

“The Transformation of the Human Spirit: 1) When Bad Things Turn Out Well”

a sermon by

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Text: “I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known through the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ” (Philippians 1:12-13).

This past week, in the midst of a ten-day trip to Italy, I had the chance to visit the city of Florence and to enjoy once again the beauty of the area of Tuscany. Though I have visited Florence on several occasions, there is something about the beautiful Duomo (or cathedral) that inevitably draws me to the center of this beautiful city. One of the great attractions for me are the Ghiberti Bronze Doors that adorn the Baptistery located next to the cathedral, which portray in pictorial fashion the great stories of the Old and New Testament. Tradition has it that when the Baptistery was built, a contest was held to determine who would have the honor of sculpting the doors. Two of the finalists were Lorenzo Ghiberti and Brunelleschi. The story goes that when Brunelleschi saw the model that Ghiberiti had created, he was crestfallen and conceded defeat.

Later the great artist Michelangelo declared that Ghiberti's doors were fit to stand at the "gates of paradise."

But that was not the conclusion of the matter. When a further contest was held to determine the architect to design the great "Duomo," it was Brunelleschi who proposed the great dome that would become one of the finest architectural wonders of the Renaissance in Italy. As I marveled once again at the sheer magnitude of the beauty of that cathedral, I was made alive once again at how Brunelleschi's great disappointment had somehow been transformed into a magnificent triumph.

I.

Over the next four weeks we will look at one of the most important books of the New Testament, Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. It is a short letter (only four chapters) but it provides us with a remarkable insight into Paul's own life and faith and gives us a chance to reflect on how Paul's writing gives meaning to our lives as well.

There are a number of themes in this letter that make it one of the most rewarding in all of the New Testament. In this letter he speaks of his faith and hope in light of his impending death (1:19-26). Philippians also contains a remarkable hymn in which Paul speaks of Christ as the one who did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but who emptied himself becoming a servant of the gospel (2:6-11). Philippians is also a deeply personal letter in which Paul describes a righteousness not achieved by human means but one that is rooted in Christ (3:4-16). It is, in a real sense, a letter of Joy, in which Paul entreats his hearers to 'rejoice in the Lord, always' (4:4-13)

II.

This morning I want to deal with the subject of "When Bad Things Turn Out Well." One of the characteristics of this letter is that it is written from prison. This is one of the so called "prison epistles" which were written at the end of Paul's life. It is not clear where Paul is in prison. Many believe it could be Rome, but there are other scholars who argue that Paul is in Ephesus or even Caesarea Philippi. Though it is not certain where Paul is in prison, it is certain that he is in prison. And yet, Paul makes a remarkable observation. His imprisonment, rather than being an impediment to his ministry, has become an occasion for it. In fact, he goes on to say that the whole imperial guard has come to know that his imprisonment is for Christ.

One of the things that one learns as a pastor is the great difficulty that accompanies human existence. There are struggles in our marriages, in our homes, in our jobs, struggles with health and illness, struggles in so many of our relationships. The question that most of us face is not whether there will be these kinds of struggles, but rather what we will do in light of them.

III.

One of the hopeful themes that is present in Paul's letter to the Philippians is that sometimes difficult circumstances can actually lead to positive results. Let us be clear about this. This is not a "Pollyanna" letter. Paul is in prison. If it is true that his imprisonment is in Rome, then Paul knows that his life in this world is soon coming to an end.

It is remarkable to reflect that some of the greatest literature we possess comes to us from persons in prison. This was true of Paul. One of the greatest Christian classics, *Pilgrim's Progress*, was written by John Bunyan while he was imprisoned in a Bedford, England, jail. James Henry Thoreau wrote his famous essay, "On Walden Pond," while in prison. Martin Luther King wrote his famous "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" while imprisoned for disturbing the peace in Birmingham, Alabama. The Greek Russian dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote his famous *Gulag Archipelago* while in a Soviet prison camp. We don't know why difficult circumstances often produce remarkable testimonies of faith, but we do know that it is true.

But this is not only true about prison; it is true in many other circumstances as well. Several years ago I came across a remarkable book by Reynolds Price entitled, *Letter to a Man in a Fire*. The book was written to a young medical student who was suffering from cancer. In his book, which was originally delivered as a series of lectures at Auburn Seminary in New York Price reflects on his own struggle with cancer and how that terrible pain and affliction became for him an insight and discovery into the way God works in human suffering.

IV.

There is something else at stake in this passage and it is Paul's clear conviction that the most difficult situations in life provide the greatest occasions for faith. As I reread this magnificent letter, I was taken back again by the intimate relationship between human suffering and faith in God, and I wondered what would have happened to Paul had he not been placed in prison. Would we have even remembered him? Would these magnificent letters ever have been written?

Paul is bold enough to proclaim that what had happened to him had actually helped to spread the gospel. He was able to bear witness to the Roman imperial guard that was stationed near him. Moreover, his imprisonment--his suffering--actually empowered other people to speak the word of God with boldness and fear.

In the fifth chapter of his letter to the church at Rome Paul put it another way. "Suffering," he said, "produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5: 1-5).

One of the great Christian writers of our time is Frederick Buechner, who is an ordained Presbyterian minister as well as an author and lecturer. Buechner has written a number of fictional works including *Godric*, *The Book of Bebb*, *the Son of Laughter*, and more recently *The*

Storm. However, his nonfictional works leave a legacy that is significant as well. Buechner is one of the few contemporary writers I know who is able to see in some fashion the way that God is at work in his life and who is able to describe that in a way that is not egotistical or sentimental. One of the finest of these is a small book entitled *Telling Secrets*. In this book Buechner tells in the greatest detail the secret in his life that had haunted him for all his years. In 1936, when Frederick Buechner was ten years old, his father committed suicide one November morning by locking himself in the family car with the engine running until he was overcome by carbon monoxide. There was no funeral, no graveside service, and his father's name was seldom again mentioned in the house.

It is hard to imagine how a ten year old child would be effected by something as severe as that and yet every word that Buechner has written, every sermon preached, every lecture give is somehow an explication of that event and how that event shaped his life.

In his book, *The Reformed Imperative*, Dr. John Leith begins his chapter on God's providence with these words: "The Christian witness is that the last word in every human situation is the grace of God." That grace is affirmed in Paul's letter to the church at Rome when he declares that nothing can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ--not even death itself. In the final analysis that is the only gospel that any of us can proclaim, and it is the only gospel that really makes any sense.

There are those who can say it is not true, but no one can say it is trivial. And if it is true it is the most wonderful thing that any of us will ever experience.

Amen!