

A VIEW OF LIFE FROM BEHIND BARS

INTRODUCTION:

Any of you ever see the 1979 movie “Escape from Alcatraz” starring Clint Eastwood? For those of you unfamiliar with the movie, Alcatraz was a maximum-security prison located on an island in San Francisco Bay roughly one-and-a-quarter miles from shore. True to the title, the movie is based on a book about 3 men—Frank Morris and brothers Clarence and John Anglin—who made it out of prison and off the island in June 1962 and were never seen or heard of again. There is a lot of mystery surrounding their escape. The water is cold (anywhere from 50 to 60 degrees), shark-infested, and has a strong current that could easily wash you out to sea. Although their bodies were never officially found, several months later a fishing boat about 20 miles out claimed to have seen through binoculars a floating body of a man wearing denim—the normal prison clothes of those at Alcatraz.

Adding more to the mystery is the fact that in 2013, the San Francisco PD received a letter that claimed to be from an aging John Anglin. In the opening paragraph of the letter the author writes, “My name is John Anglin, I escape[d] from Alcatraz in June 1962 with my brother Clarence and Frank Morris. I’m 83 years old and in bad shape. I have cancer. Yes, we all made it that night but barely!”

The prison was closed in 1963, became a National Park in 1972, and was open to the public in 1973. Each year, more than one million people visit the prison. I’ve had the opportunity to visit there twice. If my memory serves me right, we were allowed to go into some of the cells—even the one known as “the Hole.” “The Hole” was the name given to the cell used for solitary confinement. I think you’d all agree that being in the cell for a few minutes with the door closed—and knowing you were going to get out momentarily—is no comparison to what it would be like to having the door slammed shut behind you—and not knowing when you would again see the light of day.

This morning I want us to go back to the book of Philemon and get some insight as to how Paul viewed life from behind bars. His view, of course, had nothing to do with what he *physically* saw—or didn’t see. Instead, it had to do with his attitude and perspective and thinking. Please turn to the book of Philemon and follow along as I read verses 1-7.

1. Paul’s view of God working in circumstances

We noted last week that Paul wrote this letter in approximately 60 A.D. from a prison in Rome. Why was he there? Not because he had done anything wrong, but because he was doing *right*—he was obeying what God wanted him to do. What did God want Paul to do? Preach the message of repentance and faith.

Acts 26:19-20 “Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was **not disobedient** unto the heavenly vision: ²⁰ **But shewed** first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should **repent and turn to God**, and do works meet for repentance.”

Paul had a vision from God that gave him a mission from God which he obeyed. The result—he landed in prison! How did Paul view his being in prison? Did he call it bad luck? Did he think of it as God being against him or not loving him? Did he think of it as a waste of time? Not at all! Although not spelled out, we see here two attitudes—two views—that Paul had toward his circumstances.

A. Circumstances are from God

Look at verse 1 “Paul, a **prisoner** of Jesus Christ...” We are tempted to say, ‘Paul; you got it all wrong. You are not a prisoner of Christ—you are a prisoner of **Rome.**’ But Paul had it right, didn’t he? Even though he was in a Roman prison being watched by Roman guards—and even though he was not free to do what he wanted to do when and how he wanted to do it—he was right where Christ wanted him to be so he called himself a **prisoner** of Jesus Christ!

And because he was where God wanted him to be, he could be **content** where he was—even though it may not have been his first choice of where he wanted to live for two years!

G. Campbell Morgan: “He saw through all the secondary, incidental things, to the primary and fundamental fact, that, to the man abandoned to the will of his Lord, nothing can happen outside the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

What about us? When our plans—even our plans for doing the things we believe God wants us to do—are changed, do we still trust Him? Are we a prisoner of “bad circumstances”—or are we a prisoner of Christ? This week I received a text from someone with news that disappointed me and made me kind of “blah” most of one day. But while working on this message, I was confronted by this very thought—am I going to trust God when circumstances don’t go as I have planned—or am I going to be discouraged? Since God is in control of these things, I’m making a decision to trust Him!

