

A Bad Situation. Pastor, I lost the last 10 years of my life taking care of my spouse. I was housebound. I was a caregiver. Just doesn't seem fair. Look what I get for my faithfulness to God. Pastor, I have been dealing with this lymphoma cancer, the aftereffects of a stroke, for several years now. Going to the doctor for infusions or checkups is a way of life. I thought retirement was going to be fun. Pastor, I tried to give my kids a Christian education. I tried to get them into a relationship with you. But they have gone down a different road, away from you. My heart is very sad. Bad situations. Plug in yours. Wouldn't it be great instead of being Mr. or Ms. Negative about your life situation, that you could be positive? Have an inner smile on your heart. Where can you turn for such an attitude adjustment? Focus on a man named Paul. You think you've had a rough shake. Paul could have been Mr. Double Negative. Listen to the last 20 years of his life. Five times beaten with the 40 lashes minus one, Three times beaten with rods, once he was stoned, 3 times shipwrecked, spent time holding on to a piece of wood in the Mediterranean sea, bitten by a poisonous snake, faced days without food, gone without sleep, had people trying to dispute everything he said, concern for the churches he started, a health ailment like diabetes or poor eyesight. And yet, he has an ongoing joy in his life.

This morning I want to speak to you about the ongoing joy in your life that comes with realizing no matter what challenges or prisons you face, the Lord will use your life to glorify and exalt his name. He has already planned how he wants to use your life to spread the message of the gospel and exalt his name. Some of the best moments for doing this will come during times of difficulty. So Christian, "Make The Best Of A Bad Situation!"

I am holding in my hand a short length of chain. As I rattle this chain, I want you to imagine that you are a Roman soldier guarding the Apostle Paul while he is under arrest in Rome. He is waiting to go to trial for his bold witness to Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Every time Paul moves you can hear the chains rattle that have been shackled to his legs. The man once walked the city streets of the Roman Empire boldly proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. Now he is a prisoner for that gospel. From all appearances it seems that he is going to spend the last days of his life on this earth in despair, defeat and disappointment.

Listen again to the chains rattle as he moves his feet and writes to the dear Christians in Philippi whom he called his joy and his crown. "I want you to know that what has happened to me has really served the advance of the gospel." It appears from the sound of the chains rattling around Paul's feet that his life of witnessing to Jesus has come to a screeching halt. Instead of inviting these dear Christians to have a pity party for him, Paul calls on them to join him in rejoicing and thanking the Lord for the way a bad situation has turned into a golden opportunity for the progress of the gospel.

He doesn't just speak in general terms about how a bad situation was turning into a blessing. He shares with them how Roman soldiers are listening in to the conversations he is having with people who come to visit him. "As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ." Look at the Roman guards from Caesar's Elite soldiers, the Praetorian Guard. These were soldiers that were the special forces of the Roman military. When they weren't doing special opps, they did local duty by escorting prisoners back and forth to court. Watch them listen as Paul speaks his belief that Jesus of Nazareth died on a cross for the sins of the world, rose from the dead. See the surprised looks on their faces as he proclaims Jesus as Lord and God, superior even to Caesar himself.

These special forces soldiers who guarded him heard the words of Paul and shared them with other Roman soldiers. It is amazing how the Lord can take a bad situation in your life and mine, and turn it into a great opportunity for us to confess our faith in Jesus.

A man named Ed once told his pastor how he had to have major surgery that required spending a week in the hospital. Every night before his wife left him they read the Bible together and prayed the Lord's Prayer. His roommate in the hospital room listened to the conversations, heard their Bible readings and prayers, and listened when the pastor came to visit and had a devotion. One day he asked Ed if the pastor could talk to him and read the Bible to him. When he recovered, he started coming to worship, took classes and became a communicant member of the church. Some of your best moments for bringing God's Word into the lives of other people will come during the moments of your life when you are going through tough times.

Listen again to the chains rattling as Paul writes more to these dear Christians to assure them that the Lord was using this prison experience as a blessing for the church. He writes, "Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly." Christianity was a new religion in Rome. Was it a legit religion that was worth listening too? Because of the positive reception it was getting from the soldiers and others in the community, more Christians were unafraid to talk about what they believed.

