

Making the Best of a Bad Situation

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- [0 : 0 0] Thank you, Richard. That's a good message in that song. Whenever you think that your life is hard, I want you to think about the life of the Apostle Paul and the hardship that he went through over a four-year period.
- It began in Jerusalem. He was seized by Jewish leaders and charged with inciting a riot. The charges were groundless, but nonetheless, he was taken prisoner. He wound up being taken to Caesarea and being imprisoned there for two years, but never truly charged with a crime.
- Finally, he got fed up with it. He was under arrest. He was imprisoned. He appeared before two different Roman governors.
- One succeeded the other. It just seemed like they would not do anything. They were listening to those Jewish leaders who were falsely accusing him of inciting a riot, causing all kinds of havoc in that place.
- [1 : 2 4] And so they would listen to Paul, listen to them, but do nothing. Finally, Paul got tired of it, and he said, I appeal to Caesar. And as a Roman citizen, he had that right, and they had to send him from Caesarea to Rome.
- He had to travel by ship. Now think about it. He's been two years in prison. He's now going to Rome on the ship where hopefully he's going to find some answers, get some relief.
- Along the way, a hurricane-like storm comes up. For many, many days, they think the ship's going to sink, but by the grace of God, it does not.
- But when the storm's over, the ship does run aground, breaks up, and Paul has to swim to shore, most likely hanging on to a plank from the broken ship.
- He finally gets to shore. There's a fire burning. He warms himself by the fire, and all of a sudden, he gets snake bit. But again, God's gracious.
- [2 : 4 2] It doesn't faze him. He finally is taken to Rome. He's going to appear before Caesar. He does not know when.
- But as a Roman citizen, he is allowed to live under what we would call house arrest as he awaited his trial.
- He could have visitors. People could come and talk with him, listen, he could teach. He had a lot of freedom in terms of living in that house, people coming. But at all times, he was chained to a Roman soldier.
- No matter who came, no matter what they were talking about, no matter how he felt, he was confined to that one place and always chained to that soldier.
- That would be a hard situation, wouldn't it? A terrible way to live with no end in sight. Well, if you want to read those details, the details, I want to encourage you to read Acts chapter 21 through chapter 28.
- [3 : 5 4] Begin in Acts 21, go to the end of the book, and you can read all that happened to Paul over this period of four years. What I want to ask you is, how would you respond?

How would you respond if you've been in prison for four years and no formal charges? You appeal, you go to Rome. You're going to be there to get your day in court before Caesar himself, the emperor.

But you don't know when. And in the meantime, you're just sitting there at this one place, can't go anywhere else, chained to a Roman soldier at all times. How would you respond? What would you do?

Here's what Paul did. Two things I want to point out. He continued his ministry of preaching and teaching, just as he always had done. Look at this. This is Acts 28, verses 30 and 31.

He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

[5 : 00] He had a lot of freedom in that setting. Second thing he did, he wrote letters to churches. He wrote four letters that we have in our New Testament.

Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, and Philippians. New Testament commentators refer to these as the prison letters of Paul. Well, today I want us to begin a study of the letter to the Philippians.

This is the most positive letter of Paul's in the New Testament. Some commentators say that it's just a letter filled with joy.

One commentator, one writer, Stuart Briscoe, agrees that joy is one of the themes of Philippians, but it's not the kind of joy that we normally think of that comes from happy feelings or pleasant circumstances.

Look at how he describes the situation. Paul talks a lot about joy and rejoicing, not the I've got a wonderful feeling, everything's going my way kind of joy, but a remarkable joy that he could experience in prison when things were going wrong.

[6 : 20] That is a quality of life that is worth knowing because we all have our prisons of one kind or another. One of the ways Paul found joy in prison was just what I'm going to call he made the best of that bad situation.

And that's what I want us to do this morning. I want you to open your Bible. All these verses are not going to be on the screen. The book of Philippians, chapter one.

Over the course of this message, we're going to read the first 18 verses. So I want you to open your Bible and leave it there. And what I want us to see is how Paul teaches us to make the best of our bad situations.

First thing, or the first lesson in doing that is this. Focus on others. When you find yourself in a bad situation, not a lot of hope, focus on other people.

