

CHRISTIANS IN SPITE OF EVERYTHING

"All the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar's household." Philippians 4:22.

Many find it extremely difficult to be faithful Christians because they are living in such an unchristian world. They seem to think that they might make a success of the Christian life if their social environment would only give them a decent chance. They ask, "How can one be a Christian in a world like this?"

Paul was a prisoner in Rome, but he made that prison a pulpit for the proclamation for the gospel. In this letter to his Philippian friends in his best-loved church, Paul reveals how he himself had conquered his environment, which was very hostile to everything for which he stood.

In closing this letter, as was his custom, Paul sent greetings to the believers at Philippi, both from himself and from the followers of Christ in Rome. There must have been a real joy in his soul as he wrote of the saints in Caesar's household. It was as if he had said, "You wouldn't think it, would you? but there are saints even in Caesar's household, and they are especially interested in you."

What is a saint? A saint is simply a saved sinner. In the New Testament, "saint" is the term which is used to designate a believer in Christ. There it is used to designate all the followers of Christ, whether they are weak or strong, undeveloped or mature. However, it carries with it the implication that a saint is a Christian who truly loves and serves the Lord. When they trusted Christ as Saviour and enthroned Him as the Lord of their lives, they separated themselves from all other leaders and devoted themselves to His cause.

Paul wrote of saints in Rome. They did not do as the Romans did. They were different. They did not live as the pagans did. They testified for their Lord, Who had redeemed them and saved them. Their names, while unknown to us, were written in heaven. If these unnamed saints could live godly lives in Rome, the good life can be lived anywhere. The Rome of Paul's day was tottering on the precipice of moral disaster. Being a saint there meant doing so in the worst environment.

To understand the full meaning of Paul's greeting and salutation from these saints in Caesar's household, we must remember who that Caesar was and what life in his palace was like. The emperor who then wore the purple was the last of the Caesars, and the worst. His name was Nero, one of the most vile, inhuman, ferocious and wicked tyrants who ever lived. Never before or since has history exhibited such a contrast as the dissolute Nero and Paul the apostle. Humanity never rose higher than in Paul, and never sank lower than in Nero.

Nero seems to have been totally devoid of conscience and of any sense of justice. Common, ordinary criminal procedure was not sufficient to satisfy his thirst for blood. He sought far and near for his victims, and devised all kinds of methods for inflicting excruciating sufferings upon them. He was the most infamous scoundrel and scandalous despot that ever disgraced the imperial purple. He assassinated his own mother, divorced his first wife and kicked to death his second wife. Nero was the very epitome of all the vice, cruelty and degradation of his age. So utterly despicable was his life and so vile his record that the very name Nero is no longer borne by men, but is reserved for dogs.

Nero's vicious anger was directed against Christians especially. He tortured them in every conceivable way. He had their limbs torn from their bodies, or had them thrown into the arena of the amphitheater to be devoured by wild beasts, or had their bodies smeared with pitch and set on fire to provide a human torch for lighting up the place at night. What a bloody tyrant this Caesar was!

At the instigation of Nero, his courtiers set fire to the imperial city, and tradition affirms that "Nero fiddled while Rome was burning." Then, when the populace rose in their wrath and demanded the punishment of those responsible for setting aflame their beloved city, to shield his myrmidons, Nero accused the Christians of doing it. They were then tied in sacks and thrown into the Tiber to drown. Some of them were hanged, quartered and crucified. Still others were thrown into the arena to be torn to pieces by wild beasts.

One night this unmitigated scoundrel gave a garden party. During that day he had a thousand poles erected in the imperial gardens, a thousand Christians stripped, tarred and tied to the poles, and at night they were ignited and burned to illuminate the Emperor's garden party.

If we had been living when Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians, about the last place on earth that we would have looked for saints would have been in Caesar's household. Yet they were there, and from that citadel of Satan they sent greetings to the Philippians.

The saints in Caesar's household were not those in the imperial family. Rather, they were the menial servants, the slaves and the humblest dependents. Although they were living behind thick walls, which were guarded by Roman soldiers, the good news of salvation had reached them, and they were in full enjoyment of the liberty of the children of God. They had peace and joy in their hearts. They won their spiritual victories in the midst of a hostile environment.

These saints in Caesar's household tell us that the flower of Christian life can grow anywhere. If these men and women were able to live for Christ amid the perils and seductions of Nero's palace, then there is not any place where that is not possible. After all, it is not easy to be a Christian anywhere. There is no place where you can live the Christian life without working, struggling, striving and praying.

"Am I a soldier of the cross,
A follower of the Lamb,
And shall I fear to own His cause,
Or blush to speak His Name?

