

Introduction

I was in a prayer meeting years ago and a man prayed. I'll never forget the question he suddenly blurted out as he did, "**Oh Lord, why are there so many problems in life?**" That's a valid question because its premise, there are so many problems in life, is true. Leadership expert John Maxwell says it this way, "**Problems keep popping up.**" They do don't they? Problems keep popping up. So that's what I'm going to preach about today. Philippians 1:12-20 reveals four basic insights about problems that we need to know and accommodate. Let's examine each one.

Problems Are Normal

The first insight is that problems are normal.

A middle-aged Christian who had just lost his job interpreted it this way. "**God must be testing me,**" he told me. I've heard many Christians say that or something similar to it. A problem pops up and they think God is singling them out – that He's testing them, teaching them a lesson, or even punishing them. That in turn triggers the guilt of trying to figure out what's wrong with them that He needed to do that.

But that isn't what most problems are about. Don't get me wrong. The Bible teaches that God does discipline His people when they need it. Most problems though aren't that. The fact is they're normal.

Our text teaches us that. The greatest missionary who ever lived, Paul, wrote it. He devoted his life to the most noble of all causes, winning the world to Jesus. Surely he wouldn't have any problems in pursuing that cause. Right? Wrong! The word "**imprisonment**" in verse 13 makes clear that he was incarcerated when he wrote this letter. Talk about a problem, that's it. How does a missionary win the world to Jesus when he's confined and chained to a Roman guard?

Paul's circumstance implies that problems are normal. Norman Vincent Peale told about a conversation he had with a New Yorker. The

man complained, **“Reverend, I’ve got problems.”** Peale responded, **“I know a place near here that has a population of 15,000 and not a person there has a problem.”** **“Really,”** the man said excitedly: **“Tell me, where is this place? I’d like to live there.”** To which Peale replied, **“It’s Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx.”** His point is well taken. The only people who don’t have problems are dead ones.

That’s the reality and we need to accommodate it. We accommodate it by taking problems in stride. First, don’t let them shock or panic us. Expect and anticipate them instead. Second, don’t let them shame us. They don’t mean that we’re worthless, inferior, or bad or that God doesn’t love us. Wake up and join the human race. Realize and act as if problems are normal.

Most Problems Aren’t as Bad as We Think

Out text reveals a second basic insight about problems. Most aren’t as bad as we think.

Few of our problems exceed Paul’s. He was in prison and faced the prospect of execution. But notice something. There wasn’t a hint of despair in what he wrote. On the contrary, he was positive and upbeat throughout. He wrote in verse 20, for instance, **“I’m full of expectation and hope.”** I wrote a little note in my Bible beside this verse. It says, **“Paul makes a molehill out of a mountain.”**

That’s just the opposite of what most people do. Human beings have an amazing ability to make mountains out of molehills or at least hills out of molehills. It happens almost every time. They tend to exaggerate the enormity of their problems under stress. They overreact and blow things out of proportion. They play their problems up by perceiving them to be worse than they really are.

Paul’s example calls us to get in touch with reality; to keep our problems in perspective. We need to play them down and pray them up. Robert Schuller gives a sound piece of advice in that regard. When problems pop up, we need to embrace this realistic point of view: **“My**

problem isn't nearly as serious as I think it is now. The feelings of panic and fear I'm experiencing are overreactions. What I'm facing, other people with fewer mental, emotional, and spiritual resources have also faced. They survived and so will I and I'll be a better, stronger, wiser person when it's over." That perspective helps us stay positive and upbeat.

The famed Boston minister, Phillips Brooks, told about a prominent businessman who came to his office one day. He was almost hysterical and blurted out, **"Dr. Brooks, did you read the morning paper? I'm ruined!"** Brooks calmed him down and then said, **"Now just a moment, I don't read that paper because I don't subscribe to it. Half the people in town don't read it. Most of the half that do only read the front page and the funnies. Of those who read more than that, I dare say less than one percent will run across your name. And those who don't know you won't be interested in it and won't remember what they read. Those who know you won't believe it. So, relax. You're far from ruined."**

What a wise man Brooks was. Our problems are rarely as bad as we think. That's the reality and we need to accommodate it. Let's not exaggerate the enormity of our problems under stress. Keep them in perspective. Play them down and pray them up.

There Are Possibilities in Every Problem

There's a third basic insight our text reveals. There are possibilities in every problem.

Paul's was. He wrote in verse 12, **"My circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel."** His problem (his confinement) actually helped the spreading of the gospel – in two ways.

