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A Happy Christian

BY THE LATE: C. D. COLE

But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the Gospel;

So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places;

And many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will:

The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds:

But the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel.

What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice" (Phil. 1:12-18).

In these verses we have a picture of a happy Christian. Paul is in prison but happy. One would hardly think of going to a jail to find a happy man. Prisoners are usually sour and sullen. But Paul's happiest days were prison days. He did indeed have his gloomy and depressing seasons, but not while in prison. Paul had learned how to sing songs in the night. His prison experiences had resulted in many converts. Some ten years before, he was in prison in Philippi, and he and Silas sang songs at midnight and the jailor was converted. And now from his prison in Rome, he pens his most joyful letter to his beloved church at Philippi. This imprisonment ended in freedom, but later on when he was put in the same prison to await the head-

man's axe, he wrote in a happy vein, saying, "The time of my departure has come," and expressing the wish to depart and be with Christ.

Paul's letters are largely autobiographical. His theology was the generalizations of his experiences. He believed and felt all that he preached. All that he said was born of sincerity. When he preached the doctrine of human depravity, he felt it in his own heart. When he preached salvation through Christ, he made it his only hope. When he preached missions, he practiced missions. Paul had come to see that all human efforts to be saved by works were of no avail and that a sinner is made right with God through faith in Christ. This was his constant testimony and to this his life was dedicated.

Paul is now in Rome as a prisoner about to be tried before Nero, the bloodiest of all monarchs. With his very life in the balances, he is prepared for whatever comes. If it is to be death, he wants to magnify Christ in that. He wants his last breath to be in praise of Christ. Taking the thoughts in order as they lie before us in this passage we have:

I. Paul's absorbing ambition that triumphed over prison experiences—the ambition to make Christ known. He tells the Philippians that the things that had happened unto him had fallen out rather to the furtherance of the gospel. What hurt him had promoted the gospel. He was bound but the gospel was free. The clipping of his wings had given wings to the gospel. He cannot go about preaching the gospel, but men can and do come to him and they hear about

Christ. Paul does not go into detail about what had happened to him. That was not worth dwelling upon. He might have recited a long story of hardships since that day more than two years previous when he was seized by the mob in Jerusalem. He might have told of his experiences in court both at Caesarea and in Rome. He might have dwelt upon his prison life: the poor food and the discomforts of being chained to a soldier day and night. But he does not mention these things. Later in the letter, he will say, "I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content." Paul writes as a happy person and seeks to engender happiness in the Philippians. He speaks of his bonds, but nothing of his defence. His defence is always of the gospel. And so he hastens to tell the Philippians that the gospel has not been hindered.

God had overruled everything for the gospel's sake. Paul's enemies had caused his mouth to be stopped in Jerusalem, but they had unwittingly opened it in the world's metropolis. We have many examples of God overruling the sins of men to His own glory. The capture of the ark by the Philistines was the fall of their god, Dagan. Paul's thorn in the flesh was the occasion for grace in his soul. Paul's weakness became the occasion for God's strength. Man's extremity is God's opportunity.

II. Let us now consider some of the ways Paul's imprisonment had furthered the gospel.

1. He reached the official household of Caesar. He says, "My bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace or praetorium guard." Through his bonds, Paul was able to preach to Nero's bodyguard. One of these soldiers had charge of Paul day and night, and every time there was a change of guards, Paul had a new hearer. Many of these soldiers were saved. Everybody around the palace heard about Christ and knew that Paul was in prison for the sake of Christ and the gospel. In his closing salutation he says, "All the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar's household" (Phil. 4:22).

