



# Obstacles or Opportunities

## Introduction

Philippians 1:12-18

Prison has a way of changing people. People who have been in jail for any length of time will come out a number of different ways, but sometimes it flips a switch in a person and motivates them in a whole new way.

Paul the apostle made some of his greatest contributions while he was in prison. As he wrote in his letter to the Philippians, "The things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel" (Philippians 1:12). What things? Being arrested in Jerusalem, spending two years in prison in Caesarea, being placed on a boat and taken to Rome, then being jailed in a Roman prison.

How in the world could those things turn out for the furtherance of the gospel? Picture this: Paul was chained twenty-four hours a day to Roman guards who worked in six-hour shifts. Imagine the impact that would have made on their lives; they were literally a captive audience. No wonder he was saying, "Hey, don't feel sorry for me. Some of these guys are coming to Christ."

Not only that, but "most of the brethren in the Lord," he wrote, "having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear" (Philippians 1:14). Other believers were being emboldened by Paul's example.

Maybe you're feeling imprisoned or chained to something. It could be your home, your family, a lousy job or career, or a disease or debilitating condition. It could be that you're literally imprisoned; you've made a mess of your life and don't know what to do. Maybe you've been asking yourself, "What could I ever do in this place, in this condition?"

How about seeing it as a divine appointment? God can use you powerfully in your situation to further the gospel. Some of your greatest work could take place now, if you let God into your place of confinement and watch Him work.

Paul certainly didn't plan to be stuck in a Roman prison. Yet while in prison, he led Roman guards to Christ, emboldened other believers, and wrote one of his most personal, winsome, loving, thankful letters. How can you, like Paul, look at your situation through the eyes of the Lord this week?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Devotional by Skip Heitzig entitled "Your Prison, God's Appointment" found @ <http://connectwithskip.com/devomail/read/daily-devotional/2018/01/16/your-prison-god's-appointment>

## Open it

1. Looking back at your days in school, what was the most difficult class or teacher you had? Why? Did taking that class make you better or just bitter?

## Read it

Philippians 1:12-18

## Explore it

2. What did Paul want the Philippians to know about his imprisonment in verse 12?
3. What happened around Paul as a result of his imprisonment?
4. How did Paul's imprisonment affect his fellow believers?
5. What two reasons did people have to proclaim Christ?

# Apply it

## **Jailhouse Rock!!!**

*Just think of something dreadful that you wouldn't want to encounter. And just imagine that if it happened, it would seem to prevent you from doing the most important thing in the world to you. That's what Paul faced. Besides death, being chained to a guard twenty-four hours a day had to be a dreadful experience because it prevented him from doing the thing he loved best—spreading the gospel. When it first happened, he may have wondered, How in the world can God use this for good? How can I fulfill the great responsibility that God has given me? It just doesn't make sense. Little did Paul know in the beginning when he was confined that God intended to use that difficulty for many people's benefit—including ours, through the centuries.*

*Without Paul's imprisonment, he might not have written so many letters. Then his contemporaries and those who have read them down through the years wouldn't have drawn closer to God. In these verses, Paul is expressing his conclusion that the results of his imprisonment were a "good" that he never could have imagined: the effect on the guards and Christians who were encouraged to be bolder in their witness for Christ. But he never could have anticipated the greater good of all of us readers benefiting from his words. Plus, it seems that there were people in Caesar's court (the palace guard of whom many were members of the royal family) and even family members who believed in Jesus—right under Nero's nose (Philippians 4:22).<sup>2</sup>*

**6. God had "signed off" on Paul's imprisonment and was going to use it for great good in the life of the church. How can knowing that God has signed off on our trials and troubles allow us to find joy amidst great difficulty?**

**7. As a result of this imprisonment, Paul's ministry had to change. What were some of the things Paul would no longer be able to do in ministry, and what new opportunities were now available to him? When have you seen God close a door in your life only to open a different one for you?**

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<sup>2</sup> Miller, Kathy Collard. Paul and the Prison Epistles (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 2839-2850). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

8. In what ways can people in Paul's situation grow angry or bitter? What truths can we learn from Paul's life when we face a dead end in life?
9. List out the difficulties you are facing right now in life. How might they be used by Christ to further his kingdom work?

