

Trusting in the Providence of God

Dan Jenkins

Paul's letter to the Philippians is so remarkable. Though written from his prison cell in Rome, it is not filled with despair and gloom. Instead, it is characterized by hope and joy. The words joy, rejoice, rejoiced and rejoicing are found 18 times in this short book. Imagine the condition of Paul who had been in prison for four years, and then read the book of Philippians and take note of how positive it is. It speaks of the joy which comes from *above us* and brings joy *within us*. It speaks of the joy which comes from *around us* and the joy which comes *from living* every day devoted to the Master. This book and this lectureship based on this book will enable us to find the true happiness God offers to each of us.

There are so many reasons for joy and the very first chapter gives us one of the greatest. We have every reason to rejoice because of the joy which comes from trusting in the providence of God.

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD AT PHILIPPI

Paul said, "But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel..." (Phil. 1:12). [All Scripture references are taken from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.] It is so remarkable that few individuals can see the "big picture." Paul saw those

things which were happening so differently from the way others saw them.

Go back to the beginning of the work in Philippi and see how this work was born in adversity. Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke had left Troas because of the Macedonian call given to the great apostle. They may have arrived in Philippi believing great things were about to happen, but such was not the case. True enough, they were able to find that band of women worshiping beside the river, but it appears that *only one* of them (along with her household) was converted. From outward appearance, this was not much of a beginning of a great work!

Shortly afterwards, as they returned to this place of prayer, they had to deal with the slave girl who was possessed with the spirit of divination. Their actions resulted in a mob scene. Paul and Silas were arrested, beaten with rods and many stripes, delivered to the jailer and placed in stocks in the inner prison. This certainly did not seem to be the beginning of a great work!

The story does not end there. God miraculously shook the prison, opened every door and removed the chains holding every prisoner. This resulted in the conversion of the jailer and his household. The very next morning they were released and after meeting with the brethren they departed. It was much of a beginning for a great work!

Yet, hear the words of Paul, "The things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel." When Paul left that city, that small band of disciples could never have seen the role they would play in God's providential working with mankind. They were the only church to contribute to the work that was begun in Thessalonica (Phil. 4:16). The liberality of this church was used by Paul to motivate more prosperous

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churches in Achaia to join in the collection that Paul gathered to take to the poor saints in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8:1-4). When we look at the letter Paul wrote to Philippi, we learn that it was this very church who sent one of its members to bring their gift to the apostle. Epaphroditus sought out this “criminal,” risking his own life to deliver that gift and then ministered to Paul (Phil. 2:25-30; 4:18).

The church at Philippi could never have seen how they would be used by God. If they could only have known, they would have had great joy in the way His providence worked through them. Today, that small band of Christians is now praised around the world for their compassion, their sacrificial spirit and their part in the evangelizing of the world. What a great lesson for us!

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD IN THE LIFE OF PAUL THE MISSIONARY

To better understand the joy of trusting in the providence of God, take time to look at how God worked in the life of Paul after he departed from Philippi. Note how often those plans he made for his life were never realized as he expected them to be, but they “...actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel” (Phil. 1:12). Providence does not work according to *our* plans, but according to His!

I am not sure what expectations Paul and those travelling with him had when they responded to the vision of the man from Macedonia pleading for Paul to come and help. If they had great expectations of many converts in Philippi, they were not realized. As far as we know, only two families were converted. The next city where they preached was Thessalonica and the confrontation in the synagogue did have an impact. “And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks,

and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas” (Acts 17:4). The church was established, but evidently within three short weeks, Paul and Silas were forced to flee for their lives (Acts 16:2, 10). A struggling infant church was left behind, but we must never lose sight of the providence of God working in that church! It all “...actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel.”

When he arrived in Berea, the reception was outstanding, but shortly afterwards Jews from Thessalonica arrived, stirred up the city and forced Paul to leave. From outward appearance, things were not going well, but it again “...actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel.” Such is the nature of providence!

