

Optimistic in Christ

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text is from the Epistle reading. The apostle Paul writes to the Philippians, **“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the Gospel.”** Here ends our text.

Is the glass half full or is it half empty? Are you an optimist or a pessimist? The word optimist derives from the word optimum or best. An optimist always sees the best side of a situation. Even when the situation looks down and bad things are happening, he expects them to work out for the best. But the word pessimist derives from the word for worst. A pessimist sees the worst side of a situation. Even when the situation looks up and good things are happening, he expects them to work out for the worst.

Psychologists don't really know what makes a person an optimist or a pessimist. Why does one person see things in a favorable light while another person views the same circumstances with gloom and doom? Is this genetic? Is there something within us that we're born with that makes us optimistic or pessimistic? Is it just a choice we make? We have an option to be an optimist? Or is this learned behavior? A person who always has good things happen to them becomes an optimist, but a person who always experiences bad things becomes a pessimist. As we get older over time, as the weight of the world seems to crush our spirits, do we move from being an optimist to being a pessimist? An old pessimist once remarked, “An optimist is simply a person with no experience yet.”

In our Epistle reading this morning, the apostle Paul is writing from prison to the church in Philippi. From what we understand, this is Paul's first imprisonment in Rome. After years of being locked up in Caesarea, after a perilous journey in which he was shipwrecked, he's now in chains in Rome awaiting his trial with a possible verdict of death. Does Paul write as an optimist or a pessimist?

If Paul wrote as a pessimist, if he only saw the glass as half empty and going down, he might write something like this. “I want you to know brothers that the terrible things that have happened to me have really served to hinder the gospel. I can no longer travel about and preach in the cities as I once did. Instead I'm chained to a pagan Roman soldier. They work in shifts so every few hours I'm chained to a different pagan. Because of my imprisonment, the brothers here are probably too afraid and timid to speak the gospel anymore, lest they be imprisoned themselves. The ones who do preach the gospel are only doing it out of rivalry though. Since I've gotten a lot of attention lately, they're jealous and seeking to regain their prestige. They're only preaching Christ out of false motives. I'm sure you've forgotten about me by now, and it seems that God has too. This whole experience has been rather embarrassing, humiliating, and disheartening. The only options that may happen to me now are either that I continue to languish here in prison indefinitely, or they bring me to trial. In which case they may release me so that I can once again be persecuted, or I may be condemned and beheaded. I'm pretty certain that I'll die, though, and we'll never see one another again. Like me, I've heard that you've had to suffer for Christ too and have every reason to be afraid of your persecutors. I'm sure that my present predicament has caused you to despair of Christ, become divisive, and abandon faith in the gospel. We are all doomed.” Such might be the case if Paul wrote as a pessimist, seeing and expecting only the worst. How depressing, though. Somebody shoot that horse and put it out of its misery.

But Paul doesn't write to the Philippians that way. Instead he writes, “I want you to know brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. Though I can't preach publicly like I used to, I still witness to the Roman soldier I'm chained to. And every shift, I get to witness to another one. So it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. This is great publicity for Christ and his church. I'm not just out preaching in the back woods, but because of my arrest, I'm in the Roman capital with access to Caesar's household. Many of them have converted and come to faith. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are more bold to speak the word without fear. It is true, because of my popularity that some preach Christ out of rivalry from false motives. But who cares? Whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached, and in that I rejoice. I know that you remember me in your prayers and through the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will all turn out for my deliverance. It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If they clear me at my trial, I'll continue to live and that means fruitful labor. If they condemn me, I'll die, but that

means I'll be with Christ in heaven. These are such great options, that I don't know which one I'd choose. Live and preach Christ, or even better, die and be with Christ. I'm hard pressed to pick between the two. But since I know that it would be better to remain in the flesh for your account, I'm convinced that I'll remain. I'm sure I'll continue with you in joy in the faith to the glory of Jesus Christ till we meet again. But whether we meet or not, I'm certain that your manner of life is worthy of the Gospel of Christ, that you're standing firm in one spirit and mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not at all frightened in anything by your opponents. I've heard that it's not only been granted to you to believe in Christ, but like me to suffer for the sake of Christ. But this is a clear sign of your persecutors' destruction and of your salvation from God." Paul even closes his letter with these encouraging words, "All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit." Ta Ta

Paul writes as an optimist. In an apparently bad situation, Paul sees the best and expects the best to happen. But why is Paul such an optimist? Was he born this way? Did he choose to be optimistic? Was this a learned characteristic of his by experience? No. Paul had spent the last 25 years of his life suffering as a Christian, persecuted, stoned, shipwrecked, hungry and naked, chained and imprisoned. From his afflictions as a Christian, Paul would have no expectation of good things happening. And Paul would be the first to tell you that he wasn't born an optimist, but he was born in sin, blind to the grace of God. And Paul didn't choose to be an optimist. This wasn't some self-generated power of positive thinking. No, it was rather that God chose him. God regenerated him, and gave him a new birth at his baptism, so that his eyes were opened to see the good things of God. God gave him the gift of faith in Jesus Christ and all the blessings of forgiveness, life, and salvation. And through these eyes of faith, Paul could see God working for good, for the best. Through the apparently bad things happening, his suffering and imprisonment, Paul could see God working for good to bring those in the Roman guard and Caesar's household to faith, to embolden his brothers to speak the Gospel without fear, and to unite his brother Philippians in oneness of faith, despite their affliction. He was like Joseph last week who in faith could see that what others meant for evil, God meant for good. As Paul had written before he even came to Rome, "God works all things for good for those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." In Christ, Paul saw the best; in Christ he expected the best. Paul was optimistic in Christ.

Now this may not make much sense to secular psychologist or the rest of the world. When they look at Jesus Christ - his poverty, his suffering, pouring out his blood on the cross, his humiliating death – they think, "What good could there be in that? All the worst things happened to him. That glass is empty." But God says to them, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways." We look in faith at Jesus Christ and see the glass as full – full of God's love, and grace, and forgiveness of our sins. What other men meant for evil, God meant for our good, our deliverance. Like Paul, we are optimistic in Christ.

"But Lord I'm suffering here in this hospital bed. I'm chained to an IV tube with a rotating staff of nurses who keep waking me up." Great! What a chance for you to witness Christ to the staff. What an opportunity for other Christians to live out their faith by visiting you and showing their compassion. "But Lord, our church is dying. Half the pews are empty." What! God's given you a church building in which to worship and receive his gifts? Half the pews are full and there's space for more? You have a pastor to preach God's Word? How wonderful. "Church is over. Have to clean up the Communion ware again. All those empty glasses. What a chore." Yes, the cup and glasses are empty, but the communicants went away full – full of Christ's blood and his forgiveness. What a service to God's people. And next week, the cup will be full for them again. "My Christian mother is dying. Her body is worn out." What a blessing that you had a Christian mother. What a blessing that God kept her in the faith all her life. What a blessing that though she suffers here now, she has finished the race, and will soon be with Christ. What a blessing that you will see her again in heaven with a resurrected body that will never perish.

No matter what the world may throw at us – no matter how bad – the worst of situations – through faith in Christ we see the best. Through the eyes of faith we see God working for the good. And just as Christ suffered and died, but then rose again in glory, we know that any suffering here will quickly come to an end. We expect the best to come. We look forward to a better life, a better resting place, eternal life in heaven. The glass is not only half full, but it's filling up. My cup runneth over with God's gifts and blessings – faith, forgiveness, and everlasting life. Through faith in God's promises, we remain optimistic in Christ. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.