B. Circumstances shouldn’t stop us from obeying God

I believe a second view Paul had regarding “bad” circumstances is that they should not prevent us from doing what God wants us to do. God had commanded Paul to preach repentance and faith toward God. Did God remove that requirement and give him a “pass” because he was in prison and didn’t have the freedom to go talk to people? No, He didn’t, did He? How do we know? Look at verse 10 “I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have **begotten** in my bonds” For Paul to have led him to the Lord while in prison, he was obviously sharing God’s Word while in prison. Prison did not change God’s **plan** for Paul—just the **place** he was to carry out God’s plan!

Preaching in prison didn’t end with Paul in the first century, though—it has gone on ever since. In the early years of our country—before we declared our independence from Britain—there was no freedom of religion in America like we enjoy today. Baptist Ministers were often jailed for not agreeing to be licensed by the Kingdom of Great Britain—but that didn’t stop them from preaching! In the August 21st entry of a daily devotional I have, it reads: “How thrilling to realize that across Virginia many came to know Christ while listening to Baptist preachers declaring the Gospel through jailhouse windows. It is amazing also to note the fact that as a result of ‘jailhouse’ preaching, some local Baptist churches were born.”

To recap, Paul’s view regarding difficult circumstances was that they were ordained of God and did not provide an excuse to disobey God. Is that our attitude—our perspective—when things don’t go the way we think they ought? It should be that way, shouldn’t it?

Not only do we see Paul’s view of God’s working in circumstances, we also see...

2. Paul’s view of God working in hearts

A. Work in Philemon’s heart—seen in fruit (4-7)

Notice verse 4: “I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers”

Why did Paul thank God for Philemon in his prayers? According to verse 5, Paul was thankful for Philemon because of the faith and love that Philemon had toward the Lord Jesus and toward “all saints”—God’s children. Why did Paul thank **God** and not Philemon? Because Paul knew that the fruit in Philemon’s life was a result of God working in Philemon’s heart—not Philemon doing it on his own!

Philippians 2:13 “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.”

It is interesting how many times Paul thanks God for the work God has done in the hearts and lives of others.

Romans 1:8 “First, I **thank my God** through Jesus Christ for you all, **that your faith** is spoken of throughout the whole world.” **I Corinthians 1:4-5** “I **thank my God** always on your behalf, **for the grace of God which is given you** by Jesus Christ;⁵ That in every thing ye are enriched by Him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge;”

Ephesians 1:15-16 ¹⁵ Wherefore I also, after **I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love** unto all the saints,¹⁶ **Cease not to give thanks** for you, making mention of you in my prayers;”

Colossians 1:3-4 “**We give thanks to God** and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you,
⁴ **Since we heard of your faith** in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints,”

Pretty hard to miss the fact that Paul thanked God for the work God had done in their hearts. He also thanked God for the work that had been done in Philemon’s heart as demonstrated in the fruit of love and faith.

Here’s a question that I think would be good for all of us to consider: Do the people that **love** you most and **know you best** thank God for the work He has done in your heart—or are they asking God to break your heart and change you?

Not only did Paul recognize the work that God had done in the heart of Philemon, he also wrote of the...

B. Work in Onesimus’ heart—stated as being forever

Notice verse 11: “Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and me”

Onesimus—whose name means “useful”—had been *useless*, but really was now useful. Why? Because verse 10 says he was Paul’s son that had been “begotten”—another way of saying he had been “born again.” We don’t know in what way Onesimus had previously been unprofitable, but he wasn’t any more—he was a **changed** man!

Salvation is a supernatural work of God in the heart, isn’t it? To change a man like Paul—who before was a blasphemer of God and a hater of Christians—into a humble and holy man of God was God’s doing—not Paul’s. To change a man like the apostle John—who once wanted fire to come down from heaven and kill the Samaritans who would not receive Jesus into their city—into the Apostle of Love was God’s doing—not John’s. And to change you and I from what we were—into what we are now—is no less a work of God’s doing!

Titus 3:3 “For **we ourselves** also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another.”

Verse 15 reminds us that the work God does in the heart is a permanent work—not a temporary one.

Onesimus had “departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him **for ever**.” That obviously did not mean neither of them would never **die**—it meant that the new relationship they now had as “brothers in Christ” would be a relationship that would never end; it would last for ever.