When you see how the Lord gave Paul the power to witness boldly while a prisoner in Rome, it gives us confidence like Paul and those brothers in Rome. When you hear how the Lord used Ed's stay in the hospital to lead someone to Jesus, then you are reminded that the Lord will also use the best moments of your life and the worst moments of your life as opportunities to use your life to bring the Word of God to others.

The bottom line is that people need to hear about Jesus or they will perish forever. Imagine for a moment that this chain was attached to a large piece of concrete and then shackled to your leg. You may be a good swimmer, but what chance would you have if someone threw you into a deep lake or out in the ocean? Every person in this world builds up a huge debt of sin that ultimately will bring us down to eternal death on judgment day. Our best efforts at doing good cannot free ourselves from the debt or cut us from the chain. Forgiveness is found only in Jesus. In the Lord's Prayer we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses." The word for forgive has the meaning of letting something go, freeing it, releasing it. The Lord leaves us on this earth to share this message with people who do not believe. I wonder how many Roman soldiers discovered how they were free from sin through Jesus and believed in Jesus for their freedom from the huge weight of sin.

Not everyone was happy over how Paul's life in prison was being used to further the gospel. It appears that there were Christians in Rome who were jealous that Paul was reaching people in Rome that they were not able to reach. Even in the early church, there were Christians who did not always get along because of sinful pride and jealousy.

Listen to the chains rattle again, as Paul moves his feet and writes about this challenge he faced in Rome from other Christians who were jealous of him. "It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. 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.” Paul is not being a Pollyanna who runs around seeing good in everything even if it is not really there. He is genuinely happy and joyful that even when people are envious of him, the gospel is still getting out to heathen people living in Rome. Some were sharing the name of Jesus with others out of pure love for Christ and for those who were lost. Others seemed to be in the numbers game, wanting to put up better numbers and get more attention by winning more converts. Look at how our church is growing. We are doing much better than you Paul.

Before we become too critical of these early Christians for the wrong motives in sharing the gospel lets take a closer look at our situation today. See that little church across town struggling to pay its bills. At a church meeting one member pipes up and says, “If only we had ten more members we could pay all of our bills.” Another person jumps in and says, “If only we had a few younger families, they could help us with cleaning the church and maintaining our property.” Listen to the conversation between two Christian women standing in line at the supermarket. One says, “We had over 100 in our Vacation Bible School last week, how many did you have?” See the Sundays School where prizes are giving out for those who bring the most friends.

Let’s get even more personal. Are our motives always pure when it comes to sharing what we believe about Jesus? Perhaps we do so out of sense of obligation or shame or guilt. We may even do it reluctantly because we feel totally inadequate instead of putting our trust in the Lord. When bad times come to us, we may fail to see the opportunities the Lord is placing before us. We may even be jealous of other Christian churches and question why they seem to be growing and we aren’t. How true are the words of the prophet Isaiah who said that even our righteousness or the good things we try to do for the Lord are filthy rags in God’s sight. Our only hope standing before the Lord on the last day rests in Jesus and his righteousness. Listen to what Paul later writes in this letter. “That I might be found in him (in Jesus), not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ-the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”

What amazes us about Paul is his confidence that every situation he faces will turn out as an opportunity to lift up and exalt the name of Jesus. “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. 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.”

Paul was confident that his body would be used to exalt Christ whether it was sitting as a prisoner bound in chains, or whether he was a free man walking through the stone paved streets of cities in the Roman Empire talking to people about Jesus. The chains are rattling again, as Paul removes the shirt from his body to wash and bathe himself. The Roman soldiers stare in amazement at the scars across his back, numerous beatings received for his witness to Jesus and his resurrection. To the Corinthians he would write, “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. Wherever the Lord takes your body this coming week or next year or ten years from now, join Paul in rejoicing how your life and your body will be used to exalt Christ, even if you end up in a hospital or prison. Amen.