

It is so easy for us to be discouraged these days, Christians. We might even be a little embittered by the way things are going. Because I know that we can very easily remember a time when everything seemed to be better, a time when everything seemed to be going right, a time when everything was going the way that it should. But now it seems like everything has gone downhill, doesn't it? That we are suffering loss after loss with no end in sight. And it leaves us asking all kinds of questions: "What's going to happen to us? What will the future be like? Is the Church going to fail? Is the Gospel going to fail?" "What happened to the good old days?" we wonder. "And what will happen in the days ahead?"

But Christians, these are not new questions for us. The Church has always struggled with these questions in every time and in every place. In fact, the Ephesians in our reading for today were also wrestling with these questions. Because the Ephesians could remember pretty clearly a time when everything was going better. Paul had been their pastor for three years. And those were wonderful years for them. That was a time of power. That was a time of growth. That was a time when all kinds of people were coming to the Church and were coming to know Christ. Yeah, there were problems. There's always problems. But it was a very easy time to be optimistic in. A time when everything seemed to be going right.

But things changed for them, and not for the better. Because Paul was preparing to leave the city to continue on his missionary journeys. But even before he got a chance to leave, a riot broke out in Ephesus. In Acts chapter 19, we're told that some of the pagans were not very happy with how popular the Church had become. And some of them stirred up the whole city to riot and to loot and to cause all kinds of problems for the Christians. And it was only because a city official managed to calm them down that the riot didn't get worse than it did. And so it was very clear to the Church, then, that things were not going to be quite so easy in Ephesus anymore. They were not quite as welcome in the city as they were before.

But things got worse still. Because Paul finally did leave the city. But several months later, as he was passing by on his way back to Jerusalem, he called the elders of the city to come and to visit him. And when they came to visit him, he told them that the Holy Spirit had told him that he was about to be imprisoned, that he was about to suffer for the sake of the Gospel. And perhaps worst of all for them, he told them that they would never see his face again. That was a very hard thing for them to hear. In fact, as Acts chapter 20, starting at verse 37, says: "There was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again." And so, to the Ephesians it seemed like one bad thing was happening after another. What was going to happen next? What kind of future lay in store for them?

Then things got worse still. Because Paul was finally imprisoned, just as he said that he was going to be. The Jews out of jealousy had brought false charges against him, and the Romans had thrown him into prison as a result. And Paul was possibly facing the death penalty because of these false charges. And that was the straw that broke the camel's back for them. The Ephesians lost all hope. It seemed like everything had come to nothing. It seemed like everything had gone wrong. Almost as if the Gospel itself had failed! And they probably thought to themselves: "How could it ever get worse than this?"

And Christians, it's so easy for us to think this way too. It is so easy for us to lose heart over the way that things are going. Because we live in a time when it seems like the Church is losing ground. We live in a time when it seems like there are many who are turning away from God, who are turning away from the faith. We live in a time when it seems like society is getting worse and worse with each passing day. And there doesn't seem to be an end in sight. And the reason why that's so distressing for us, the reason why that's so troubling is because it seems like it's all out of control. Like it's all one giant mistake, as if it shouldn't be this way. Because when things were better, everything seemed to be going according to plan. Everything was going exactly as we expected it to go. And that was a lot easier to deal with. But now things have gone wrong, and that's much harder for us to deal with. Because all of these things that we didn't expect have caused it all to break down. And maybe if we did this or that, we think, we could get back to the good old days! We could go back to the way things were. But even thinking that way shows that at heart we think that we've lost control, that everything has gone wrong and has gone off course. And that's exactly what is so difficult for us to deal with. Because if it was going the way that it should, it wouldn't be so bad. But nothing seems to be going right. "So what do we do?" we think. "What are we supposed to do? What does the future hold for us? What does the future hold for God's Church?"

But Christians, Paul tells us in our Epistle reading that things are not off course. Nothing has gone wrong. Things are going as they should. Because even Paul's chains, even Paul's suffering, he says, are all part of God's plan. Because Paul says that he is "a prisoner for Christ Jesus." That's an amazing statement! Really pay attention to that! He says that he is a "prisoner for Christ Jesus." He does not say that he is a prisoner of Rome. He does not say that he is a prisoner who happens to be there because everything went wrong. He saying he is a prisoner of Jesus, that God himself had put him in that place, that God himself had put those chains on his hands and feet. He was there exactly as God intended him to be! Because God is the one in control of all things.

And Paul tells us that this had been the plan all along. That in eternity, even before God created the world, he had chosen Paul to be the messenger of his Gospel, to proclaim that Gospel to all the nations, to all the Gentiles. And part of that plan, Paul says, was the suffering he was now going through. God had intended this from the very beginning. So nothing was off course. Nothing was going wrong. All was exactly as it should be, because this was God at work, bringing victory to the world. And Paul could even rejoice in this and give thanks to God in the midst of his chains, because he knew that God was in control. And so he says, Ephesians 3, verse 13: "I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory."

And Christians, I know that we often struggle to really understand this. Because I think so often we see bad things happening in our lives as accidents, as things that just sort of happened that we didn't plan for. And we try to deal with that in lots of different ways. We'll say that it's just a part of life, that you've just got to roll with the punches. You've just got to deal with it, and so on and so forth. We try to think that if we just deal with it in this way and say that it is a part of life, that then we can take care of these problems. But that doesn't always work. Because sometimes they get to be too much, and then they can soon overwhelm us.

But Christians, God is in control. Paul tells us that this is no accident. We are exactly where God intends us to be. The time that we live in, the place that we live in, the chains which we wear, the suffering which we endure--all of it is part of God's plan, and it is meant for our good. So we can rejoice in it, and give thanks to God even in our chains, just as Paul did, because it all shows that he has all things in his hands, and that nothing happens apart from him.

And Christians, hold on to that truth. Don't let go of it. Because if you do let go of it, it is so easy for us to lose heart. It is so easy for us to become discouraged. We can look at the future, and it will seem like a dark maze in front of us. Dark and foreboding, and we're not really quite sure how to get through it. And all of our sufferings will seem like setbacks that will cause us to lose hope. And we can think that even the Gospel itself is somehow in danger. But Christians, that's not the truth. The truth is that God plans all of our steps. No matter how dark it may seem to be, God is our light who will lead us through. No matter what we are going through, God will care for us, because he intends it for our good. He will lead us through the valley of the shadow of death, so that we do not have to fear any evil. And even if God leads us through fire, even if he leads us through water which threatens to overwhelm us, God will take care of us, because he intends it for our good. Even the darkest night which he sends into our lives will give way to his light. Because our suffering, Christians, will end exactly the moment that God wants it to. It won't go a moment longer, because God is the Master of all of our ways, the Captain of all of our steps.

So Christians, do not lose heart over what you are suffering. Do not lose heart in the midst of all of the things that are happening around us today. All of these things are in God's hand. And it is happening for your glory, because it shows that we belong to him. And whether we receive good or bad from his hands, we can rejoice in it, because the victory, Christians, is ours forever in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you are the one who directs all of our ways. Help us always to trust in you, knowing that you intend all things for our good. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.