That's what Paul did. He entertained people coming and going, teaching, preaching. We read from the book of Acts. He wrote these four letters. Let's begin with this letter.

[7 : 37] Philippians 1, 1. Paul and Timothy. Servants of Christ Jesus to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi with the overseers and deacons.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul writes a typical letter in terms of the form of his day.

He included Timothy just because Paul was that kind of guy. Timothy had nothing to do with the start of that church. He was sort of Paul's understudy at the time and associate.

But it just sort of shows us Paul's bigness. He wasn't concerned about getting all the attention. He includes Timothy.

He addresses them as they are, as all Christians are, saints in Christ Jesus. And this is the only letter where he actually addresses the church leaders, the overseers, the pastors, the elders, and the deacons.

[8 : 44] Now, here's what I want us to think about. Paul's situation is not only awful, but he didn't know if it would ever get any better.

He didn't know. I mean, he was no one. He was a Roman citizen. He had the right to appear before the emperor. But what if there were a thousand people ahead of him?

He didn't know. His situation was a recipe for just sort of turning inward, feeling sorry for himself, and just being depressed.

Well, that's not what he did. Paul responded to this awful situation by focusing on other people. As we saw, he continued his ministry of preaching and teaching.

He wrote letters to churches. We know that he wrote this letter to the Philippian church from prison because he refers to it four times in chapter one.

[9 : 54] You'll see it there on the screen, verses 7, 13, 14, and 17. He uses the phrase my imprisonment. That's what the ESV, New American Standard, uses.

The NIV talks about my chains. Paul was in prison. He had no freedom. He couldn't go where he wanted to go. He could live there, that rented house.

He could have visitors, but he couldn't leave. And at all times, he was chained to that Roman soldier. Well, Paul spent at least four years as a prisoner.

Think about it. Two years in Caesarea, as we looked at or talked about a while ago, and at least two years in Rome. He did not know if he'd ever see freedom again.

In such a hopeless situation, it would be natural for him just to sort of give up, wouldn't it? To just sink into despair and depression.

[10 : 59] But he did the opposite. Instead of just sort of turning inward, he turned outward. Instead of just feeling sorry for himself and thinking how bad he had it, he started thinking about other people and their needs and how he might meet them.

Paul was specifically focused on other people's need to hear the gospel, to come to faith in Jesus, or to grow in their relationship with him.

There's a lot of things here we need to learn from Paul. Whenever you find yourself in a bad situation, and life's full of them, isn't it? We all go through them.

Hard times. Sometimes they're short. Sometimes they're long. Sometimes we can see the light at the end of the tunnel. Sometimes we cannot. But whenever you find yourself in a situation like this, even a hopeless situation, don't retreat into your own little private world and just think about yourself and how bad you have it.

Focus on other people. Talk to other people. It may be your natural inclination, I don't want to talk about it. Talk to other people.

[12 : 19] Go see other people. Get out. Get out. Don't just try to hide and hope it'll all go away. Do what you can to try to minister to other people.

Focus on their needs. You know, that's one of the ways that God has wired us to deal with hardship. Some of you in this room, I have heard say something along this line.

I went to see so-and-so. I knew they were having a hard time. I went to visit them to maybe offer a little encouragement. But they encouraged me more than I did them.

I want you to understand. God has made us as human beings created in His image to be relational people. And we especially need other people in our lives when things are going bad.

When we are tempted to be down and out, depressed. The most natural thing for you to do is try to write it out yourself. Keep silent.

[13 : 29] Oh, I don't want to bother anybody. Talk to people. Find people who will listen to you, who will care. This is sort of an aside here.

If someone comes to you and you can tell they're burdened, there's a problem, and they start talking about their situation, just so I don't step on anybody's toes, get too personal, let's just say they come to you and they're discouraged and they're down and out because their dog died.

Don't listen to two sentences and then tell them your experience about your dog dying and forget about them.

That happens more times than not. You think about it. When you have really tried to talk to somebody, unload a burden, get some help, just not keep it all to yourself, and as soon as you get it all out, instead of them listening to you, trying to encourage you, they tell you their stories.

