

Green Philippians:
Three Sermons on Paul's Letter to the Philippians
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Sermon Three –Staying Hopeful

Acts 16: 25-40; Philippians 3: 2-16

‘About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them’ (16:25) If, like Paul and Silas, they were all chained up and had their feet fastened in stocks, I don't suppose they had much choice about listening to this duo, lustily singing hymns at a time of night when any right-thinking person would be trying to get some sleep. For some unaccountable reason we are not told the content of any of the encouraging comments sleep-deprived fellow-prisoners shared with the two singers.

A small part of me wonders which hymns they were singing. If Paul and Silas were Charles Wesley fans then surely they must have included *And Can it Be – my chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee.* My larger concern, however, is with **why** they were singing at all.

In the light of their recent experiences and current situation they don't seem to be a lot to sing about. Having deprived her owners of the services of a fortune-telling slave girl, Paul and Silas had been dragged before a hastily convened and possibly irregular local court for trial, been given a severe flogging, and then deposited in the securest cell that a Philippian prison could provide.

Most people would be discouraged to receive such a reception in a town and such treatment from its representatives, but here are Paul and Silas, singing their hearts out, seemingly without worry, either for their circumstances or with any thought for their neighbours. So, although a smaller part of me wonders which hymns they were singing a much **larger** part wants to know **why** they were singing in such circumstances. If I can figure that out then it might come in handy for the times when circumstances are against me and when I might be prone to lose hope.

It's notable that Paul did not lose hope, given that he had lost so many other things. He lost his dignity when he and Silas were stripped of their clothes before being publicly beaten; no small matter at any time, but huge in that society, bound together by notions of giving, receiving and losing honour. He had lost his physical freedom; movement curtailed by physical injury after a beating, and further constrained by shackles and stocks. On top of that, his

status as a Roman citizen, which should have protected him from summary punishment and offered him judicial due process, had been disdained and discarded.

And all of this came on top of loss of the high status he had previously enjoyed within the Jewish community; status which **he** had given up as a result of following Jesus. As he wrote to the Christians in Philippi a while later, ‘If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more; circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.’ (3:4-6)

All this, however, Paul was prepared to put aside for the sake of ‘the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.’ (3:14) In fact, as far as Paul is concerned, all these marks of status he had previously enjoyed were like items that used to be on the positive side of a financial ledger which had now been moved into the negative column: ‘whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.’ (3:8)

Now, thank goodness – or should that be “thank God”? - I have not experienced anything like the losses Paul and Silas experienced in Philippi in **my** pursuit of knowing Christ Jesus as my Lord. Being a Christian in early twenty-first century Edinburgh is a much less frightening prospect than being a follower of Jesus in first-century Philippi, or being identified as one of his followers in several places elsewhere in today’s world.

On one occasion in the 1990s, I was delivering “welcome to your new home” cards on behalf of a Churches Together Group in Liverpool, to houses in a small, newly built estate. The owner of one house, enraged by my unexpected churchly presence on his doorstep, pursued the local Catholic priest and me back down his path, accompanied by much shouting and by his threatening-looking, loudly growling dog. Had they been there to witness it, Paul and Silas’ fellow prisoners might have got some new ideas for vocabulary to direct at the two hymn singers.

Maybe it is something about visitors to your door that brings out the best in people. My observation and experience over a number of years is that door-to-door collecting for Christian Aid Week has become an increasingly challenging business. As well as those who politely decline to donate there is a rising number of blunt refusals – “we give to our own” being one of the more puzzling

I've received. Occasionally, some who don't even bother to comment before they close the door in your face. Still, **unlike** Paul, and in contrast to countless Christians ever since, I've never really had to fear for my physical safety or for my life whilst working or witnessing for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Which is not to say that there are never times when I am in danger of losing hope. Many of us know what it is to face opposition when we voice an opinion or take an action that runs against the grain of how most people in church or in society see things. Think of those, for example, who over many years campaigned, and those who still have to campaign, for their Church to ordain **women** as well as men as ministers, pastors or priests, often in the face of opposition and even abuse. Or consider some of the negative reactions others experience in speaking up for the full inclusion of LGBTQI folk in the life of their churches, communities and society.

