

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
January 6, 2013

When Difficulties Become Doors

Read Philippians 1:15-26

Key verse: “Since Christ is proclaimed in every possible way, whether from dishonest or true motives, I’m glad and I’ll continue to be glad” (Philippians 1:18b).

The Apostle Paul wrote these words while a prisoner. Probably he wrote Philippians during the two years when he was held under house arrest in Rome. (See Acts 28.) Not a nice way to spend two years of your life! But Paul looked at his difficulties and saw them as doors of opportunity for God to work: “I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel” (Phil. 1:12).

Specifically, through Paul’s imprisonment, the imperial guard heard the gospel and the Roman Christians who were not imprisoned were emboldened to share Jesus with others: “...it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear” (Phi. 1:13-14).

Paul’s “difficulties” included the mistreatment of some who apparently preached the gospel out of a sense of competition with Paul. But this difficulty, too, Paul saw as a door of opportunity: “Some certainly preach Christ with jealous and competitive motives, but others preach with good motives....the others preach Christ because of their selfish ambition. They are insincere, hoping to cause me more pain while I’m in prison. What do I think about this? Just this: since Christ is proclaimed in every possible way, whether from dishonest or true motives, I’m glad and I’ll continue to be glad” (Phil. 1:15-18).

I recently talked with a church member who had gone through a lengthy time of hospitalization because of a serious illness. Upon his release from the hospital, he was admitted to a rehabilitation facility where he stayed for quite some time. He became discouraged about being away from his home for so long. But he told me that he decided he would trust the Lord to use him as long as he had to be in rehab.

As a result, God gave my friend numerous opportunities to reach out in Christian love to other patients there and to share with them his faith in Christ. When he told me this story, he was running over with joy—not just because he was now home but because he had seen the Lord turn his difficulties into doors!

How can we see our difficulties become doors? Certainly, our *response* to life's difficulties is a key. We can't control our circumstances, and some will be difficult. But we can control our response. Our right attitude and our faith in Christ can set the stage for God to turn our difficulties into doors of opportunity.

In addition, this passage from Philippians shows some of the tools God used in Paul's life—and can use in our lives—to turn difficulties into doors:

1. *The power of prayer.* “Prayer,” someone has said, “moves the hand that moves the world.” Paul, the “apostle of the long road,” who traveled constantly to spread the Christian faith, was suddenly grounded for two years. But his work continued in large part through the power of prayer: “...I know that this will result in my release through your prayers” (Phil. 1:19a). For Paul, prayer was not the last resort; it was his first response!

2. *The help of the Holy Spirit.* Paul turned to prayer for turning difficulties into doors. He also depended on the help of the Holy Spirit: “...I know that this will result in my release through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:19).

3. *The hope of life eternal.* Paul lived victoriously no matter how difficult his circumstances because he knew that, ultimately, the Christian can't be defeated. If we live, our Lord is always able to turn even difficulties into doors of divine opportunity and blessing. If we die, we go to live in the immediate presence of our Lord:

“...for me, living serves Christ and dying is even better. If I continue to live in this world, I get results from my work. But I don't know what I prefer. I'm torn between the two because I want to leave this life and be with Christ, which is far better. However, it's more important for me to stay in this world for your sake” (Phil. 1:21-24).

Thanks be to God, who turns our difficulties into doors of divine opportunity and blessing!

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