially if you have a lot of them, and sometimes young mothers can feel chained at home. But for you young mothers who are listening today, your children are your best disciples and you can train them to take the Gospel to places you would never think. Susannah Wesley had 19 children. Think of it, 19 children and this was long before disposable diapers, washing machines, refrigerators and other modern conveniences. I mean, after six or seven, how did they even find time to conceive more?

And you know who two of her children were – Charles Wesley and John Wesley. These were the founders of what we know as the Methodist church which in its origins was fervent evangelistically and spread the Gospel throughout England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and North America. Charles wrote over 8000 hymns, many of which we still sing – *Christ the Lord is Risen Today, O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing, And Can it Be That I Should Gain*. Their spiritual impact was incalculable and much of it goes back to their godly upbringing by their father and their mother Susannah Wesley. Susannah would say with the apostle Paul: *Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel.*

May I share one more example –another one dealing with family and children. A friend of mine took his entire family to Hong Kong for a missions outreach. This had to be terribly expensive to fly several people overseas but they did it to advance the Gospel. One day they were in a meeting and Communist officials were in attendance. This family stood in front of everyone, including the officials and shared their testimony, including the children.

The officials could not believe what they were hearing and marveled at how composed and obedient the children were. They said to the father, “you have forced your children to say these things.” But he replied, “No, they are saying them of their free will.” The officials were astonished that they were able to train their children in such a way. Today, this family has moved to a very special location in the world where they – as a family – are spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

What’s limiting you? What terrible circumstances are you in? I do not want to minimize your difficulty. I’m sure it was no fun for Paul to be beaten and to have people plan his assassination. That’s why he appealed to Caesar. I’m sure it was no fun to be lost at sea for two weeks and then to suffer shipwreck and almost die from Roman soldiers who wanted to slit his throat. Yet through it all, God was with him and God turned those circumstances around for the greater progress of the Gospel and what God did with Paul he can do with you and with me. Let’s trust him for that!