

# The Best of Times, The Worst of Times

*Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly (Philippians 1:12-14).*

**THE** only time I've ever been in chains was when my son, a police officer in training, would practice his handcuffing techniques on me. I was, you might say, "in chains for Cody."

The apostle Paul found himself in chains with alarming frequency, locked behind bars in jails from Jerusalem to Philippi during his missionary travels. When he wrote to the Philippians he was in one of the final sets of chains he would know, imprisoned in Rome where he would eventually die.

And yet in that most desperate of situations Paul set an example for the Christians of his day and for all followers of Christ through the ages. He chose to see his chains not as a limitation or burden, but as an opportunity for Christ. He had trained himself to be "in Christ" and to live "for Christ" in every situation, and found ways to advance the gospel even in Caesar's prisons among Caesar's guards. His zeal for evangelism in the worst of times was contagious, instilling courage and fearlessness in the believers around him.

We learn a lot about ourselves in times of crisis. Most people, if they are honest with themselves, would say they aren't entirely certain whether they would run or whether they would stand up and do what needs to be done when a major crisis comes.

The good news is that we can prepare ourselves to be ready for dreadful circumstances. Paul had confidence in what he would do because he had prepared himself to suffer for Christ. He lived "in Christ" in the best of times, so that he would be prepared to live "in Christ" even in the worst of times.

## In the Worst of Times for Christ

On the morning of September 11, 2001, two men were on the 81<sup>st</sup> floor of Tower #2 of the World Trade Center, desperately trying to avoid the fate that was claiming so many that day.

Stanley Praitmuth, an assistant vice president for Fuji Bank Limited, found himself trapped after the United Airlines plane crashed into his building. He was buried up to his neck in debris, isolated behind collapsed walls, while a wing of the airliner burned nearby.

Knowing the desperation of his situation, he began to pray to the Lord, asking him to please send someone to help. While praying, he saw a beam from a flashlight and heard someone

on the other side of the debris. Praitmuth yelled to draw his attention, but the other person could not get through to him.

Praitmuth then cried out to the person on the other side and asked him if he knew Jesus, and if they could pray together for God to help. The two men joined in prayer, still separated from each other amid the wreckage.

After they prayed, Praitmuth was gripped with the knowledge that he could kick through the wall separating them. As he began to break a small hole through the wall, Brian Clark reached through and pulled Stanley to freedom, and together they began the long descent to the street, escaping the building just minutes before it collapsed.

There is an amazing story of faith and reliance on God in crisis. Like Paul, Stanley Praitmuth used the opportunity of the crisis to let others know about his faith in God. And like Paul, the story of his experience has encouraged many more to speak the Word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

But the real key to the story lies in what Praitmuth says he did that morning before he left home for his job at the World Trade Center.

## In the Best of Times for Christ

On that fateful morning, in the safety of his own home, at the beginning of what promised to be an ordinary day, Stanley Praitmuth prayed, as was his regular habit—part of his daily preparations for going to work.

What motivated Praitmuth on September 11 to see his seemingly hopeless predicament as an opportunity to display faith in Christ? It was his steady faith in God on the normal days of his life.

The way to prepare for days of disaster is to practice living for Christ during the ordinary days of life.

A traveling evangelist is the subject of another widely circulated story—a story about a flight he took just before September 11, 2001.

During his flight he noticed a flight attendant seemed to be having some trouble breaking ice for passengers' drinks. He offered to help and struck up a short conversation with her about God. Before returning to his seat, he gave her some evangelistic literature to read.

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Later in the flight she stopped by his seat and told him he was the sixth person in the past few days to talk to her about God or give her tracts about salvation. She confided that she was beginning to wonder what God was trying to tell her and what he wanted from her.

The evangelist replied simply that God wanted her life. As a result of their conversation, the flight attendant became a Christian.

Later, when the names were released of the people who were on the airlines that crashed on September 11, the evangelist found that flight attendant's name on the list. She had

been on American Airlines Flight # 11, the first plane to crash into the World Trade Center that Tuesday morning.

That Christian man was not in the midst of a crisis when he spoke to the flight attendant about the love of Jesus Christ. His life was not in imminent danger that day, and neither was the flight attendant's. And yet he knew that, just as Paul was in chains for Christ, he was on that airliner for Christ, and took advantage of the opportunity to advance the gospel.

### Heroes for Christ

Many heroes have been rightly honored for their part in the tragic events of September 11.

Policemen and firemen ran into the burning buildings while others were fleeing. They did their jobs, risking their own safety in their attempt to save thousands who were trapped. Many lost their lives.

Ordinary citizens chose to make their way into the city toward Ground Zero to see what they could do to help, while thousands streamed past them going in the opposite directions.

Courageous men and women aboard Flight 93, learning from cell phone conversations with family and friends that their plane was likely intended for use as a terrorist weapon, knowingly sacrificed their lives in order to crash that plane into the fields of Pennsylvania.

Thousands of enlisted men and women, including "part-time" reservists and guardsmen, have given their time, energy, and even their lives in the battles and wars that have been fought in behalf of their country since that day.

Their heroism will never be forgotten.

From an eternal perspective, though, the bravest heroes are those who do what it takes to rescue men, women, and children from the evil of sin and the terror of eternal flames. These are the ones who remember each day that they are in the checkout line or in the unemployment line for Christ. They talk in Internet chat rooms for Christ and sit in school classrooms for Christ. They sit at the ballgame for Christ and in the hospital emergency room for Christ.

I know of one Christian couple who make it a practice when dining out to ask the waitress or waiter, "Is there something on your heart that we can pray for?"

Another man looks for opportunities to plant seeds for Christ in response to the simple and ordinary questions people ask in the daily routines of life.

A question in an elevator ("Are you going up?") or simple daily greetings ("Good morning" and "How are you today?") provide opportunities to speak a pleasant word for Christ.

A wonderful retired woman, beset by one ailment after another, looks forward to her visits to the clinic and

hospital, knowing she will have opportunities there to share the joy of Christ with her caregivers.

Each of these Christians has decided to follow Paul's example by taking every opportunity to speak up for Christ and to encourage others to do the same.

By living daily for Christ, grasping hold of each opportunity to advance the gospel, we are training ourselves so that we will be ready when a crisis comes. When we are put into chains or when disaster suddenly rears its ugly head, we will respond as we have become accustomed to respond to any circumstance: for Christ. ■

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