

The Liberty of Limits

Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. (Philippians 1:12)

"No limits" blares the refrain of the commercial world. "Freedom" and "choice" are the code words of our age, whether concerning access to the Internet, the indulgence represented by the luxury and power of the latest sports coupe, or the "duh" impatience with what are deemed prudish and antiquated social conventions. Time Magazine, in its 60th anniversary issue, aptly summarized the prevailing spirit: "Behind most of the events of the so-called American Century lay the assumption, almost a moral imperative, that what was not free, ought to be free, that limits were intrinsically evil, that science and humanity should go wherever they please in a spirit of self-confident autonomy."

With this mantra ringing in our ears, we have difficulty hearing Paul's message on the liberty of limits in Philippians 1:12. But think about aged apostle's circumstances for a moment. Behind "what has happened to me" is the stark reality of the apostle's imprisonment at Rome, handcuffed day and night to a Roman guard, awaiting his trial before that most profligate of judges, the Emperor Nero, with his critics having a field day maligning him in their ongoing envy-fest. However, God used Paul's chains, critics, and crisis to advance the Gospel. The apostle's prison turned into his pulpit, his critics unintentionally spread the message, and his judicial crisis provided a unique platform to exalt the Lord Jesus.

Paul's confinement became the occasion for a surge of the Kingdom into the capital of the kingdoms of the then-known world. God took him from the dusty roads of the senatorial provinces of Achaia and Asia Minor through Jerusalem, that outpost of nationalistic unrest, to the citadel of his day, thrusting him into the company of the mucky mucks of the Empire's military and judicial establishments. The soldiers that guarded Paul were part of the elite Praetorian Guard, the 9,000 or 10,000-member bodyguard of the emperor. In terms of prestige, they were the Pentagon operatives of their day. His trial was conducted at the level of the Supreme Court of the entire world. If you wanted an audience with influence, it would be hard to beat the one God chose for His spokesman. Paul's limits had opened a wide avenue of opportunity for witness and service. Like engineers clearing a path for an advancing army, Paul's chains were the occasion for the Spirit to unleash the gospel with liberty and power at Rome.

Did you ever view your own limitations as the occasion for God's ministerial originality? Your health concerns may well be God's way of bringing you into contact with people whose disease of soul dwarf the severity of your physical problems. Weary mothers may feel chained at home with the constant care of their young families. However, God uses this. Suzannah Wesley was the mother of nineteen children, long before the days of laborsaving devices and disposable diapers. Out of that family came John and Charles Wesley, whose life work shook the British Isles. Or you bristle over your ever-shrinking horizon. Your current confinement may introduce quiet space that invites soul communion with God Almighty.

It is a simple secret really. There are no accidents with God. When Christ is your life, you come to view your circumstances as divinely supplied windows through which to shine forth the light of the Gospel. Instead of doting on our need for relief from that which we would have never chosen, let us thank God for reminding us again that we minister from our brokenness, not from our completion. Let us ask Him for eyes to see His innovative ways of granting us the liberty and power of the Spirit, within our limit situations, for the furtherance of His Kingdom work.