
Heart and Soul ... A Weekly Meditation

June 8, 2014

“Remember that I’m in prison.”

Colossians 4:18 (Common English Bible)

Paul signs his name to this letter to the Colossians, “Remember that I’m in prison.” This may be nothing more than an explanation. As he moves his writing instrument across the sheet, his writing looks cramped and awkward. Paul wants his readers to remember that his poor handwriting is the result of his wrists now bound in chains. But how suggestive that short apology is! How often in our own exercise of responsibility do we plea difficulties? We all move through the day with difficulties.

To begin with, there is the limitations of our health. Advanced age may limit mobility. Heart disease, stroke or diabetes may present agonies that remain with us for a lifetime. Chronic weaknesses make each day difficult. Even the most vigorous of us have limits: demands of work and responsibility to the needs of loved ones bring many sleepless nights. Limits of physical health or emotional stamina can feel as though we have been bound in chains.

Then there is the limitation of opportunity. There are those who have prepared well for a life of meaningful work. Time, money and considerable mental application has been poured into a college or graduate degree only to graduate – perhaps with honors – and discover a difficult job market. Resumes are sent out and interviews are scheduled but they wait. The waiting begins to feel like a prison cell.

There is also the limitation of ability. The Bible makes no secret – or apology – that to some have been given five talents, to another two and to another one. Clearly the one-talent individual can never embark on a five-talent enterprise. Similarly, the five-talent person eventually understands that to those who have been given much, much is expected of them. Ambition that is unreasonable can result in the shackles of resentment.

These limitations, and many more unmentioned, present a constant problem: what are Christians to do with them? Let us be sure that these limitations are as real as the chains that constrain the wrists of Paul. And however they present themselves, we must accept them in the present moment and look to how God intends to be purposeful in our lives.

Paul provides guidance. There is absent the sounds of complaining from the prison cell of Paul. Those who visit Paul do not hear self-pity. He had urgently wanted to go to Spain. Paul was convinced that ministry in Spain was God’s call to him. Yet, Paul is fettered in a prison cell. But rather than speak of what he is limited from, Paul speaks of what he is limited to; Paul uses his chains to present the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Roman guards who watch over him day after day.

Additionally, Paul writes letters. His wrists may be in chains but Paul engages in a ministry of writing letters of instruction and encouragement to struggling churches. Paul longed to preach the Gospel he loved in Spain. Yet, no number of sermons delivered in Spain could ever have given the Church of Jesus Christ the far-reaching treasure it now enjoys more than the four letters Paul wrote while in prison – the letters of Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon. It is difficult to imagine that had Paul been permitted to preach in Spain, the church today would have been any stronger than the ministry it received, and receives today, from these prison letters.

Gracious God, please give me the strength to accept the limitations in my life and allow me to accept and embrace each moment You have given me.

Doug Hood

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