

Video: If or Because We've seen in Paul's letter to the Philippians, that we are sinners who by God's grace have been made saints in Christ Jesus. And so we've been called to be servants of Christ, to live wholeheartedly for him.

But often we can let things get in the way of this commitment to serving the Lord. We are tempted to say that we'd serve Christ if our circumstances were better, or people around us were more helpful, or we had a better idea about what was going to happen.

But God doesn't want us to serve Christ, if. He wants us to serve him, no matter what, because of who he is and what he has done.

And it was this commitment that Paul expressed in his letter to the Philippians. Paul had experienced exceptionally tough circumstances, painful personal attacks and great uncertainties. But he overcame them all, to serve Christ, no matter what!

Philippians 1:12-26: "Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴ Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

¹⁵ It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶ The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸ 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, ¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰ I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me."

1. When Circumstances are Challenging

Paul's circumstances were far from ideal. When he said, "What has happened to me..." Philippians 1:12 that included his arrest in Jerusalem, imprisonment for two years in Caesarea, a transfer to Rome via a shipwreck off Malta and house-arrest in Rome where he waited to stand trial before Caesar with the threat of execution hanging over him.

During that time he was constantly guarded by praetorians - well trained soldiers who watched his every move. Paul had no privacy, no liberty, no freedom to travel to take the gospel to new towns and cities.

But Paul didn't write about this to complain. He wasn't looking for sympathy or pity. Instead he wanted the Philippians to know that all of this "has really served to advance the gospel." Philippians 1:12

Paul wanted them to see that even in his challenging circumstances, God was at work in bringing people into contact with the life-giving message of Jesus! That God wasn't just working despite his circumstances - he was working through them. There were two ways this was happening:

a) Share Christ

First of all, Paul said: "It has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ." Philippians 1:13 The soldiers thought Paul was their captive. But actually they were his captive audience as he shared with them the reason for his imprisonment - his faith in Jesus, the one who could set captives free!

Paul had done this before. One family became part of the Philippi because Paul and Silas, with backs bleeding, prayed, sang and witnessed from a cell!

Again and again in his life, Paul tried to look at problems and see opportunities for the gospel. And he taught others to do the same, to: "Make the most of every opportunity." Colossians 4:5

Challenging circumstances can feel like 'chains' that restrict or stop us from sharing Christ. But they don't need to defeat us. God wants to use us as we keep sharing Christ even in these challenging times!

b) Inspire Others

And as we do so, we can inspire others to do the same. As a result of his situation, Paul said, “Most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.” Philippians 1:14

Paul was imprisoned for preaching the gospel. But instead of putting others off doing the same, he became an inspiration to them to fulfil God’s calling on their lives.

Years ago I read the story of Keith Green, a Christian musician who was committed to living for Christ and sharing the gospel. In 1982, at the age of just 28, he was killed in an aircraft crash, along with 10 others, including 2 of his kids. It seemed such a needless and pointless tragedy.

But what has always stuck in my mind was how in this book written by his widow Melody, she wrote about the impact of his death. So many people were challenged and inspired by how Keith lived. But even more were challenged and inspired by his death.

When he was killed, they cried out to God, saying, “Lord, who’s going to speak to our generation now?” And the answer many received was, “You are.”

Paul was convinced that: “In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Romans 8:28 Of course, we don’t always know how God will choose to work through our circumstances. And we don’t often see good coming out of them immediately. But through sharing Christ even in the most challenging of circumstances we can be confident that God is at work in our lives.

2. When People are Difficult

But sadly, not all the people that were inspired to share the gospel by Paul’s imprisonment did it out of pure motives.

Yes, some preached Christ “out of goodwill... in love.” Philippians 1:15-16. They knew that Paul was suffering for the gospel and they resolved to continue what he in his present situation could not do. Paul rejoiced in their partnership in the work.

a) Motives Matter

But incredibly there were others who spoke “out of envy and rivalry...selfish ambition.” Philippians 1:15, 17.

Paul didn’t go into detail about how they were trying to do this. But it seems they were using Paul’s imprisonment as an opportunity to promote themselves. With Paul out of the way, they could take the limelight, they could make a name for themselves! And they hoped to “stir up trouble” Philippians 1:17 for Paul.

And that was wrong. Motives are important in serving Christ. There is something really wrong with serving God in a selfish and self-centred way. There is something false in promoting ourselves when we point people to Christ.

Later Paul wrote: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit...” Philippians 2:3 So we need to check our motives and hearts; allow God’s Word to judge our thoughts and attitudes, and ask God’s Spirit to cleanse us of impure desires.

b) The Gospel Matters More

But how should we respond to others who do serve out of wrong motives? Sadly, even today, Christians are tempted to compete with others in church and use ministry as an opportunity to show off. So how should we respond when we see this, or even suffer as a result of it?

Well incredibly, Paul wrote: “But what does it matter?” Philippians 1:18. He didn’t mean that what they were doing was ok. Or that they shouldn’t be challenged about this by those who could speak into their lives. They were sinning against God and needed help to repent.

But Paul wasn’t going to get angry about these hypocritical preachers. He wasn’t going to defend himself, dwell on their attack or the undoubted pain they’d caused. He knew that discussing and condemning them to the Philippians and getting all worked up, would have done nobody any good.

