

CHRISTIANS IN SPITE OF ENVIRONMENT

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

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 then was the last and the worst of the Caesars. His name was Nero, one of the most vile, inhuman, ferocious, and wicked tyrants who ever lived.

Nero seems to have been totally devoid of conscience and of any sense of justice. He plunged into the depths of sin and crime. His excesses and vices shocked even the Romans. He gloated over the misery and suffering he could bring upon others. 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. Nero was the very epitome of all the vice, cruelty, and degradation of his age. He assassinated his own mother, divorced his first wife, and kicked to death his second wife. So utterly despicable was his life and so vile his record that the 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.

At the instigation of Nero, who had such a gluttonous appetite for murder, his courtiers set fire to the imperial city, and tradition affirms that "Nero fiddled while Rome was burning." Then, when the populace rose in 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. Others were hanged, quartered and crucified. Still others were thrown into the arena to be torn to pieces by wild beasts.

One night this infamous tyrant and unmitigated scoundrel gave a garden party. During that day he had a thousand poles erected in the imperial gardens, and then he had a thousand Christians stripped, tarred, and tied to these poles, and at night they were ignited and burned to provide illumination for the party.

Strange as it may seem, in the midst of the foul and lustful atmosphere of Nero's residence there were those who were Christians. If ever there was an atmosphere uncongenial to Christianity, it was that of the court and palace of this bloody debauchee. Yet, so powerful was the gospel of Christ in transforming sinners, that in the service of this profligate ruler were men and women worthy of the exalted title of "saints," who openly avowed their allegiance to Christ by publicly sending greetings through Paul to the brethren in Philippi. There were those in the palace who dared to be Christians, to live the true Christian life, to give supreme

allegiance to Christ, and to take their places among His people who were so much despised and so greatly threatened with tortures.

Had we been living then, Caesar's household would have been the last place we would have looked for Christians. Yet, they were there, and from that citadel of Satan they sent greetings to the Christians in Philippi. Although they were slaves and menial servants, living behind thick walls, which were guarded by Roman soldiers, they were in full enjoyment of the liberty of the children of God. They had peace and joy in their hearts. They were pure amid the defiled and victorious among the defeated. They won their spiritual victories in the midst of a hostile environment.

There in the midst of the corruption of heathenism was a colony of heaven. What a tribute to the power of Christ that He had true witnesses in the very citadel of evil! Thus out of the muck comes the lily and out of the filth comes the flower; out of defilement comes devotion; out of the sinful palace comes saintly people; from among the servants of cruel Nero come the friends of the compassionate Nazarene.

When you are tempted to lower the Christian standard because of unfavorable circumstances or an uncongenial environment, just remember that it is possible to be true when those about you are untrue, and to be pure in the midst of impurity. These saints in Caesar's household tell us that the flower of the Christian life can grow anywhere. If these men and women were able to live for Christ amid the seductions and perils of Nero's palace, then it is possible to live for Him in any place. Being a saint in Caesar's household meant being one in the worst kind of environment, and under the most difficult circumstances. After all, living a genuine Christian life does not depend on environment or the circumstances of life.

Who were those saints in Caesar's household? Some of them were soldiers of the Emperor's bodyguard. Why did Nero choose Christians as members of his personal bodyguard? Because they were more trustworthy and reliable than others. Some of these saints were stewards of the Emperor's household, the men who received and distributed his goods, who kept his accounts. Why did Nero, the prime antagonist of Christians, choose them to be his stewards? Because they were more honest, trustworthy, and dependable than any others whom he might have commanded. 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 services. It was in the household of the foulest monarch who ever ruled that those Christians maintained their love, their loyalty, and their zeal. From this fact you and I can readily see that by the grace of God we can be saints anywhere. If Christianity could flourish within range of Caesar's palace, it can flourish anywhere. Christ enables His followers to be victorious in spite of hostile environment.

It has been asked whether a man's heredity or his environment is the greater factor in his life. Some 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.

One of the temptations of Christians today is to blame their moral and spiritual failures on their environment. Instead of pointing the indicting finger at ourselves, where it rightfully belongs, we attempt to saddle the responsibility for our delinquencies on our surroundings. We say, "If circumstances were different, we would be different."

We do acknowledge that a bad environment does make victorious living more difficult. All of us do have the tendency to take on the color of our surroundings. It is very difficult for a child to become a Christian, and to live a victorious Christian life, when he is reared in a home where the name of God is never spoken except in an oath, and where immorality and drunkenness are taken for granted. But, thank God, there are those in every age who have done so in spite of their circumstances. Such circumstances bring terrific pressure upon people, but they do not have to be determinative. Through the grace of God one can live the Christian life and witness for Christ in spite of his surroundings, even if he is obliged to be in direct contact with wickedness, in great moral danger, and involved with those who hate the good. To all who say that circumstances make it impossible for them to live pure and godly lives, and who bribe their consciences by pointing to the hardness of their environment, I present the challenge to prove that you have more unfavorable circumstances than did those Christians who lived in Caesar's household.

