

BROOMFIELD

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 3 Issue 22

June 6, 2004

The Ministry of an Imprisoned Saint

Biblical Ministry

In Hebrews 11:36 we read of the possibility that serving Christ may lead to imprisonment. We read this account:

Hebrews 11:35-36, “Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment.”

And yet, this is not the only kind of prison mentioned in Scripture. Christ read these words of Isaiah that He Himself fulfilled:

Luke 4:18, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, **to preach deliverance to the captives**, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised.”

There is such a thing as being imprisoned in sin. It is that prison that Christ came to deliver us from.

Colossians 2:8, “Beware lest any man spoil you [takes you captive or imprisons you] through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.”

Here the prison is a false teaching.

2 Timothy 3:6, “For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive [or imprison] silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts.”

Here the prison is a false religion.

Prisons come in all shapes and sizes. Some of them are of our own making. Others are of the doings of men. They can be as innocuous as a bad day. Or they can be as serious as a terminal disease. They can exist where no walls or bars have been erected. It's how we cope that is the issue!

I've known individuals who have faced a bitter providence as though it were nothing. I've also known those have given up under a relatively light trial.

How do we cope when we it comes to prison?

What constitutes faithfulness as a minister faced with chains?

What ought to be our focus? Our attitude? Our outlook?

In our passage we are looking at the words of an Imprisoned Saint Paul sat in Rome awaiting a trial that could end in his death, he penned this epistle to the Philippians to encourage and strengthen them in the faith.

Now, having looked at this epistle almost in its entirety, we come now to Paul's closing words — what we might call his final will and testament to the church in Philippi.

Now, I do not intend to “spiritualize” Paul's imprisonment here. Paul was in a literal prison in Rome. Rather it is my desire to examine how Paul responded to his situation that we might glean insight into how we might cope when faced with any form of “captivity” — whether that be to a trial, a bad situation, a bitter providence, or ill health.

Paul's Concern

Notice that which characterized Paul in his imprisonment is his concern.

Philippians 4:21 “Salute¹ every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren which are with me greet you.”

This is an important statement that Paul makes as he closes this epistle to the Philippians. In fact, he has stressed this same message now no less than twenty-one times in this book.

And what is the message?

As he sends his greetings to EVERY SAINT he is making a statement: EVERYONE IN THE BODY OF CHRIST IS IMPORTANT!

Paul just didn't want his greeting to be given to the leaders in Philippi, or the ladies to whom he at first brought the gospel, or the popular, the good looking, the wealthy, or just simply Euodias and her followers. Indeed! All were to receive Paul's greeting. Sinclair Ferguson wrote this:

“A colourless enough ending, we might think, until we remember one of the great burdens of this letter: healing divisions in a fellowship. Paul wants all the saints, however they have aligned themselves over the Euodias-Syntyche disagreement, to know that he loves, cares for, and prays for each one of them, without distinction.”²

And this reveals to us the concern of this imprisoned saint — the entire body!

In Christ

¹ ασπάζομαι aspazomai

² Dr. Sinclair Ferguson, Let's Study Philippians, page 115

When Christ was facing the greatest challenge of His life — dying as a sacrifice for the sins of His people what is it that occupied His mind?

John 17:20-21, “Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.”

Though Christ was facing a “prison” from which He could not escape alive, nevertheless His concern remained on the people whom God had given Him!

This family of God must be our concern when faced with captivity. — the people of God. We must have concern for the entire body, all whom God has given us as brothers and sisters. We need to hear this because unlike God³ we are partial and chains can make us that way! Under normal circumstances we have a tendency to form little groups and stay in them. But when we are hurting, it is those who minister to us that gain our allegiance. Thus it doesn't take long when in prison for our world to revolve around our needs and those who meet them.

I've seen it a hundred times. The benediction is given and the hurting walks blindly past forty other people to speak to their comrade in arms. Never mind that in God's providence that morning God placed someone in their path who needed their ministry. Yet they walk blindly past the one needing their ministry to look for the one or two people who could help them

Family of God, it ought not to be this way. It shouldn't be this way on Sunday morning or any time the body of Christ gathers. And it shouldn't be this way during the week. It should never be this way!

God placed us — needs and all — on this earth to be a blessing.⁴ Thus when it comes to ministry in the kingdom of God we must not be “need driven!” Those worthy of our ministry must not be those who have ministered to us. Our focus must remain on the entire body of Christ. God specially placed you in the body unto its growth!

Ephesians 4:16, “From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.”

Accordingly, we must be driven to fulfill the calling God has placed on us by being faithful to the entire body.

However you say, “My heart is divided.” “I do have favorites.” “In my difficulty, these are the people I want to spend time with.” “What should I do?”

The answer that Paul has given no less than seven times in this epistle is that one must repent of this “mind set” which says that “I depend on others for significance.” “My rights, needs, and wants are more pressing than others.” “Life is about feeling good.” And put on the mind of Christ.