### **Pocketful of Rainbows!!!**

*The same God who used Moses' rod, Gideon's pitchers, and David's sling used Paul's chains. Little did the Romans realize that the chains they affixed to his wrists would release Paul instead of bind him. Even as he wrote during a later imprisonment, "I suffer trouble, as an evildoer, even unto bonds; but the word of God is not bound" (2 Tim. 2:9). He did not complain about his chains; instead, he consecrated them to God and asked God to use them for the pioneer advance of the gospel. And God answered his prayers.<sup>3</sup>*

10. Paul didn't see his prison cell as an obstacle, but rather an opportunity. Why are we so quick to see the obstacles trials bring instead of the opportunities?
11. What things must we know about God that allow for a positive outlook on life no matter the circumstances?

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<sup>3</sup> Wiersbe, Warren W.. Be Joyful (Philippians): Even When Things Go Wrong, You Can Have Joy (The BE Series Commentary) (p. 41). David C Cook. Kindle Edition.

### **In The Ghetto!!!**

*Speaking of fearlessness, Paul says that when others heard about his brave witness in the Roman prison, they were inspired to greater faithfulness. This is the second time in three verses that Paul mentions “the brothers” (v. 12). The first result of Paul’s imprisonment related to those on the outside, but now Paul mentions how God has used his situation for those on the inside—the body of Christ. The family of faith was being built up by Paul’s afflictions. Persecuted Christians often inspire otherwise timid believers. After Jim Elliot and his four missionary friends were brutally killed by the Auca Indians, a high number of Wheaton College graduates offered themselves as missionaries in the years following (Carson, Basics, 24). A similar thing was happening through Paul’s sufferings. Christians were becoming more confident, more bold, and were speaking “fearlessly.”<sup>4</sup>*

**12. How does Paul's example of perseverance inspire you? What things must change in your life so that your fortitude might grow to be like Paul's?**

**13. Why do so many Christians struggle with being bold for Christ? What can we do for one another to change this trend?**

### **Don't Be Cruel!!!**

*Paul states the motives of the two groups in verse 15, and then adds to this description in verses 16-17. The envious evangelists are filled with “envy and strife.” The empathetic evangelists preach out of “good will.” The former preach Christ out of “rivalry,” while the latter preach out of “love.” The envious evangelists look at Paul’s imprisonment as an occasion to tear him down, to stir up trouble, and to elevate their ministries over Paul’s. The empathetic evangelists care about Paul. They understand that Paul is in prison by God’s sovereign will and not as a result of any disobedience or unfaithfulness. They serve out of goodwill toward Paul. They seek to continue his mission. So we have two groups of ministers with different motives. These ministers with bad motives seem to be believers, and so we shouldn’t think that we can’t fall into these same sins ourselves.<sup>5</sup>*

**14. How might Paul's imprisonment give occasion for Paul's critics to bad mouth him? Why is rivalry and envy so common amongst Christian leaders?**

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<sup>4</sup> Merida, Tony. Exalting Jesus in Philippians (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (p. 54). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>5</sup> Merida, Tony. Exalting Jesus in Philippians (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (p. 56). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

15. How has the advent of technology (radio, television, internet) made competition amongst churches even more prevalent than in Paul's day? What advice do you have for your church leaders to protect them from this needless comparison?

16. How can churches in a local area or community work together instead of being rivals? What message does this send to a watching world?

### **This is Living!!!**

*So let us speak the gospel that God has entrusted to us, and let us do it faithfully before God, who examines hearts. Let us pray for those who proclaim the gospel. And let us rejoice when people are proclaiming the gospel even if we find things about the messengers questionable. Do you care more about Christ's glory or the one speaking about Christ? May it be the former. Because Paul was preoccupied with the Savior, not the speaker, he could rejoice! Surely Paul's joyful attitude displayed in front of the Roman guards had an impact on them. His consistent testimony of joy in the midst of suffering, coupled with the explosive power of the gospel, made an eternal difference in their lives. There's no reason to believe that such a strategy for evangelism won't work today—living an attractive and joyful life before people and proclaiming the good news to them. Jesus is better than comfortable circumstances and high-profile positions in ministry. He matters more than what others think about us.<sup>6</sup>*

17. Paul found a way to find joy even when he felt stuck. Where do you feel stuck right now? What can you start believing or doing that might allow you to be filled with joy instead of bitterness and hopelessness?

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<sup>6</sup> Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Philippians (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (pp. 59-60). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.  
Note: This study was compiled and questions were written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. [www.villagebible.church/smallgroups](http://www.villagebible.church/smallgroups)