

What do you do when your plans don't work out? Do you blame your circumstances? Do you blame God?

Kenneth Bae had plans to be missionary to North Korea. He knew the difficulties. If he were caught sharing the gospel, he'd be in great danger. Yet North Korea was on his heart. His father was born there, but his family fled to South Korea when he was a child. Years later, Kenneth's father took his family to the USA.

In 2006, Kenneth moved his family to China. China would be a stepping stone into North Korea. He knew that the North Koreans needed hope. They needed to know the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Soon, he began arranging trips into North Korea. Strictly speaking these weren't mission trips. Because it's illegal to speak of Christ in North Korea, it would be dangerous for the Christians on his team. Kenneth was to find that out for himself very soon.

On one trip, Kenneth took his computer's external hard drive into North Korea. It contained many files relating to his mission trips there. He'd intended leaving the drive in China. Then, his plans went awry. In North Korea, he was arrested. He was kept under guard in prison or in hospital for about 2 years. During that time the North Koreans called him their most dangerous American prisoner.

Near to his release date, a guard asked him about God. Clearly this man was thinking about the consequences of coming to faith. His final question clearly bothered the guard. "If God is real, why are you still here? You have been here longer than any other prisoner." Kenneth answered that it was God's plan for him to be there. And God's plan included that guard. Furthermore, it included all of the other guards. Then he added, "Without me how would you hear about God and Jesus His Son?" What a good question!

Why was the Apostle Paul in prison? He wouldn't have planned his imprisonment. In fact, he was confident that he'd soon visit Philippi (2:24). You might think that he was there because he'd broken the law. But Paul sees it as God's plan for him. He writes in 1:16b, ***I am put here for the defense of the gospel.*** And so we don't find Paul complaining about life in prison.

Yet I'm sure that Paul wasn't excited about prison life. Even so, he knows that whatever trials he endures they're all for the cause of Christ. He writes in 4:12a, ***I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation.*** Then, in 4:13 he writes, ***I can do everything through him who gives me strength.*** Paul knew that the Roman guards needed Christ. So too the Philippians needed Christ at the centre of their lives. Christ was to be the basis of their unity.

With problems of unity in the Philippian church, the church needed encouragement. And so Paul doesn't focus on his immediate problems. His focus is the Lord Jesus. Note 1:21, ***For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*** Sure, he wants to live. But, live or die, he will face his problems with Christ as his Lord and Saviour.

Have you ever thought that the way you face problems encourages other Christians? Look at 1:12-14, ***Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.***

Here he is in prison, probably chained to a guard, yet enduring his suffering. Note his words in verse 12, ***what has happened has really served to advance the gospel.*** All of the palace guards know that he's a Christian. Furthermore, the Christians who care for his needs are encouraged to ***speak the word of God*** (1:14).

Do you know that people are watching your every move? They watch to see how you cope. They want to know, 'Does your faith in Christ sustain you through the good times as well as the bad?'

We have a faith worth sharing. For, we have the Saviour, Jesus Christ. But it's not faith that saves us. Rather, it's the finished, work of Christ on the cross. Christ bore our sins. It's Christ who saves. Faith is necessary for our salvation, but it's not the cause of it. Our faith centres on Christ crucified, dead and buried, and raised from the dead. Christ took our place on the cross, suffered and died for us, so that by grace through faith we rise to new life in Him.

How is it with you this morning? Do you have that faith in Christ? Do you even know how much you need Christ in your life? We call Him Saviour because He saves us from our sin. God, in His great mercy has made it possible for us to know Him. Faith assures us that in union with Christ we're right with God. So Paul isn't struggling to believe that God is at work. He's sustained by Christ because he is *in Christ*. Note the end of 1:13, ***I am in chains for Christ***. And it is Christ whom he must preach.

Paul wrote to the Romans (8:28), ***we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose***. And what was God's purpose for Paul at this time? It was for him to be in prison, *in chains for Christ*. Here he is, exercising his faith, preaching the gospel and writing letters of encouragement. There is no self-pity in Paul.

Like Paul, you and I are called to exercise our faith in Christ. James writes in his letter (2:26b), ***faith without deeds is dead***. But you ask, 'How can I do that? I'm not Paul. I'm no great evangelist!' Maybe not, but we can encourage others in their walk with the Lord. First, by showing how our faith sustains us in times of trouble. Second, by speaking an encouraging word or lending a helping hand. Maybe you can write a letter of encouragement to someone whom you remember them in your prayers. Recently, when Ginny was sick, someone did that for me.