Aren’t you glad that the work God does in a heart is permanent and that the gift of salvation is everlasting life—not **probationary** life? Nothing we did **earned** it—and nothing we can do **will keep it**. It is all of God!

3. Paul’s view of God in relationships

A. Members of God’s family are equal

Paul emphasizes that equality quite a bit in this small book.

--Paul calls Timothy his brother in v 1

--Paul calls Philemon his brother in v 7 and 20

--Paul call Onesimus his beloved brother in v 16

In v 16, Paul also encourages Philemon to look at Onesimus not just as a returned slave, but as a **brother** beloved—both in the flesh and in the Lord. Their *human* relationship was now different because Onesimus should serve Philemon as if he were serving *Christ*—and Philemon should treat Onesimus the way he would want to be treated (if he wasn’t already doing that). “In the Lord” they were brothers and although their roles were different in the home, in God’s family they were equals.

That’s a good thing for us to remember, isn’t it? “The ground at the foot of the cross is level”—it is the same for everyone!

B. Members of God's family are forgiving

Members of God's family are to be forgiving. We noted last week that although Paul as an apostle could have *commanded* Philemon to forgive Onesimus and receive him back as seen in verse 8, instead Paul "beseeches" him—he appeals to him—as seen in v 9. Paul's **request** to Philemon—as seen in verses 12 and 17—was for Paul to "receive him"—in other words, to forgive him. Now notice verse 21: "Having confidence in thy **obedience** I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say." Paul here is emphasizing that granting forgiveness is a matter of **obedience**. **Eph 4:32** "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, **forgiving one another**, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." That's a command, isn't it?

C. Forgiveness in God's family should be motivated by love for one another

We already noted a couple of times from verse 8 that Paul as an apostle could have commanded Philemon to take Onesimus back. Why didn't he do that? Verse 9 tells us why: "Yet for **love's sake** I rather beseech thee..." 'I would rather you forgive him out of love and because you *want* to—not grudgingly because you *have* to.'

Ever have this happen when you want one child to ask forgiveness of another child? Child 1: 'Will you forgive me for doing thus and so?' Child 2's response: 'I suppose....' (Not much of a sense of forgiveness, is there?)

Verse 14 carries the same emphasis of Paul wanting Philemon motivated by love and not sheer obedience. In v 13, Paul says 'I wanted to keep him,' but wouldn't do so without your permission. Verse 14: "But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly." "Benefit"—blessing—comes when we do things *willingly*—not when we feel coerced. God loves a cheerful giver—and server—not one who feels they have no choice!

D. Members of God's family should be patient with one another—seen in Paul's view of "Marcus"

Notice verses 23-24 "There salute thee Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus; Marcus..." Who is "Marcus"? Marcus is "John, whose surname is Mark" from the book of Acts who had departed from Paul and Barnabas while on a missionary journey. Barnabas wanted to give him a second chance but Paul did not. **Acts 15:39-40a** "And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus; and Paul chose Silas..."

In Paul's mind, Mark was a quitter—but realized later in life that he had judged him too harshly and too quickly. **II Timothy 4:11** "Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is **profitable to me for the ministry**." We need patience with one another, don't we? If Paul can give up on someone too soon, we obviously can do the same thing.

E. Members of God's family should warn one another—seen in the life of Demas

Lastly, there is one other person in this list that serves as a reminder regarding relationships. His name? **Demas**. Demas in verse 24 is called a fellow-**laborer**. But in II Timothy, a letter written just 4 to 6 years after Paul wrote this letter, we have a new picture of Demas. Notice **II Timothy 4:10** "For Demas hath **forsaken me, having loved this present world**, and is departed unto Thessalonica..." What a sad thing to have to write about a former "fellow-laborer."

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS:

1. How are we in our relationships with one another? Are we forgiving and patient? Do we lovingly warn one another—and treat one another as equals; brothers and sisters in Christ?
2. How do others pray for you? Do they thank God—like Paul did—for the work God has done in your heart or are they asking God to break your heart?
3. And how do you view "bad" circumstances? Do you remind yourself that no matter what happens, you still belong to Christ and that He has a plan that He wants you to carry out?