Philippians 2:6-7, “Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the

³ Compare Romans 2:11

⁴ Compare 1 Peter 3:9

likeness of men.”

You are never more Christ-like than when you are denying yourself and ministering to the needs of others. This is the concern of the faithful minister in chains!

Paul’s Passion

Philippians 4:21-22, “Salute every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren which are with me greet you. All the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar’s household.”

In this statement alone, Paul references the idea of “greeting” four times.

1. “Salute [Greet]⁵ every saint,” verse 21a.
2. “The brethren which are with me greet you,” verse. 21b.
3. All the saints [greet] you,” verse. 22a.
4. “Chiefly they that are of Caesar’s household,” verse. 22b.

Now some might argue that this was the standard way that you closed a correspondence at this time. However this is incorrect. The standard way a Roman closed a letter in Paul’s day was with “farewell” or “good luck.” Yet here Paul does not use these words, but the Christianized way of ending a letter, “Greet so and so” — which means that there is something behind these words.

The term *salute* or *greet* simply means to give a greeting or to embrace. In the Roman culture of Paul’s day, the way you “embraced” someone on the street was simply by saying, “Greetings.” In the church, this was transformed into the phrase, “Rejoice!”⁶

The significance of rejoice is that it stands for nothing less than an exhortation to REJOICE IN THE LORD FOR HE IS COMING SOON! And thus though a family member was just taken prisoner on account of his faith, “Rejoice — The Lord reigns!” Though you were banished from the trade guild because you no longer can make the requisite sacrifice(s), “Rejoice — The Lord will provide!” Though your future is uncertain, the world literally is falling all around you, and you are in prison facing potential martyrdom; Rejoice! The Lord is near!

That family of God is the message here!

When Paul expresses “Greetings” to the Philippians from no less than four sources, he is laying emphasis to the call for the Philippians to “Rejoice!”

And once again we see that this has been Paul’s passion throughout this entire epistle! Having mentioned this no less than thirteen times, Paul closes this letter with the reminder to the Philippian brethren to let this be their dying theme. He wants to remind every saint in Christ Jesus to “Rejoice!” He is saying that all the saints say, “rejoice!” Those in Caesar’s household say, “Rejoice!”

Focus on Christ

⁵ In the Authorized Version the term is rendered salute when the Greek term *ασπάζομαι aspasomai* is in the aorist tense. It is rendered greet when it is in the present tense.

⁶ χαίρω *chairo*

Now this is a rather significant message for it presupposes where our focus must ever and always be on Christ.

When Peter's eyes were on his Lord, he walked on the water.⁷ But when Peter took his eyes off of his Lord and focused on the waves, he began to sink.⁸

To all those in Christ today who have long since “Rejoiced in the Lord!” and on account of their chains have lost their will to rejoice; Christ's message to you is this: “O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?” (Matthew 14:31).

Don't you see! Christ still commands the wind and the waves. He still upholds all things by the word of His power.⁹ In His providence He is working His perfect will for you in and through all things. Let us therefore, “Rejoice! For salvation is nearer to us than when we first believed!”

You say, “My joy is all but gone. The clouds have blocked the sun. I have very little over which to rejoice. Such is many a prison cell.”

Yet listen brothers and sisters when Christ spoke the words “O you of little faith, why [do] you doubt?” (Matthew 14:31) there is an important preface that easily is overlooked.

Matthew 14:31, “And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?”

See, God only issues the call of rejoicing to those who are in His hands! He says this to those upheld by Him and cradled in His arms! And so you are today!

You say, “But I don't see Him!”

Yes and neither did these:

- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego- yet He was there.
- Elisha's servant- but He was there.
- The two disciples walking on the road to Emmaus- yet He was there.
- Daniel- yet Christ closed the lion's mouth.
- Joshua- yet God promised to always be with him.
- The people of God called to take the Promised Land — yet the Lord fought for them while they kept silent!

Brothers and sisters, Christianity involves faith which means that we must stop viewing this world through the physical senses. Rather, we must allow the word of God to reveal the world in which we live.

Accordingly, don't miss a very important truth.

⁷ Compare Matthew 14:29

⁸ Compare Matthew 14:30

⁹ Compare Hebrews 1:3

Hebrews 13:5-6, “Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: **for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.**”

As ones whose eyes have been informed by this message, how ought we to encourage one another? With the simple exhortation, “REJOICE!”

Paul’s Priority

Philippians 4:22, “All the saints salute you, **chiefly they that are of Caesar’s household.**”

Here the emphasis is place upon those of Caesar’s household. This is a peculiar statement worthy of much deliberation.

See it would be easy in Paul's condition to consider himself sidelined. Accordingly, we would not blame him had his focus simply been on his survival. In fact, that is the testimony of many who have been imprisoned on account of politics or religion. Don't make waves. Just get through it!

