

Progress in Spite of Adversity

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Introduction

How is your spiritual life? What is the spiritual condition of this class? This church? The association of churches to which this church belongs? God desires us to be making spiritual progress on every front, personal and corporate.

The path of Christian growth and service is not generally a comfortable one. This maxim is as true of Christian living in the corporate sense as it is of the individual's Christian life. Yet, we can make spiritual progress despite adversity. The New Testament provides several examples of adversity that Christians overcame with the Lord's help. In this lesson we'll survey three such examples, noting the nature of the problem and pointing to elements of the solution.

Progress in Spite of Persecution (Acts 8.1ff)

In the early years of the church's existence, it was concentrated solely in Jerusalem. For some time it experienced phenomenal growth there. But there came a time when its advance aroused the anger of devout Jews, and Christians began to experience persecution at the hands of men like Saul of Tarsus.

In the face of persecution, many Christians fled Jerusalem for less oppressive places. In God's design, this dispersion was instrumental in spreading the gospel to other areas of the world (cf. Acts 11.19-21). Stanley Toussaint explains, "The fact that all the Jerusalem believers except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria was God's method of fulfilling the mandate of 1:8" (372).

Craig Keener affirms this point as well: "It took persecution—mainly the scattering of the bicultural, foreign Jews—to get the church to begin to do what Jesus had commanded them back in 1:8. As the second-century North African theologian Tertullian pointed out, 'the blood of Christians is the seed' of the church's growth" (343).

It might seem odd that persecution could lead to church expansion and growth, but this seems to have been the case throughout church history. Opposition from the unbelieving world promotes spiritual growth in at least two ways: First, it elicits commitment on the part of Christians. Faced with a high-stakes choice, believers often rise to a higher level of devotion to the Lord and heighten the visibility of their witness in the process (cf. Acts 6.8-8.1).

Second, as was the case with the Jerusalem church, persecution tends to increase Christians' mobility, spreading the gospel witness even more. Toussaint explains: "Because of persecution believers were scattered (cf. v. 1) and the Word of God spread (cf. Rom. 8:28; 2 Cor. 2:14; Phil. 1:12-14). This is another evidence of God's sovereign control; in spite of opposition the Word of God grew (cf. Acts 12:24; 19:20)" (372).

How well are you and your church representing Christ in the face of opposition? Do you see persecution as an opportunity or a threat?

Progress in Spite of Disagreement (Acts 15.36-41)

A second apparent hindrance to spiritual progress in the New Testament was the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas concerning whether to take John Mark on their second missionary journey. Ralph Martin explains the background of this controversy:

From the time of Acts 13:5 John Mark traveled with Paul and Barnabas. [. . .] But Mark's decision (for reasons not supplied in the NT) to leave the apostolic group as it pressed beyond the Taurus mountains of Asia Minor (v. 13) caused some bitterness later when Barnabas wanted to take him on the second journey (15:39). The result was that Barnabas, out of loyalty to his kinsman Mark, left Paul and went off with Mark to Cyprus. (3: 259)

Seesemann describes the word Acts uses to refer to the contention: "The verb [*paroxyno*] means 'to spur,' 'to stir to anger,' passive 'to be provoked, incensed.' The noun [*paroxysmos*] is rare and means 'provocation' or 'irritation.' [. . .] The noun has the sense of 'irritation' in Acts 15:39 when Paul and Barnabas disagree about taking Mark with them" (791).

On the surface, disagreement between two mature Christian leaders such as Barnabas and Paul might seem to lead only to negative outcomes. But this was not the case, as Toussaint observes: "The argument [between Paul and Barnabas] became such a sharp disagreement (*paroxysmos*, 'provoking, stirring up, arousing,' the root of the Eng. 'paroxysm') that they parted company. The Lord overruled in this dissension for through it two missionary journeys instead of one were formed [. . .]" (396).

Conflict is a natural part of the human experience. It is part and parcel of being thinking beings. While it is not necessarily sinful, it often leads to sinful expression. In addition, it can distract our attention from the things that matter most.

We must learn to express our disagreements with fellow Christians in a godly manner. In some cases we must agree to disagree peacefully, realizing that continued conflict will only hurt our common cause. Also, we should separate differences of principle from a personal attack.

Progress in Spite of Hypocrisy (Phil 1.12-18)

A third threat to spiritual progress in the life of the early church occurred in the later stages of Paul's ministry when he penned his letter to the Philippians. At the time of his writing Paul was in prison. In addition, some hypocritical believers were preaching the gospel for the purpose of self-promotion. Robert Lightner comments:

The group that preached Christ out of envy and rivalry [. . .] were probably not Judaizers, as some suppose, because Paul said they were preaching Christ, though insincerely. The Judaizers believed that keeping the Old Testament Law was a means of salvation. [. . .] However, since he did not accuse these in Philippi of presenting "another gospel," it seems that they were believers who for some unknown reason did not love the apostle or appreciate his work." (651)

Warren Wiersbe observes that "Paul uses an interesting word in verse 16—*contention*. It means 'to canvass for office, to get people to support you.' Paul's aim was to glorify Christ and get people to follow Him; his critics' aim was to promote themselves and win a following of their own. [. . .] Unfortunately, this kind of 'religious politics' is still seen today" (42).

Paul understood that the Christian cause was not a popularity contest. The priority was sharing the gospel of Christ, not gaining a fan club. Therefore, while his antagonists expected their preaching to irritate Paul, he rejoiced in that they were sharing Christ, regardless of their intent. Lightner comments:

What rejoiced Paul's heart was that Christ was being preached, even though it was from wrong motives by some (Phil. 1:18). Since the content of the preaching was the same for both groups, the apostle could rejoice. He did not rejoice because there was a faction among members of Christ's body, for this brought him grief. Instead, it was the preaching of Christ that brought him joy. (651)

We would do well to learn to separate personal advancement from the cause of Christ. Doing so will enable us to rejoice in everything that brings glory to Christ, no matter who gets the credit.

Conclusion

In Phil. 1.12 Paul said that his circumstances had contributed to “the furtherance of the gospel.” The Greek word rendered *furtherance* is used in a variety of senses, including “‘fortune,’ ‘success,’ ‘blessing,’ ‘distinction’ (in rank, honor, etc.), ‘military success,’ ‘progress in healing’” (Stählin 939). Like Paul, we need to see God’s hand in all our circumstances. There is no situation God cannot use to advance His work! Let’s be faithful regardless of persecution, disagreement, or hypocrisy.

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