Sort of like you show them your scar, they got to show you theirs. That's not what people need who come to see us. Human nature is such, we make life all about me.

[14 : 58] I'd rather talk about me than anybody. You had too. Not talk about me, talk about yourself. We need to resist that temptation. When people are coming to us, when they are trying to focus on other people, let them, let them help them.

The second lesson about making the best of bad situations is be thankful. Look for something to thank God for or to thank somebody else for.

I want you to look now in verses three through eight. Paul says, I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you, for you all, making my prayer with joy.

Paul was a southerner. He talks about you all all the time. Look at it. Always in every prayer of mine for you all, making my prayer with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

And I'm sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion this day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all because I hold you in my heart.

[16 : 19] For you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. I want us to look at some of the things that Paul was thankful for.

There in Rome, chained to that soldier, no real idea when or if you'll get set free. Look at it.

Number one, be thankful for the people in your life. Be thankful for the people in your life. Paul was thankful for these Philippian Christians.

And he thanked God for them. Look at it. Verse three again. I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine. He's telling them, I thank God for you.

[17 : 28] And then some of the other things he says, it lets them know Paul's thankful for them as well. He's thanking God and that's his way of thanking them.

Let's think about some of the things that he was thankful for. They had responded to the gospel in Acts chapter 16. It tells us about Paul going to this place. He preached. People believed. A church was started.

They became partners, he says, in the next verse, verse five here, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day into now. They became partners with him in ministry.

How did they do that? One thing, they prayed for him. Chapter one, verse 19. We'll look at it again another time. They really prayed for him. They supported him financially.

He talks about the gift they had sent him. They'd met his needs in chapter four, verse 16. They even sent one of their members, a man by the name of Epaphroditus, in chapter two, verse 25.

[18 : 28] It is obvious that people in that church, they loved Paul. They were with him as much as they could.

They supported him. And he loved them. He talks about it specifically in verse eight. It's my prayer that your love may abound more and more. And we'll talk about that a little bit later too.

What I want to ask you is to think about some of the people in your life that you need to thank God for and probably express thanks to yourself.

Paul is showing us here that no matter how bad our situation may be, it's always helpful to count our blessings. Thank God and thank other people that God has used to bless us.

I want you to think about some of the people that God has placed in your life who have truly invested in you. Think of some of the people that God has placed in your life.

[19 : 44] They've given of themselves to you and you really are thankful for them. Think of some of the ones who have always been there for you even if you didn't really pay them a whole lot of attention.

Even if you didn't really need anything sometimes. Think of some of the people who've always been there for you whether you acknowledged it or not, whether you were thankful or not at the time.

Think about some of the people who have invested in your spiritual well-being. That's the focus of what Paul's thankful for here. Some of the people who actually shared the gospel with you lived like a Christian before you have taught you how to live a Christian life by their example and by their words.

When was the last time you thanked God for them? Now in thanking God for them we do that genuinely, seriously but when we thank God for someone it makes us think of them too, doesn't it?

And some of the things they have done for us and in thanking God for people it should motivate us to thank them.

[21 : 09] When was the last time that you actually took the time looked them in the eye or maybe even wrote them a card and said thank you for being there.

Thank you for what you've done. Thank you. You've been a blessing. God has used you in my life. You know you may be in a terrible situation right now.

Maybe things going on in your home, family, where you work, job instability. Maybe you've got health issues. Maybe some school problems.

Why don't you look around at who and what you can give thanks for right now. I mean life may be hard but in the midst of that that's what Paul was doing.

Think about who or what. I can give thanks to God for focus on God, focus on the other person and not just get swallowed up in my own pity.

[22 : 29] Why don't you even reach out to someone that you know loves you in your difficult situation and just let them know you're hurting.

Ask them to pray for you. Maybe ask them to help you, guide you, give you some advice.

No matter what we're going through in our lives right now, we can give thanks to God for people who have been a blessing to us. We can give thanks to God for various kinds of things and we can give thanks to people who may really need to hear that you acknowledge their help, their love, their blessing.