Must I be carried to the skies
On flowery beds of ease,
While others fought to win the prize,
And sailed through bloody seas?"

It is always hard to live as a Christian should, but it is possible always. In spite of all the difficulties, we can honor Christ in our living if we are only willing.

It is possible for a man to have a world of his own within the larger world in which to live. Out of the hodgepodge of the social mass, with its down-drag upon life, a man can choose those saving elements that elevate, purify

and empower the soul. Regardless of the environment in which your life may be set, there is no such thing as triumphant living except as one learns the secret which Mrs. Browning once put into four simple but profound words: "Life develops from within."

When you feel lonely and discouraged in your Christian race and warfare and are tempted to give up the whole struggle because those with whom you live do not revere God or have love for Christ, think of the saints in Caesar's household and take courage.

Strange as it may seem, there was in the midst of the foul and lustful atmosphere of Caesar's residence a group of people who had found Him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. There were those in the palace who dared to be Christians and to live the Christian life, who dared to give supreme allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ and to take their places among His people who were so much despised and so greatly threatened with tortures.

What a tribute to the power of Christ that He has true witnesses in the very citadel of evil -- saints in Caesar's household. Thus out of the muck comes the lily and out of the filth comes the flower; out of the defilement comes devotion; out of the sinful palace comes the saintly person; among Caesar's slaves are found Christ's servants; from among the followers of the cruel Nero come the friends of the compassionate Nazarene. Here in the midst of the corruption of heathenism was a colony of heaven. Remember this when you are tempted to lower the standard because of unfavorable circumstances. It is possible to be true when those about you are untrue, to be pure in the midst of impurity.

It has sometimes been asked whether a man's heredity or his environment is the greater factor in his life. Some modern leaders have stressed the power of environment and affirmed that a man must be made or marred by his circumstances. Our text teaches the very opposite. The world and the Word alike teach that by the grace of God man may be the conqueror and not the mere creature of his circumstances. With Judas Iscariot in mind surely no one will be disposed to fall under the spell of environment as the all-dominating factor in the development of moral and spiritual life. The best environment in the world did not prevent Judas from going the downward way.

"Saints in Caesar's household" is the one complete answer to all the misuse of the doctrine of environment. There are no conditions of life in which we cannot fulfill our moral obligations. The history of Christianity from the beginning has been one continuous conquest over environment. As Percy Ainsworth said, "Christ in a man's heart is stronger than the devil in a man's pathway." The fact is that the really determining factors of life are not external; the forces that make for character are internal. The creating of character is not outside but within our control.

Who and what were these saints? They were found in three walks of life that symbolize and reveal the vocations of the Christian. Some of them were soldiers of the Emperor's bodyguard. Paul says that his bonds in Christ were manifest in all the palace, "throughout the whole praetorian guard." Why did Nero choose Christians as members of his personal bodyguard? Because they were more trustworthy and reliable than others. These also included stewards of the Emperor's household, the men who received and distributed his goods, who kept his accounts and stores. Why did Nero, the prime antagonist of Christians, choose them to be his stewards? They were more trustworthy, honest, and dependable than any others he could command. And they were all slaves, the purchased property of their owner.

These "saints in Caesar's household" were characterized by Christian character, constancy, consistency, and contentment. It is evident that Nero, the greatest persecutor of Christians of the age, would not have employed these hated Christians if it had not been well worth his while to do so. It is obvious that they were saints in state as well as standing. It is equally clear that the constancy and consistency of their Christian character made them so much more valuable as servants that Nero pocketed his persecuting zeal in order to secure their service.

Circumstances do differ, and some circumstances are more favorable to Christian growth than others. In some families it is a great deal easier than in others to maintain a healthy spiritual life. It is not easy in some associations to keep the soul in line with God but it is possible. The soul need never be at the mercy of its surroundings. It is possible to be a Christian anywhere. God knows your address. He knows where you live and work and what you have to put up with every day. If you will only look to Him for help to counteract the depressing conditions of your life, He will perfect His strength in your weakness.

Occasionally, some one says, "I can't be a Christian in the environment in which I must live. I can't be a Christian in my surroundings of wickedness." With what shame one should hang his head to make a statement like that in the face of the fact that there were saints in Caesar's household.

You may have difficulties, you may have a hard place in which to live the Christian life, you may be surrounded with those ready to taunt and to make fun of you for being a Christian and putting into practice Christian principles; but shame on you if you do not have grace and courage enough to stand up for Christ under such small opposing factors as these. The fact is that being a Christian, and living the Christian life, does not depend upon environment or circumstances of life. Thank God for all the saints in strange places, who are glorifying Him.