

Order of Service and Sermon 1st August 2021

Prayer

Song From the rising of the sun – Ed Gungor

Song This is amazing grace – Phil Wickham

Church membership Derek & Carol (Led by Hugh Brenton)

Communion (Led by Hugh Brenton)

Song Give thanks to the Lord – Chris Tomlin

Bible reading: Philippians 1:12 – 19 (Margaret Jackson)

Sermon

Warren Wiersbe wrote a book called *'Encouragement for difficult days: the bumps are what you climb on.'*

The story behind the title is that a little boy was climbing a mountain with his sister – it was really steep and hard going, and they were puffing and panting. And all the way the girl was complaining to her brother, *'where is this path – all I can see is rocks.'*

And in one of those inspired moments, the boy turned to his sister and said, *'there is a path, the bumps are what you climb on.'*

I think that is a great philosophy for life – the bumps are what you climb on.

If anyone had a rocky, bumpy path to travel on, then it has to be the apostle, Paul. Listen to these words taken from his own diary in Second Corinthians Chapter 11, *'Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers.....and so it goes on.'*

If anyone is qualified to speak about suffering, then it's Paul the apostle.

And it's that same Paul who gives us this little letter called Philippians which is all about having a joy on the inside.

And we wonder how Paul can speak so frequently and confidently about joy after going through all that. And how can he himself talk about having a joy on the inside. Let's just remind ourselves that Paul found himself going to Philippi – it wasn't part of his plans, but God called him there through a vision because there were people there who needed to hear the gospel – and almost immediately Paul finds a group of women - people like Lydia who was a businesswoman and she becomes a believer as does a fortune teller and a prison guard – and so the first church in Philippi is born.

And as Paul writes this letter that we have in our hands, the church is around 10 – 12 years old.

Here at Park Road the church began back in 1653. Can you imagine a little church that is only about 10 years old? That's hardly enough time for anyone to die. It's just a little church that has no historical or traditional baggage and is just growing bit by bit.

And Paul is in prison in Rome and he's facing the possibility of the death penalty for simply preaching the good news of Jesus. And word has got back to this young church that their dear friend and pastor that they love with all their hearts is possibly facing death.

So, what are they going to do? Well, they take up this generous offering and they give it to a trustworthy elder in the church called Epaphroditus and he is tasked with making the journey to Rome and locating Paul in some prison cell so he can present him with this love gift to lift his spirits and encourage him – and then bring back a report to the church about how Paul is doing.

And so, he presents Paul with the gift from the church at Philippi and in response, Paul sits down in his prison cell and writes this letter that we have in our hands today.

Well, I hope you have it in your hands. Because this letter is an amazing gift from God, and it would be a shame if you didn't open it and have a look at it.

And in this letter, we will see 4 ways in which God can use suffering for good. God loves to take a negative and turn it into a positive because the bumps are what we climb on.

1. Suffering can advance the gospel

Let's read about that from verse 12, ***'Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.'***

Paul doesn't tell us what's going on in the prison cell – we don't know if he's hungry or well fed, we don't know if he's sleeping on the hard floor or if he has a soft mat, we don't know if he has a blanket to keep warm or if he's shivering during the cold nights.

All he says is that he wants them to know that what has happened to him has actually served to advance the gospel.

As this letter is being read out to the Christians in Philippi, I can imagine a big smile breaking out on the face of a particular individual – I'm thinking of the prison guard who was converted in the prison at Philippi. He must be thinking, ***'there's Paul at it again – this time he's doing it in a prison cell in Rome.'***

I suspect Paul loved prisons just as much as he loved churches because it was an opportunity for the gospel to get out.

We are told that Paul was in chains. He is most likely chained to Roman soldiers, around the clock who took it in 6 hour shifts. I can imagine some interesting conversations between these soldiers and their wives when they went home after a 6 hour shift with Paul.

What we do know is that some of them must have become Christians because at the end of the letter Paul says, ***'All God's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household.'***

Through Paul's suffering, the gospel is reaching into the very epicentre of the Roman empire. It really is quite incredible.