Yet the indication of this epistle is that Paul's focus as he sat in his prison in Rome was NOT survival, BUT fidelity to his calling!

What was his calling? According to Galatians, Christ was revealed to Paul, “...that I might preach Him among the Gentiles...” (Galatians 1:16).

In light of this we ask, “What did Paul do while imprisoned?”

He preached the Gospel! In the irony of the providence of the Lord, Paul was placed in Rome under house arrest.¹⁰ As such on a rotating basis, a Roman soldier would be chained to Paul. This meant that Paul had a captive audience to share the glories of Christ.¹¹ Truly, while Paul was bound in chains, the gospel wasn’t such that we read this:

Philippians 1:12-13, “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 he restates this in our text.

Philippians 4:22, “All the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar’s household.”

Clearly through the witness of Paul, the gospel made an impact not only on Caesar's body guards — the Praetorian guard — but on Caesar's very own household as well — which was a reference to his servants, slaves, freedmen, and possibly even his own relations! Gordon Fee wrote this:

“Paul is an indomitable apostle of Christ Jesus. Let him loose and he will be among those 'who turn the world upside down' (Acts 17:6; a charge of sedition!) for his Christ; incarcerate him too close to home and he will 'turn Caesar's household upside down' as well.”¹²

¹⁰ Compare Acts 26:18

¹¹ Compare Acts 28:31

¹² Gordon Fee, NICNT, Philippians, Page 460

And thus we see the priority of an imprisoned saint — faithfulness to his call! Faithfulness to serve the Lord in his circumstances. Faithfulness to proclaim Christ by life and lip. Faithfulness to be true to the calling that God placed on him from his mother's womb.¹³

Brothers and Sisters, what is your calling? Is it to serve the Lord in a difficult job? Is it to another person? Perhaps you are married. Perhaps your parents have aged beyond the ability to care for themselves. Perhaps it is to rear up godly children for the Lord. Perhaps your call is to suffer.

If these things be your calling, then why are you sitting there down cast and immobilized? Why are you so fearful of the past, present or the future?

You say because “I was just diagnosed with an illness! And things have not turned out the way I wanted!” Or perhaps your are persecuted at work.

Listen the priority of the minister of God regardless of the chains upon his wrist or ankle is to be found faithful when Christ comes.¹⁴

Yet sadly, as much as we have grown in Christ, at times it doesn't seem that we have gone too far.

LA Riot

Several years ago Rodney King was beaten by some police officers after he beat a truck driver during the Los Angeles riot. Someone caught this beating on video tape and the police soon found themselves on trial for beating Mr. King. At the trial these police officers were exonerated and the city once again started to riot.

Many in the black community torched their own homes. They looted their own stores. They shot their own neighbors. Talk about the height of stupidity.

Yet we see our children do this all the time. I'll never forget the day I looked in the backyard and saw one of my children sitting in the corner with his head bowed, scorn on his face, and his lip stuck way out. I went out and asked, “Why are you sitting in the corner while your brothers and sisters are playing?”

He said, “Because they won't let me play.”

I then said this: “So why are you punishing yourself? Do you honestly think that sitting here in the corner, pouting is going to change anything? If they won't throw the ball to you, do something — but don't sit here and beat yourself.”

I relate both of these incidents to you because they are illustrative of how the flesh typically copes with trial and difficulty. In the providence of God, we find our self in a prison. Now, rather than live for Christ and viewing death “as gain”¹⁵ we have a pity party. We neglect to serve Christ in and through all things. We fail to grow where the Lord has planted us. We neglect ministering to the entire body of Christ. We have succumbed to a pity party and are living so that others will notice us, not Christ.

¹³ Compare Galatians 1:15

¹⁴ Compare 2 Timothy 4:7

¹⁵ Compare Philippians 1:21

Brothers and sisters, I've got news for you, VERY FEW ARE WATCHING AND EVEN FEWER CARE!

Yet, there is One who cares more than a mortal ever could. In fact He puts your “tears in a bottle”¹⁶ which means that He has never missed one of them. The Scripture also says that He is “near to the brokenhearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18).

Isaiah 41:10, “Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.”

What is the “right hand” of God?

What is His name?

The Lord Jesus Christ!

In light of this, why in all the world would you and I allow anything on this side of the grave to divert us from serving One so great as He? What should keep us from Him who loves us so deeply, and cares for us so consistently?

It's crazy! Yet, that is what sin will make you! Oh let us release our feeble hold on this world. Let us repent from wanting the attention and affection of man — whether it be from a parent, spouse, boss, or a brother and sister in Christ.

Instead let us go to Christ this day and confess our need for Him. Let us confess our love for Him. Let us confess our sorrow at having been side-tracked from serving Him. And let us pray for the grace of Christ to strengthen us that we truly would be found faithful when He comes!

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on June 6, 2004. Greg is the preacher at Broomfield Presbyterian Church.

¹⁶ Compare Psalm 56:8