Do that. Do it soon. Another thing we see here, Paul was thankful for God's continuing work in his life, so we need to learn to be thankful for God's continuing work in our lives and in the lives of people we care about.

That's verse 6 and that's what we looked at last week, so we're not going to go there anymore. Let's move on. The third lesson about making the best of bad situations is this, pray.

[23 : 52] That should be natural to us as Christians. But Paul in verses 9 through 11, he really takes us to school about the way we pray.

And there is so much there that's contrary to the way we normally think about prayer and pray that I want us to come back next week and let that be the focus of our study. Learning to truly pray in ways that Paul prayed and found answers and helped people.

So let's move on now. Number four, stay focused on the big picture of what God is doing in your life. How do you make the best of a bad situation?

Well, stay focused on the big picture of what God is doing in your life. Now, let's look again now at verse 12. We're going to read verses 12 through 18.

I want you to think about what we've been looking at so far, Paul's situation and what he says. I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

[25 : 15] And most of the brothers having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will.

The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.

What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Now if you look back in verse 12, Paul begins this section by referring to what has happened to me.

What's described in detail in Acts chapter 21 through 28. Alec Motyer, a New Testament commentator, he provides a helpful summary of what happened to Paul, we need to think about again as we move on.

Look at this. He says, an entirely false accusation was leveled at him by his own people. He was nearly lynched by a religious mob.

[26 : 34] He was made the subject of unjust and unprovoked insult and shame. He was kept imprisoned owing to official craving for popularity or for money.

Then came the prolonged trial of the storm at sea where his life hung as it seemed by a thread. Eventually when he reached Rome, he came in the company of the condemned, bound by a chain and destined to drag out at least two years under arrest awaiting the uncertain decision of an earthly king.

Nevertheless, still imprisoned, still chained, still unheard, still uncertain. He looks back and declares that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.

That's just amazing, isn't it? After all he's gone through, the most natural thing would be for Paul to just be depressed, angry, angry at God, angry at everybody, questioning why in the world, God, have you allowed this to happen to me?

I have been faithful. Why have you allowed me to go through four years of hell on earth and still no end in sight?

[27 : 58] Paul didn't think that way. He didn't talk that way. He didn't write that way. This shows that what he was doing, he was looking at the big picture of what God was doing in his life.

He said he was called by God to be, to take the gospel to the Gentiles. He was called by God to be the missionary, the evangelist, the church starter among the Gentile world.

Well, he didn't want it to happen this way. It certainly wasn't what he planned, but he was now there in Rome preaching and teaching in what would be called the heart and soul of the Gentile world.

So instead of just thinking about how bad things have been, he looks at it as it's all served God's purpose. It has advanced the gospel.

Now I want you to look at some of these verses at the positive things Paul calls attention to that have happened as a result of his suffering and imprisonment.

[29 : 13] First, he's been able to reach the whole imperial guard in verse 13. That was the official body guard of the emperor and the ones responsible for guarding Roman prisoners, official Roman prisoners like Paul.

One of those soldiers was chained to Paul at all times. They would have rotated. They would over a period of two years, no telling how many different soldiers, hundreds of soldiers would have rotated in and out guarding Paul, being chained to Paul.

Well, you know that some of those soldiers, they would have hated being there. They would have hated Paul. They would have ignored him. They would have tried to mistreat him as much as they could. But being a Roman prisoner, a Roman citizen, he had certain rights, so they couldn't do much.

But some of them, some of them would have listened to Paul as he taught the scriptures, as he explained the gospel of people coming.

Some of them would have listened carefully as Paul dictated the letter to the Ephesian Christians, to the Colossians, to the man Philemon, and to these Christians here at Philippi.

[30 : 35] No doubt Paul would have personally shared the gospel with those soldiers who were interested, who asked questions. Paul took advantage of that.

He was excited that he had been able to share the gospel with all those Roman soldiers. Let me ask you, have you ever considered that God may have allowed you to go through a time of difficulty for the purpose of touching certain people's lives?

or that maybe God was just using you and your suffering to accomplish something that that was just God's plan.

That's how it was going to be accomplished. I have heard of some Christians, and you have too, maybe some in here, who have gone through, for example, cancer treatments.