The first way is found in verse 13. Paul was chained at all times to a member of the Praetorian Guard. The Praetorian Guard was an elite and highly influential group of 10,000 hand-picked soldiers who guarded the emperor. This powerful but inaccessible group suddenly became

accessible to Paul. It was an extraordinary opportunity and Paul pursued it. Talk about a captive audience. He had one. He shared Jesus with the guards to whom he was chained. They in turn shared Him with their fellow guards. The result was that His person and work became widely throughout the whole Praetorian Guard.

Paul's problem helped the spreading of the gospel in a second way. According to verses 14-15, it compelled other Christians to witness more frequently and boldly than they had before. Some were inspired by Paul's courage. Others wanted his influence and saw his absence as an opportunity to get it. But whatever the reason, Christians increased their evangelistic efforts, which, he wrote in verse 18, was all that mattered.

These verses teach that no problem is all bad. We say it in different ways. Every cloud has a silver lining. Whenever God shuts a door, He opens a window. To every disadvantage, there is a corresponding advantage. And there are possibilities in every problem. Those maxims aren't just nice talk. They're reality.

Do you realize what they mean? All of our problems may not be solvable, but they are redeemable. When we face a problem we can't solve, most of us just try to endure it. What we should do is try to redeem it instead. We should prayerfully identify whatever the possibilities are in the problem and pursue them.

Take the process of dying, for instance. I've heard many Christians say they don't fear death but the process of dying. The fact is most people consider that the ultimate problem. But it's also an incredible possibility. When we're in the process of dying, the people around us are more attentive to what say and do. For one thing, they're more sympathetic to us because of what we're going through. For another thing, they anticipate that they'll someday go through the same thing. So, they're more attuned to us than they were before, which opens up two opportunities to us. The first is to glorify God. We say and do things that cause others to esteem Him, to hold Him in high regard. The second is to build up the faith of others. We say and do things that

cause them to have confidence and peace about death and dying.

There are possibilities in every problem. That's the reality and we need to accommodate it. Ask for the Holy Spirit's guidance and help. Then look for, find, and pursue the possibilities.

There's Provision in Every Problem

The fourth and final basic insight our text reveals is this. There's provision in every problem. We see that in verse 19. Paul identified two resources he had. One was the prayers of the Christians at Philippi, which impresses upon us the importance of praying for people with problems. The other was "**the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.**" I want you to know this morning that God gives us provision for every problem. He gives us the resources we need to solve or redeem it.

The first resources He gives are natural. It's the Law of Challenge and Response. Many people today sell themselves short. They think they aren't strong enough to face and defeat the problems that pop up. But they are. When God made us, He gave us physical and psychological resources many of us don't even know we have. He gave us energies and strengths many of us have never even tapped into. But they're there. And when we refuse to be defeated, stand up to our problems, and act constructively, we discover them. They come out and when the problem is solved or ends, they carry us on to be better and stronger people than we were before. It's the Law of Challenge and Response.

But God also gives us a supernatural resource for our problems. It's the provision of the Holy Spirit.

God's gracious actions surround us if we're following Jesus. The Holy Spirit works in our lives and us. He guides, strengthens, enhances, encourages, empowers, and more. Our call is to stand in those gracious actions by engaging God. We engage Him by practicing certain spiritual activities like solitude and silence, fasting, prayer, worship, devotional Bible reading, practicing His presence, celebration, and more.

Now, we need more of the Holy Spirit's help, not less, when

problems pop up – and He gives it. If we're with Him in the fair weather, He'll be with us, even more vividly, in the foul. His gracious actions don't decrease when problems pop up; they increase or intensify. So, what we need to do is to stand in them by engaging God through spiritual activities.

Many of us don't do that. When problems pop up, we often abandon engaging God. We get so caught up in the problem that we ignore practicing spiritual activities. That is a tactical error though that isolates us from the one thing we need most – God's provision.

Don't let that happen to you. When things are going well, stand in God's gracious actions through spiritual activities. When problems pop up, keep standing in those same actions by continuing those same activities.

John Ortberg tells about a devoted follower of Jesus. This lovely woman had a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and was a wife and mother of two small children. Tragically, she was diagnosed with inoperable breast cancer and given only months to live. She eventually called Ortberg to tell him the news but he wasn't home. So she left him a message, the last line of which was this: **"I have never felt God's presence more strongly or have been more sure of God's goodness than I am now."**

That inspiring line illustrates the reality. There is divine provision in every problem. So let's accommodate that reality by standing in it – by engaging God through spiritual activities.

Conclusion

Those then are the four insights about problems that we need to know and accommodate. Robert Schuller summed them up well in the following creed he wrote and I close with it: **"When faced with a mountain, I will not quit. I will keep on striving until I climb over, find a pass through, tunnel underneath, or simply stay and turn the mountain into a gold mine! With God's help."** Amen!