I also love what the commentator David Jeremiah has to say about this, he says, ***'Paul allowed his adversity to become a platform for the gospel. We should think twice before complaining about a difficult situation, it just might be that God is up to something eternal.'***

The truth is, we often don't think that way. Over the years I have had a number of Christians come to me when they are going through a difficult time and they say they must have done something wrong and stepped outside of God's will, but the truth is, they might be at the very centre of God's will and that God is up to something and they are part of that.

I'm not saying it's wrong to ask God for healing and deliverance from a difficult and painful situation, but I would say be careful because that might be the very platform that God wants to use to extend his kingdom. Remember, the bumps are what you climb on.

2. Suffering can produce courage.

Look at verse 14, ***'because of my chains most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.'***

The commentator David Jeremiah says, ***'bravery is contagious, persecution can be productive,'*** and he goes on to say, ***'one wonders what would have become of the gospel if it were not for persecution.'*** And then he quotes Acts 8v1, ***'at that time a great persecution arose against the church, and they were all scattered and went everywhere preaching the word.'***

Paul is saying there are Christians in Rome and elsewhere who have heard that I'm in prison for preaching the gospel and they are aware of how much I have suffered, and it's given them a new confidence and courage.

They used to be timid and paralyzed by fear but when they compare their own Christian lives with what I'm going through, they no longer want to hide their faith. If Paul is suffering the horror of imprisonment and a likely execution, then the least I can do is share the good news of Jesus with the people I know.

So, suffering can advance the gospel and it can produce courage.

3. Suffering can reveal our true friends.

You will know that from your own experience. You know the people who gather round you when you're going through a difficult time or the people you can call upon any time day or night.

As Paul looks upon the church at Philippi, he sees true friends who will stand by him and support him when he needs it most. We see this as the church sends Epaphroditus to Paul with a love gift.

The journey from Philippi to Rome was long and difficult. A distance of 800 miles and would take up to 7 weeks each way. And we know that the journey nearly cost Epaphroditus his life.

Towards the end of his letter, Paul wrote, ***'I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.'*** Paul's suffering revealed his true friends.

Perhaps the contrast between true friends and those who were not true friends can be seen in verses 15 – 17, ***'It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defence 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.'***

Some are clearly jealous and want to undermine Paul and their motivation for preaching the gospel is to stir up trouble for Paul.

Just as an aside, one of the ways you can distinguish false preaching from true preaching. False preachers want people to follow them and their ministry, whereas true preachers want people to follow Christ.

It should always be about the message and not the messenger. If there is one thing we all need to be careful about, it's our motives.

I wonder if you have ever gloated inwardly, when someone else has suffered or have you ever hoped the worst for someone. That's how it is in the world of politics – I would say much of the media is just waiting for Boris Johnson to fall and if he does, the media will tear him apart like a pack of wild dogs.

There is a darkness in our society that cruelty celebrates these things – when others fall as if we are immune from these things, and it would never happen to us.

I love this true story between John Wesley and John Whitfield. They were two of the finest preachers in England and were just fabulous guys, but they had very different ways of looking at doctrine and they became part of different Christian denominations.

But they were both brilliant and highly gifted and many came into the kingdom through their ministry, but they did have some disagreements – let's leave it at that. And one day someone asked Wesley if he expected to see Whitfield in heaven. And the evangelist replied, ***'no, I don't think so.'***

Surprised by that answer he continued, ***'so, you don't think Whitfield is a converted man?'***

'Of course, he is', said Wesley, ***'but I don't expect to see him in heaven because he will be so close to the throne of God, and I will be so far from it that I will scarcely see him.'***

What a lovely attitude. There is not a shred of envy there whatsoever. Despite significant theological differences, Wesley didn't see Whitfield as lesser, but he saw him as greater.

4. Suffering can deepen our walk with Jesus.

I don't need to say much about this.

I'm sure you have seen that in people, and I've seen it too.

When difficulties come, people can either go one of two ways. Some people blame God and want nothing to do with God and Jesus or the church, while others lean in even closer to Jesus.

And I think we all know which way Paul went, despite all his suffering.

If you're walking on a bumpy path, take heart because the chances are that God has a good purpose that he wants to accomplish in you and through you.

Song Blessed be your name – Matt Redman

Blessing