If you've ever seen that set up, some people, some Christians have gone through cancer treatments, they've been sitting in a chair, hooked up to an IV, getting chemo, and sort of beside them, not far away, maybe in sort of like a circle.

[31 : 47] I've seen that. Somebody else is there hooked up. And they could be a little pod of people, or just two or three, according to how the room is set up. I've heard Christians talk about being being able to share the gospel with people during that time.

I have heard Christians talk about being encouraged by other Christians who were going through that same experience. In such a situation, it may be your natural tendency to just feel sorry for yourself.

Why do I have to have this? Why do I have to just go through this? And just ignore everybody around you. Just get over it. But we need to learn to look at the bigger picture, whatever situation we find ourselves in, that God may want to use us in our situation to touch somebody else's life in various kinds of ways.

But as Christians, we always have a responsibility to touch people in the name of Jesus Christ, to share the gospel, to demonstrate the difference Jesus makes in our lives.

Paul was able to reach the imperial guard because he was outwardly focused. I want you to look at something else. He was used by God. His faithfulness motivated others to be bold witnesses.

[33 : 17] Look again at verse 14. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. You know, if you would take a public stand as a Christian, I mean, let it be known, I'm a follower of Jesus Christ.

I love the Lord. I am really trying to serve Him. It very well may be, you might be used by God to inspire somebody who is a Christian, but they're sort of reluctant to take a stand.

Or God may use you to actually share the gospel to someone. When I was a student at Clemson in 1975, God used a friend of mine.

We'd gone through high school together. We were at Clemson together. And in our sophomore year, he took a strong stand to start living a faithful Christian life.

And when he did that, he inspired me. And I followed his lead and drawing back closer to the Lord.

[34 : 32] I'm going to be real honest with you. We'd gone through high school together. We'd done some sinful things together. We knew one another well. He took that stand in front of me.

And truly, God used it to get my attention, to draw me back to where I needed to be. And not long after that, to call me to preach. There may be someone in your life today, maybe a family member, a friend, maybe somebody who's just sort of an acquaintance, and they're looking at you more than you thought they were.

Maybe they are a Christian, but they're not where they need to be spiritually today. Maybe they're sort of drifted away from the Lord or even rebelling. It could be that if you would get serious about, I'm going to live like a Christian.

I'm going to not let whatever it is that's your terrible situation, I'm not going to let it defeat me. I'm going to be faithful to God no matter what it costs me, no matter how much I suffer.

And in so doing, God will use your witness, your testimony to get somebody's attention and draw them back to himself or maybe even draw them to him for the first time and save them.

[35 : 53] But I want you to understand, you've got to step up for that to happen. You can't be ashamed, timid, to actually say, I'm a Christian, to rise above the difficulty.

You can't feel sorry for yourself. You can't live life as if it's just about me and my pleasure, my convenience. Paul's faithfulness motivated others to be bold Christians.

Yours could as well. One more thing quickly. Paul didn't let other people's jealousy or impure motives bother him. Verses 15 through 18, Paul was just concerned that the gospel will be preached.

What we read there, Paul's not talking about people who were trying to make his life more miserable. He's not talking about false teachers.

He's talking about people who actually did preach the gospel. They were hoping, because of Paul's confinement, they were hoping to make him jealous, make him envious. They were hoping to bother him. They had terrible motives, but he didn't let it bother them.

[37 : 06] I want to encourage you to listen to Paul, look at Paul. You be faithful. You appreciate when people live a Christian life.

You appreciate when the Bible is taught, when churches grow, when people are being reached and it's not your church. Don't be jealous. Don't be envious.

Just be concerned that the name of Jesus is held high and the gospel is preached faithfully. You know, all of us do go through hard times.

Sometimes they last longer than we want them to. Sometimes we're in the midst of them and there's not one thing we can do to change it. When you find yourself in that situation next time, ask God to help you to make the best of it by doing what Paul did.

Focus on other people. Be thankful for who and what God provides to help you. Pray.

[38 : 14] And stay focused on the big picture of what God is doing in your life, in you and through you. Let's pray together.

Let's pray together.