Faith in Christ assures us that God is at work in our lives. God ***works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will*** (Ephesians 1:11). There may be times when you have doubts. You might even question why God allows bad things to happen to you. Why September 11? Why don't my plans work out my way? God's word comforts us. Isaiah 55:8, 9, ***For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts***.

Above all else, Paul was a witness to the Lord Jesus Christ and to the power of the Gospel. Thus, we have his words to the Romans, in 1:16, ***I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes***. . . Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:7, ***We live by faith, not by sight***. If we could see the future and know what will happen, we wouldn't be exercising faith. Exercising faith is to trust in the One who is faithful: the God and Father of our Lord Jesus. For, it is God in Christ who sustains us in our walk with Him.

In Asia, a Christian pastor was arrested for preaching the gospel. Convicted for his beliefs, he was strung up with a noose around his neck. He was forced to stand on the tips of his toes. Yet when he spoke to his guards, he told them about Christ: How God showed His love for us by sending His Son to die in our place upon the cross at Calvary. Yet the men constantly mocked their prisoner.

The pastor suffered terribly. But he wouldn't deny Christ. He continued to preach to the men. His whole body was racked with pain. Starved of food and drink, he wondered just how much longer he could survive. Several days passed. A storm was brewing overhead. The pastor knew that he could go on no longer. He let himself go. He put the weight of his body on to the noose around his neck. Suddenly, there was a brilliant flash of lightning. Thunder followed in an instant and the man fell to the ground. The rope had been cut by the lightning and he was saved.

Not everyone has such a miraculous testimony. God doesn't promise to save us from every difficult situation. Christians suffer. Many Christians die in terrible circumstances. But God does promise that He will be with us in the difficulties of life. Psalm 23:4, ***Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me***. Psalm 46:1, ***God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear...***

'Well,' you say, 'I'm not in prison. I'm not suffering the agonies of torture.' That may be true, but God asks that we be prepared to share the Gospel at all times. That's what Paul is saying in Philippians 1:12-18. Nothing should stop us from witnessing to Christ. Are you in prison? There is your mission field. Are you in hospital? There is your mission field. Or are you at work, or at home, or at school or at play? There is your mission field. If we are faithful, nothing can stop the proclamation, the preaching of the Gospel. That's how Paul begins this passage. Note 1:12, ***Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel***.

Paul then considers two areas that may hinder our plans to advance the cause of Christ. 1. Our circumstances. 2. Our motives. We shall see first that circumstances cannot stop the advance of the Gospel. Second, our motives in presenting the Gospel also cannot stop its advance. Our plans might be frustrated. God's plans are not!

## **1. Consider your circumstances – 1:12-14.**

A few years ago the Presbyterian Church was criticized over the leaflet, 'Port Arthur Revisited.' You might remember that time of tragedy. Martin Bryant killed many people at Port Arthur. One man told our church moderator (at that time) that it was a pity he hadn't been shot on that day. Others ranted and raved about the pamphlet. But when asked what part bothered them, they said, 'Oh I haven't read it.' They didn't want to read it either, even when offered a copy. But, praise God, many members of other churches thanked him for our strong biblical stand.

Our moderator said, "When we enter the media arena we expose ourselves to the possibility of being misunderstood, victimised, and even crucified. We must hear the voice of Jesus say: ***"If any man would follow Me, he must take up his cross daily."*** We must be prepared to 'take our share of suffering as good soldiers of Jesus Christ.' And when the dust has settled, we trust that we may say with Paul: ***I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the Gospel.***" (Philippians 1:12)

In prison, Paul is chained to the guards. They would've heard the Gospel again and again. No doubt many of them came to know Jesus as their Lord and Saviour after hearing Paul's testimony. See 1:13, ***As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.***

Let's note two truths about Paul the sufferer that encourage us when we go through the trials of life. **First**, Paul makes little of his suffering. He doesn't turn inward, full of self pity. Yes, he speaks of his chains, but they are ***chains for Christ***. How often do we want to dwell upon our problems rather than on the strength that we draw from Christ? **Second**, Paul the sufferer was still witnessing for Christ. The chains tell us very little, but *his* talk was all of Christ.

Two friends were talking together. The younger man and going through a severe testing-time. The older friend with loving wisdom said, "No moment will ever again be like this; *let there be something for Jesus in it.*"

It's not 'something for Jesus,' if we dwell on our miseries. Nor is it if we let opportunities pass without a word about Christ. It's not 'something for Jesus' if we think that any hand other than His has brought us to that place. It is 'something for Jesus' if we think and speak about Him and His glory. It is 'something for Jesus' if we trust in His all-sovereign will.

