

SOMETHING TO CHEW ON

Paul has been called the greatest Christian who ever lived. He also suffered greatly for the name of Jesus Christ. When Paul defended his calling to the Church, he defined suffering as a major proof of his spiritual office. "I have worked much harder," he insisted, "been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again" (2 Corinthians 11:23).

But Paul's many trials did not deter him from living the Christian life. Neither did they restrict his preaching the gospel. To the contrary, suffering seemed to impel Paul to even greater spiritual service.

The apostle Paul said something remarkable about his adversities: "For Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10). We shouldn't, however, think of Paul as bigger than life or an indestructible superman. There were times when the tremendous hardships he confronted were far beyond his human endurance. After suffering one rather malicious incident of persecution, Paul admitted he and his companions "despaired even of life" (2 Corinthians 1:8). But Paul had faith in the living God to see him through his trial. "On him we have set our hope," wrote Paul, "that he will continue to deliver us" (verse 10).

But as Paul's life demonstrates, God often delivers us out of troubles we are already in, not necessarily from troubles before they begin. Yet, as we must, Paul was able to rise above all his many afflictions. How did he do it? And how can we surmount our trials and troubles?

Paul certainly didn't overcome by his own strength or will. He never took personal credit for being able to bear his painfully heavy cross. He attributed his spiritual muscle to its true source - Jesus Christ. Paul said, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13). He exulted, not in his own will and courage, but in the power of Christ in him. And by that example we know that we, too, have access to the same spiritual power and courage.

Paul maintained this Christ-centred faith during four years of suffering as a prisoner of the Roman government, first in Caesarea and then in Rome. During his Roman imprisonment, Paul wrote four letters that survive in our New Testament. They are Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. We, living almost 2,000 years later, are fortunate to have these letters to teach us the inspiring truths of God. We are the beneficiaries of Paul's spiritual wisdom forged in the crucible of personal suffering.

These four letters are among the most hopeful and encouraging Paul wrote. They help us understand how we can find joy in our trials and peace in our suffering.

The upbeat message in the prison letters contrasts markedly with Paul's grim physical condition. Such a contrast teaches us a fundamental truth about our Christian faith. No matter what our misfortune or difficulty, God reigns supreme and sovereign. He can - and will - see us through any calamity. No matter that we may face adversity, persecution, affliction, hardship or disaster, God's remarkable purpose for us is not to be compared with this life's sufferings, says Paul. Beyond that is the wonderful news that we can have the spiritual strength to endure trials when they strike our lives. Paul says to us that we do not face life's problems alone, but do so with the Holy Spirit - through Christ in us. That's how Paul was able to remain assured in his terribly unsure years in prison. We

should think of a spiritually joyful Paul in prison, not someone downcast and fearful. He is striding around some small room or dismal cell in Rome, perhaps in the presence of - or even chained to - a Roman soldier. We see Paul carefully dictating a profoundly positive letter to encourage the Church. Paul writes hopefully of his future in spite of the obvious hopelessness of his predicament. This contrast between Paul's rather hopeless physical condition and his hopeful reaction reverberates through a letter he is writing. It is one of four prison epistles. This one is to the Philippians, and it becomes a message of joy.

The word joy occurs 16 times in its various forms in the letter. Spiritual joy, rejoicing in Christ, is a major theme. "I will continue to rejoice," Paul writes to concerned Church members while under house arrest in Rome (Philippians 1:18). He continues, "For I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance".

Paul has confidence in the outcome of his situation. No matter how bleak it is, no matter what ominous turn it may take, God's will shall be done. Meanwhile, the power of the Holy Spirit will see him through his predicament, no matter how difficult. Through Christ, Paul will face the worst and come out the best. What may happen to him in the future is not the issue.

Paul's present prison life, admittedly, is certainly less than ideal. However, that is not the issue for the apostle Paul. He learned to be content whatever the circumstances. Encouraging people he knew and loved, Paul says: "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation".

Here is Paul in an uncertain and trial-filled position. Yet he is the one encouraging the Church to have hope, joy and peace. He virtually demands the members to feel triumphant: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" Paul, who is suffering in prison, pleads with the Philippians: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanks-giving, present your requests to God".

Paul is no bootstrap psychologist. Church members need not attempt to manufacture this confidence and exultation. They should have joy and peace within because these are fruits of the Holy Spirit living within us (Galatians 5:22).

So, Paul can tell the Church: "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).

Paul's prison message is always hopeful, his outlook confident, his future bright. This especially shows through in another prison letter, the one to the Ephesians.

When writing this letter, Paul is in chains, with little to look forward to in this world. But he is exuberantly thankful for God's priceless spiritual gifts. It is these gifts - joy, peace, faith, hope - that will get him through his trial. Paul tells the Ephesian Christians that God and Christ are the source of all these spiritual blessings - ones we need to support us through life.

He writes: "To him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen" (Ephesians 3:20-21).

Yes, says Paul, God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). Joy, peace, faith, hope - these spiritual blessings are ours if Christ lives in us.

These spiritual qualities are indestructible because they have their source in Christ, who is always with us. Because we cannot lose Christ, our spiritual blessings are secure.