Being the Environmental Chaplain for Eco-Congregation Scotland is a relatively uncontroversial role. Yet attempting to persuade not only every Scottish church but also the entire Scottish nation to care for God's creation today and in the future involves times of discouragement. Faced with those who think that care for God's creation is an optional extra in the Christian life; meeting those who tell you that they prefer to put their efforts into sharing the

“real gospel”, there are times when you get discouraged; times when you wonder whether you should just give up. But Saint Paul won’t let me do that and, if you have had discouraging responses to your attempts to apply the gospel of Jesus Christ in a practical, everyday setting, then Paul might have something to share with you too.

If Saint Paul was writing a letter to me to jolt me out of my gloomy, pessimistic outlook, I think he would tell me to keep in mind both the big picture of the God of creation and also the specific big hope that gives Christians hope.

In relation to the big picture of the God of creation I think of George Marshall, a contemporary writer and activist on climate change and its malign impact upon this world and its inhabitants. As far as I know he isn’t a big church-goer. He does, however, have positive things to say about how environmental activists who are people of faith stay hopeful when many their secular counterparts are burning out and giving up.

He describes this phenomenon with the tagline, “What the God Squad Can Teach the Green Team”; his take on how churches equip their members for work in the world by, amongst other things, giving them a sense that their

situation is not all that there is to reality; that there is something beyond the present place and time; something giving meaning and hope even when current circumstances and situations in themselves are discouraging.

Saint Paul, who was beaten up (more than once), imprisoned (more than once); now writing from prison and in chains (1:13-14) to Christians in the town where they once saw him imprisoned and in chains, writes about pressing ‘on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus’. (3:14) Whilst worried that his Philippian friends might be endangered by enemies he refers to as ‘dogs’ and ‘evil workers’ (3:2); whilst looking back on his previous high status within the Jewish community (3:4-6); whilst considering all his various losses because of his ‘faith in Christ’ (3:9), Paul keeps in mind that it is the ‘**call of God** in Christ Jesus’ (3:14) that is his focus.

In other words, your or my situation, whatever that might be, is not all that there is to reality. This situation that you or I face is something located within a bigger context: creation, over which, through which, in which God is at work. I think that that’s an insight, an experience, a perspective, that we Christians share with some other faiths; this sense of something beyond ourselves which reassures, comforts and empowers us to carry on working for good and right; to

do so even in circumstances where we can't yet see things getting better. In that sense, George Marshall's God Squad is a very big squad indeed.

And as well as this sense of something bigger that comforts us and equips us to live life to the full, even when circumstances constrain or shackle us, there is also a more specifically Christian hope that Paul wants to share with his sisters and brothers in Philippi, and with us today, This is the belief that struggles undertaken and sufferings experienced as a result of intentionally trying to do God's will have value because they are in solidarity with the struggles and suffering of Jesus Christ, As Paul puts it, 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection **and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death**, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.' (3:10-11)

So Christian Aid collectors who risk a rude response or frosty welcome; those who persist in saying that God calls all sorts of God's people to positions of leadership in God's Church; those who continue to speak for fair and equal treatment of all in society, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, belief or whatever; even those of us who question the legitimacy of a fossil-fuelled lifestyle in God's world today; all of them and all of us are, Paul suggests, are being Christ-like; even God-like!

Hope does not flow only from the realisation that our difficulties are a sharing Christ's sufferings. This would be a fairly miserable message if that was all there was to it, but it is not all that there is to Paul's message. Not only does he say, 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection **and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death**, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.' He also says, '**I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection** and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, **if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.**'

God works in the world for the sake of the world (for the sake of God's creation). Particularly, God has worked in the world in Jesus Christ. Saint Paul retains hope because he is intentionally following in the steps of Jesus Christ whose situation was so hopeless that it led to his suffering and death. But God, who has chosen to work in the world through Jesus Christ, did so not only through his death but also through his **resurrection**: 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection', says Saint Paul.

So, the Christian Aid collector, the Christian campaigners for women's ordination and for equal treatment for all, and the Eco-Congregation workers

and chaplain not only have the comfort of being in solidarity with Jesus, and so with God, but also the confident prospect that God's love and life ultimately triumphs over the challenges and difficulties they face in their work.

Presently, these resurrection moments are glimpsed in the giving of money-filled envelopes or progress in a good cause. They are seen in increased numbers of registered eco-congregations and international agreements to rein in climate change. Ultimately, though, hope – our hope – resides in the belief that our actions form part of a bigger, divine story that reconciles the whole of creation to the love of God.

So, acknowledging our reliance upon and hope in God, as Saint Paul puts it, 'Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but this one thing I do; forgetting what lies behind and straining towards what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.'

(3:13-14)