In verse 14, we see that ***most of the brothers and sisters in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearless.*** Even while facing opposition they were stirred up to be bolder and more effective in speaking the good news of the Lord Jesus. Did you notice what Paul said? He didn't say that the leaders of the church were preaching. It was the ordinary church members who were testifying to Christ.

In all circumstances we can speak about Jesus. Paul writes in 2 Timothy 4:2, ***Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season.*** . . . The Gospel is not just for the good times of life. Truly, nothing can stop the spread of the Gospel. See how it's spreading in Asia and Africa and South America. In fact it seems to spread better in times of trouble as people discover that only God can help them. Sometimes we need hardship in our lives to drive us to the Lord. Remember that as Christians we have God's word to us. Romans 8:28, ***in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.***

So our circumstances do not stop the advance of the Gospel.

## **2. Consider our motives – 1:15-18**

When the communists controlled Russia they ridiculed Christianity. The newspapers strongly criticised the Bible. And so they'd print Bible verses in the papers. God's Word, not readily available in Russia at that time, was published for all to read and evaluate. Many people were converted and encouraged.

Was the Russian media mishandling the Word of God? Maybe, but I'm not sure that Paul would agree. Listen again to what he has to say about it in 1:15-18a. ***It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of 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. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice.*

Not everyone who speaks about Christ has a pure motive. Paul sees two groups. The first *preach Christ out of envy and rivalry... out of selfish ambition, not sincerely*. Their motives are selfish and false. The second *preach out of goodwill... in love*. Their motives are true, like Paul's, *for the defence of the gospel*. Even in troubled times they faithfully seek to proclaim the Word of God. Yet Paul doesn't criticise the first group's faithfulness to the Gospel. Nevertheless, they were double-minded. They showed that to be true by their desire to stir up trouble.

Is there a message here for us? Yes there is. We cannot compromise on the truth of God's Word and His saving grace to us. But if that gospel is faithfully proclaimed, if Jesus is preached as *the way and the truth and the life* (John 14:6) then who are we to criticize. It is our place to discern the truth. Has the Gospel been preached?

Paul is concerned for unity in the church. In our day we have many different Christian denominations. But they serve a good purpose with their different expressions of worship. And we can fellowship with any who love the Lord and seek to do His will. On the other hand I am unashamedly Presbyterian, but that's another story.

The two men who guarded our Asian pastor were terrified at what had happened. Their prisoner had been miraculously rescued. They begged the pastor to forgive them and then gave their lives to the Christ. What great rejoicing that must have caused among the local Christians.

Things didn't go according to plan for the Apostle Paul or for Kenneth Bae. Things don't always go our way either. And we wonder why God doesn't do what we ask of Him. The Apostle Paul's situation reminds us that God sovereignly places us where He wants us to be. All He asks of us is that we be faithful: Faithful in living out our faith to His glory, and faithful in sharing our love for the Lord Jesus, whatever our circumstances may be.

Our plans may not come to fruition. God's plans do. It was His plan for His Son, Jesus, to come to the earth He'd created. Philippians 2:8, *And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!* And how does God's plan bear fruit in our lives? You and I are here today that we might hear God's good news. We're to come to Christ with sorrow for our rebellion against God. And we're to receive Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, trusting that He died in our place. And now, having been united to Christ by faith, our sins are forgiven; we have peace with God and eternal life.

Sometimes we're jealous of the position that we have in the church. And so we think that no one can do a particular task as well as we can. Or perhaps we envy the role that some other person has. And we wonder why we've been overlooked for a position of responsibility. For, we might think we can handle it better than the person now in that role. But if we're not careful we can end up trying to sabotage another believer.

Maybe we're bitter because everyone else is happy, blessed and doing well. If only you knew! We all have our problems. Sometimes life is extremely hard. And we all suffer from jealousy and envy from time to time.

Maybe our motives in speaking about Christ are not always pure. But, whatever the case, Paul concludes this section of his letter rejoicing that Christ is preached. 1:18b, *The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice.*

We also rejoice when we hear the name of Jesus lifted up on high. We rejoice, for nothing can stop the advance of the Gospel. Neither adversity (the difficulties we might face) nor the cause which motivates the Bible preacher/ teacher can prevent the spread of the Gospel.

We are here, where God has placed us. We each have unique gifts and abilities that God can use for His glory. We do not serve God so that He will love us. God has shown His love for us in sending Jesus, His Son. And so we serve God by loving Him and sharing His gospel with our words and deeds. Amen.