The same is true throughout the rest of Paul’s missionary journeys. Time after time, if one looks only at how few obeyed the gospel in every city in which he preached, it appears that very little good had been done. His preaching resulted in the beginning of the church, which was followed by great persecution. Let us learn a valuable lesson. Joy does not come from seeing God *keeping us from adversity*. It comes from learning to trust in His providence *in the midst of adversity*!

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD IN THE LIFE OF PAUL THE PRISONER

As Paul finished his third missionary journey, he had great plans. He wrote to the church at Rome and gave the details, “But now I am going to Jerusalem to minister to the saints. For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem...Therefore, when I have performed this and have sealed to them this fruit, I shall

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go by way of you to Spain" (Rom. 15:25-28). Those plans never became a reality.

This was not the first time he had made plans which were not realized. He told the Romans, "Now I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that I often planned to come to you (but was hindered until now), that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles" (Rom. 1:13). He had *often* planned to go there, but each time something changed those plans. Every Christian should remember that even Paul had unrealized plans. We simply must not become disillusioned or lose faith when those things that we plan do not happen.

Paul did arrive at Jerusalem and was able to deliver the monies he had collected from the churches in Macedonia and Achaia and possibly other places. However, his enemies lied about him polluting the temple by bringing Gentiles into it, and his life was spared only because he was rescued from the Jewish mob by the Roman soldiers. He was innocent; he had done nothing wrong. At this point in his life, think of the importance of his words to the church at Philippi, "The things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel." Read the rest of his life to see just how true these words are.

He first appeared before Felix. Felix knew the great apostle was innocent, but he appeased the Jews by keeping Paul in prison (Acts 24:22-27). For two long years, Paul was a prisoner in Caesarea. Felix was succeeded by Festus. Paul appeared before the new governor, but his desire to court Jewish favor, even though he knew Paul was innocent, forced Paul to appeal for a trial before Caesar (Acts 25:9-27).

Festus did arrange for Paul to appear before King Agrippa. Imagine the scene as described by Luke. "So the

next day, when Agrippa and Bernice had come with great pomp, and had entered the auditorium with the commanders and the prominent men of the city” (Acts 25:23), Paul was brought in, bound in chains, to address all the nobility gathered that day. His preaching was so convincing that Agrippa said, “You almost persuade me to become a Christian” (Acts 26:28). Afterwards, Agrippa gave his evaluation as to the imprisonment of Paul. “This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains...This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar” (Acts 26:31-32). Don’t lose sight of the fact that Paul’s failed plans opened the door to preaching to these three great rulers and the prominent men of Caesarea. How can you ignore the providence of God in such matters? Think of the joy Paul had to tell these men about Jesus.

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD IN THE VOYAGE OF PAUL TO ROME

The voyage to Rome itself was filled with danger, but it is often in the midst of adversity that we can rejoice in seeing God at work. When the captain of the ship failed to listen to Paul, the ship found itself in the midst of a great storm. They ran strong cables under the ship to keep it from falling apart. The next day the situation was so dire they threw the cargo overboard. This did not help, so on the third day they threw the tackling of the ship overboard. Luke, who was with Paul on the ship, said, “Now when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest beat on us, all hope that we would be saved was finally given up” (Acts 27:20). *All hope was lost!* It is at such times that Christians have something the world never has – the joy of trusting in the providence of God!

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In the midst of this hopeless situation, Paul was able to tell every one of the 276 people on that ship that God was going to spare their lives. His words might not have been believed by many, especially those who could not swim, as the ship was destroyed as it ran aground, but such is the providence of God. Can you imagine how those men on the ship with Paul then regarded him? The adversity of the shipwreck and the events on that island allowed Paul great opportunity to teach during the three months they were there. Remember Paul's words, "The things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel."