And anyway, as Paul wrote elsewhere “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant?” Romans 14:4 We don’t have the right or the resources to accurately assess or judge another Christian’s service for God. They don’t answer to us, but to the Lord.

But more than that, Paul could find even in this situation a reason for rejoicing. [“The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached.”](#) Philippians 1:18

Popularity, respect or position didn't matter to Paul. He didn't focus on what other people thought about him or did to him. The important thing for him was that the true gospel was being preached. And even when preached with false motives, Paul believed that [“the gospel... is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.”](#) Romans 1:16

This is Paul's servant attitude. He cared less about his reputation than he did about what people thought of Jesus. He wasn't ambitious for himself. He just wanted more people to come to faith in Christ!

That's the attitude we need when others try to put us down or compete with us. Not to fight back, complain and condemn as that would waste our time, produce bitterness in our hearts, and distract our efforts from serving the Lord.

Instead our priority must be that Christ is preached and his kingdom is advancing. If that is happening then we should rejoice in that – and then get on with fulfilling God's call on our lives. As Jesus said to Peter, when he was tempted to compare his ministry with that of John's: [“What is that to you? You must follow me.”](#) John 21:22

3. When the Future is Uncertain

And we're called to do this, even when our future is uncertain. Paul was facing a trial before Caesar, and although he seemed to be increasingly confident of a good verdict, he was far from certain about his future. He wasn't sure if he would be released or executed.

And to some extent, he wasn't even sure what he wanted to happen. [“What shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two.”](#) Philippians 1:22 He was pulled in two directions. He could see advantages in both being released and in being martyred. He wasn't sure which one was best!

We too live and serve Christ in a place of uncertainty. Of course God knows everything that will happen in our lives. David wrote in Psalm 139:16: [“All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”](#) God knows the whole story of our lives. Nothing catches him by surprise.

But God doesn't reveal these details to us. He doesn't remove the uncertainty of life from us. James wrote: [“You do not even know what will happen tomorrow.”](#) James 4:14.

But even in this place of uncertainty, there are four things here that we can know for sure that help us in our service for Christ.

a) Be Certain about our Destination

First of all, we can be certain about our destination. Unless the Lord comes back, we all face death – but Paul wrote, [“To die is gain.”](#) Philippians 1:21.

That's because Paul knew that death had been defeated by Christ when he died on the cross and rose again on the third day. And so for him, death held no dread because it meant simply [“to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.”](#) Philippians 1:23

And if we've trusted in Jesus, we can be confident that whatever happens, one day we too will be with him, which is better by far. One day [“he will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.”](#) Revelation 21:4 Whatever happens in our lives, this is our final destination. The Father's house is our permanent home.

b) Be Clear about our Goal

Secondly, we can be clear about the goal of our lives. Paul's goal was that [“now as always Christ will be exalted in my body: whether by life or by death.”](#) Philippians 1:20 Whatever happened to him, whatever circumstances he faced, whatever people thought of him, his ambition was to exalt Christ, reveal the greatness of Christ, to honour Christ in everything that he did.

And this should be our constant goal too. No matter what happens, our greatest desire, our primary ambition should be to honour our Lord and Saviour.

c) Be Committed in our Service

Thirdly, we can also live with a constant commitment to serve Christ. Paul wrote: [“For to me to life is Christ.”](#) Philippians

1:21. His life was all about living in relationship with Christ, growing in his knowledge of him and serving him.

Life for him was an opportunity to serve Jesus. “If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me.”
Philippians 1:22

That’s why even though Paul was longing for heaven, he was content to wait for God’s timing. He knew “it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.” Philippians 1:24 His desire was to do everything that Christ asked him to – to preach the gospel and to help this church to grow in their joy, faith and relationship with Jesus.

In all the uncertainties of our lives, this is what God wants to remain constant – our commitment to serve Christ. Whatever opportunities or challenges we face, this should be our desire, our loving response to all that he has done in our lives. “In view of God’s mercy, offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.” Romans 12:1 How and where we do this is in God’s hands. But living for Christ is to be our whole-life commitment.

d) Be Confident in the Lord

But finally, if we do this, then we can also know the same confidence that Paul expressed here:

- Confidence that God would continue to work in his life: “I know that... what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.” Philippians 1:19
- Confidence that despite the tough times ahead, he “will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage.” Philippians 1:20
- Confidence that God would use him to help others and he “will continue with all of you for your progress and joy.” Philippians 1:25

Where did this confidence come from? How could he be so sure in the face of unknown events and challenges? It was because his confidence was in the Lord.

He told the Philippians, he would experience this “through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ.” Philippians 1:19 Paul was confident that the Lord would provide all that he needed in answer to the prayers of his brothers and sisters in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is the confidence of the servant of Christ - not self-confidence or self-reliance – but confidence in God. As Paul wrote near the end of the letter: “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” Philippians 4:13

Conclusion

In our lives,

- Our circumstances will often be challenging
- People around us will often be difficult
- And our future is always uncertain

But we don’t need to allow these things to stop us from serving Christ. If our priorities are

- to share the gospel of Christ,
- encourage people to trust in Christ
- and in everything we do to honour Christ,
- then we do not need to be afraid of anything.

Whatever happens, we can be confident in him – that he’ll never leave us, that he’ll provide all that we need, and that one day he’ll bring us to himself, which will be better by far!

Andrew Burt
Enniscorthy Christian Fellowship
January 21st 2024