Christianity is not a thing of locality, but of character. It can thrive in any place on this earth. That is why nobody is ever justified in saying, "It is no use for me to try to be a Christian where I am." Men can live for God if they want to and are willing to pay the price that is necessary to do it. Obadiah kept his conscience in the house of wicked King Ahab. Daniel maintained his integrity in the heathen court of Babylon. Nehemiah walked as a blameless servant of God in the profligate Persian palace. Joseph lived above reproach while he was a slave in Egypt. In all kinds of hardships, and in various parts of the world, God has those who are walking daily with Him as did Enoch of old. If anybody does not live as he should, he cannot blame his failure to do so on his surroundings. The intoxicated man can't plead that he met some bad companions, and had to go with them where they should not have gone. The sinfully extravagant man can't plead that he is forced to keep up appearances. The business man cannot excuse his dishonest practices because he is in danger of bankruptcy. The working man can't overlook his petty theft by saying he is underpaid. It is not necessary for any man to do wrong. Anybody can live for God at any time, and in any place, and under all kinds of circumstances, if he wants to do so.

An unfriendly environment makes spiritual victories difficult, but it does not make them impossible. My heart is thrilled by the truth that God can make saints anywhere. Evil has its allurements, but we do not have to yield to temptation. It does not take a seer to see that our nation is now in a disastrous moral slump, but it is a certainty that we as individuals do not have to plunge into the depths of degradation because others about us are doing so. As individuals we can escape the flood of evil that is sweeping our nation to its doom. We don't have to be sensual because this is an age of sensuality and debauchery. We don't have to be

superficial because the times are shallow. We don't have to neglect the culture of our spiritual lives in divine worship because life is crowded and complex.

There are not any conditions of life in which we cannot fulfil our moral obligations. The history of Christianity has been one continuous conquest of environment. As Percy Ainsworth said: "Christ in a man's heart is stronger than the devil in a man's pathway." The really determining factors of life are not external; the forces that make for character are internal. As Mrs. Browning put it: "Life develops from within." Through the enabling strength of the indwelling Holy Spirit one can be a victorious Christian in the midst and in spite of opposing circumstances. "Greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world" (I John 4:4). What we need is inner resources. As Paul expressed it: "That he would grant you, according to the richness of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man" (Ephesians 3:16). Outward circumstances do not control the person whose inner life is strong. Contentment does not rest upon ideal circumstances, but upon the quality of one's soul. It does not depend on what a person has, but upon what he is. "A tub was large enough for Diogenes, but a world was too small for Alexander." Circumstances do not make the man, but they do reveal the kind of person he is. "Life is a grindstone, and whether it grinds a man down or polishes him up depends on the stuff he is made of."

Some circumstances are more favorable to Christian development and service than others. In some families it is much easier to maintain a healthy spiritual life than it is in others. In some places it is not easy to keep the soul in tune with God, but it is possible. The soul need never be at the mercy of its surroundings. Christ expected His early followers to be victorious in spite of their enveloping circumstances, as was indicated by His prayer: "I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, (i. e., change their environment), but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil" (John 17:15). God knows your address. He knows where you work and what you have to put up with every day. If you will only look to Him and depend on Him, He will perfect His strength in your weakness.

It never has been, is not now, and never will be an easy thing to be a Christian of the right sort. Knowing this, Isaac Watts wrote:

"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 thro' bloody seas?

Are there no foes for me to face?
Must I not stem the flood?
Is this vile world a friend to grace,
To help me on to God?

Sure I must fight, if I would reign;
Increase my courage, Lord;
I'll bear the toil, endure the pain,
Supported by Thy Word."

Christian friends, Satan is going to see to it that our way is rough. Every true Christian will be called upon to bear crosses and to "endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ" (I Timothy 2:3). The world, the flesh, and the devil are calling to people as never before. The call of the world is loud; the challenge of the world is appealing. Sin is made very alluring. People today want somebody to tell them how to sin and to be happy.

Occasionally, somebody says: "I can't be a Christian in the environment in which I have to 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 view 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 who are ready to taunt you 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. There is no place where it is easy to be a real Christian. There is no place where you can be an obedient Christian without striving, working, and praying. When you are discouraged and tempted to give up the struggle because those with whom you live and associate do not revere God and love Christ, think of the saints in Caesar's household and take courage.

You, who are unsaved, can become Christian today in spite of your environment, circumstances, and the other things that claim your attention. Become Christians in spite of hypocrisies and failures in lives that you see about you. Their hypocrisies and failures will not save your souls. Look to Christ Who alone can save you. Become a Christian now in spite of your past life of sin. Become a Christian in spite of your loved ones and friends who have been holding you back. In spite of all that Satan may say to you, and all of the hindrances that he may place in your way, receive Christ as your Saviour. With Charlotte Elliott say:

"Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou biddest me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come! I come!

Just as I am, and waiting not
To rid my soul of one dark blot,
To Thee whose blood can cleanse each spot,
O Lamb of God, I come! I come!

Just as I am — Thou wilt receive,
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve,
Because Thy promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come! I come!