2. Other believers became active witnesses. Paul says, "And many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear" (Phil. 1:14). Some preached with a bad motive, hoping to increase Paul's afflictions in his imprisonment. These preachers did not like Paul, but they preached Christ and Paul was glad for Christ to be preached. What self-abnegation on the part of Paul! Who were these men who preached to hurt Paul? Some think they were the Judaizers—Jews who insisted that Gentiles must become Jews by the rite of circumcision in order to be saved. I do not go along with this thinking. Paul never endorsed anybody who perverted the gospel. And certainly it

was a perversion of the gospel to make circumcision essential to salvation. I believe these were men who preached the truth about Christ, but with a bad motive. Without endorsing their motive, Paul endorsed their message. He rejoiced that Christ was being preached. In this connection, someone has said that "some Christ is better than no Christ," referring to the Judaizers who did not preach a true gospel. But this man misses the point. Some Christ is not Christ. Christ must be all and in all or nothing at all. Christ will be the only Saviour, and the whole Saviour, or no Saviour. To add something to faith in the blood of Christ is to take away from Christ. To mix law and grace, faith and works is to frustrate grace and make the gospel of none effect.

Paul is referring to the mixed motives of preachers who had been inactive, but who now come to the front because of his imprisonment. Some preached Christ from good will towards Paul, and others preached Christ out of envy and rivalry. Paul was getting too much publicity, and they were envious of his prominence. Paul, who had lips only for Christ, was on the lips of everybody, and these selfish preachers could not stand that. And so they came to the front and preached Christ with a vim to show that Paul was not the only pebble on the beach. They would incite envy on his part. They know from experience how painful envy is, and so they would add the pain of envy to Paul's painful bonds. But this crowd of selfish preachers did not know Paul. They did not understand that nothing mattered to Paul but the glory of Christ. What they were selfishly doing in preaching the truth about Christ did not make Paul resentful and envious, but happy. Paul was wrapped up in the gospel of Christ, and these selfish preachers were wrapped up in themselves. Paul's idea of success was to so live and work that Christ would be honored. He was willing to be nothing that Christ might be everything. He was willing to sink that the gospel of Christ might swim. Like John the Baptist before him, he would decrease that Christ might increase.

Now let us notice quickly those who preached Christ out of love and good will to Paul. They loved Paul and were inspired by Paul's defence of the gospel. They identified Paul's bonds with the gospel of Christ. Paul's boldness brought them to the front, not for publicity's sake, but out of love. A soul on fire for Christ will kindle a flame in other souls. There is a story of a Scottish martyr, Patrick Hamilton, whose courage and constancy at the stake touched many hearts and moved men to boldness. And one day a man remarked to Cardinal Beaton: "If you burn any more, you should burn them in cellars for the smoke of Mr. Patrick Hamilton has infected as many as it blew upon." Yes, the blood of the

martyrs has always been the seed of the church.

This ambition to magnify Christ made Paul calm in the face of death. He faces the two alternatives of life and death and gives us his state of mind concerning these two things. His trial is about over and the verdict will soon be forthcoming. What will it be? What does Paul want it to be? If he himself could control the heart of Nero in rendering the verdict, what would it be? Well, Paul says frankly that he does not know. He says, "What I shall choose I know not." And again he says, "For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better; Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you" (Phil. 1:23,24). Paul says that his personal preference would be to depart and be with Christ.

Paul is more concerned about being true to Christ than he is about his own deliverance. He wants to magnify Christ whether by living or by dying. He wants to be bold and unashamed to the very last breath. Paul knew that many had and would renounce their faith in Christ in the face of death, and he wanted to be saved and believed he would be saved from compromising Christ.

As we study this great apostle, we are apt to exclaim, "What a man!" However, we must not preach Paul but Christ. Paul would not want us to preach him but Christ Jesus as Lord and Saviour. And so, we are holding up Paul only as a trophy of Divine grace. We are showing you a man who was completely mastered by the Lord Jesus Christ. And as we study Paul, let us exclaim, "What a Saviour Jesus Christ is!" What amazing grace that would cause the thrice holy God to do so much for a hell-deserving sinner!

Let us say with the poet:

"Praise the Saviour, ye who know Him;
Who can tell how much we owe Him?
Gladly let us render to Him
All we are and have.

Keep us, Lord, oh, keep us cleaving
To Thyself, and still believing,
Till the hour of our receiving
Promised joys in heaven.

Then we shall be where we would be,
Then we shall be what we should be;
Things which are not now, nor could be,
Then shall be our own."

There's no telling how
much good you can do if
you don't care who gets
the credit. -copied

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