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD IN PAUL IMPRISONED IN ROME

When Paul arrived at Rome, he did not immediately receive his trial before Nero. The Bible described his arrival in this way, "Now when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him" (Acts 28:16). Though he was allowed to live in a rented house for two years (Acts 28:30), he evidently was guarded by soldiers. When he wrote Philippians, he described his condition, "So that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ" (Phil. 1:13). The Greek word used for "chains" is so interesting. It is a special word indicating a short length of chain which was placed upon the wrist of a prisoner and also upon the wrist of the soldier guarding him. He was in his own house, but he was chained to a soldier. Now imagine the impact on those soldiers who rotated shifts and were forced to listen to him day after day, week after week, month after month as he dictated to a scribe the many

epistles he wrote from Rome. Imagine them listening to him as he taught those who came to learn from him. Imagine them seeing Christians risking their lives to be identified with Paul the “criminal” as they sought him out. Do you wonder how many different guards learned of Jesus? Paul answered that when he said, “The whole palace guard, and to all the rest...” (Phil. 1:13).

While we have used Paul’s words about all that happened in his life actually turning out for the furtherance of the gospel, Paul makes *specific* application of these words to those who were around him when he was in chains! The guards in Rome were the most elite of all the Roman army and they heard the gospel simply because of the adversity which came into Paul’s life. There is providence of God and there is joy in trusting in the providence of God!

But it doesn’t end with the guards. Read the last verses of this letter. “All the saints greet you, but especially those who are of Caesar’s household” (Phil. 4:22). His influence evidently had reached beyond the guards into the palace where some in the household of Caesar became Christians. God had commissioned apostles to go to every creature, and the gospel message went into the palace at Rome.

It does not end with the household of Caesar. Are you aware that because Paul had appealed his situation to Caesar, he appeared before Nero, the most powerful man on earth? The details are not known, but judging by what Paul said in his trials before Felix, Festus and Agrippa, Nero himself heard of the resurrection of Jesus, of righteous living and of the coming judgment. Those apostles truly carried the gospel to every creature under heaven! All of this because one man’s plans never were never realized and his life took another path.

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Now ask Paul about the joy of trusting in God's providence. Ask him if his life was always pleasant and if his plans were all realized. Ask him if there were thorns in his side which he longed to have removed, but which never were. Then ask him if what God provided for him—even years in prison—brought joy. I don't have to tell you his answer. His life proclaims the joy of trusting in His providence.

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD ON THOSE AROUND PAUL

Paul used his adversity to lead to his guards to hear the truth, but he did not stop there. He showed how God used his problems to change the lives of others. "Most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear" (Phil. 1:14). When fellow Christians saw Paul's faithfulness, they became much more bold to speak openly about Jesus. Don't overlook the fact that Paul did not say *some* brethren became bolder, but *most* brethren were impacted by his faith. The next verse shows that even false brethren became more vocal to speak. Their motives were heinous, but as Paul said, "Whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes and will rejoice."

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD IN EPAPHRODITUS AND TIMOTHY

Time and space do not permit us to fully discuss the providence of God in the lives of two other great Christians mentioned in this book. Timothy was at Philippi when the church began, and he was there when this letter was written (Phil. 1:1). He had firsthand

experience in seeing so many of the things which happened in Paul's life. He sat at Paul's feet and walked in Paul's steps. He saw the providence of God and knew the joy which comes from trusting in Him.

Epaphroditus was another Christian whose life shows us how God cares for His people. He was from Philippi and brought their gift to Paul. Imagine the danger in which he placed himself when he, by his actions, identified himself with this "criminal." Paul described him as "my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier." He also described him as the messenger of the Philippian church and the one who ministered to Paul on their behalf (Phil. 2:25). Epaphroditus became gravely sick in Rome to the point of almost dying, but God had mercy on him. He likely was the one who carried the Philippian letter back to that church. Epaphroditus could tell us so much about God's providence and the joy of trusting in it.

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD IN YOU

Child of God, read this book carefully. Think about how much it teaches us about God's care for His children. Take time to learn that adversity is not always adversity and shattered plans are not always shattered plans. Instead of complaining about life and worrying about tomorrow, learn the joy of trusting in the fact that you are a child of God and He really cares for you! Live your life believing His words. Paul said, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). Find comfort in His words, "If God be for us, who can be against us" (Rom. 8:31). Claim His promise, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5).

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God has not promised us cloudless days and untroubled waters, but He has given us His rainbow after every storm. Let us rejoice in Him!

Dan Jenkins preaches for the Palm Beach Lakes church of Christ in West Palm Beach, Florida.