

SAINTS IN STRANGE PLACES

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

Paul was writing from the great city of Rome to his beloved friends in Philippi, a miniature Rome, where he had been beaten with stripes and fastened in prison stocks. There must have been a real joy in his soul as he wrote of 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."

"Caesar's household" does not signify any reference to the imperial family. The people Paul is thinking about are the menial servants, the slaves, and the humblest dependents. The transformation of their characters was one of God's miracles. Though they were living behind thick walls, guarded by Roman soldiers, the good news of salvation had reached them. Confined as they were, yet they were in full enjoyment of the liberty of the sons of God. Nothing could diminish their joy or the peace of God in their hearts.

How the saints in Caesar's household contrived to see Paul we do not know. That they took great risks is probable. But they knew him as their friend and encourager. We wonder what they told Paul. Did they tell him some of the things they had to endure? After all, you know, they were human as ourselves. On the other hand, what did Paul advise them to do? It is quite certain that Paul did not advise them to leave their station and seek an easier and more congenial sphere. Rather, they were to stick to their job, hold on fearlessly and trust absolutely to the grace of God, which was sufficient for all their needs.

If we had been living when Paul wrote his Epistle 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 by the grace of God they witnessed a good confession. From that citadel of Satan these saints sent greetings back to the Philippians.

Just what is a saint? A saint is simply a saved sinner. According to the New Testament, "saint" is the term which is used to designate a follower of Jesus. There it is used to designate all followers of Christ, whether weak or strong, undeveloped or mature. However, it carries with it the idea that a saint is a Christian who truly loves and serves the Lord. The disciples of Jesus were called saints because by their acceptance of Him as their leader they separated themselves from all other leadership for their lives and were devoted to His cause.

Paul wrote of saints in Rome. They did not do as the Romans did. They were different. They gave the lie to their pagan surroundings. They testified to the truth of their redeeming Lord. Their names, unknown to us, were written in heaven. Enough for us to know that God used common people, and made them uncommon. He visited the obscure place, empowered ordinary lives, and spread their influence across the centuries. If these unnamed saints could be holy in Rome, the good life can be lived anywhere. The Rome of Paul's day was tottering on the precipice of moral disaster. Her's was a decadent civilization. And being a saint in Caesar's household meant being a saint in the worst kind of environment and under the most difficult circumstances.

Who was Caesar? The Caesar here referred to was none other than Nero, one of the most vile, inhuman, ferocious, wicked tyrants who ever lived. He seems to have been totally without any sense of justice, and to have been devoid of conscience. 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 especially directed against Christians. 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 city of Rome at night. What a bloody tyrant this Caesar was!

Nero surrounded himself with courtiers whose vices were so heinous as to put to shame the men of their own day and generation. It was these courtiers who at the instance of the Emperor 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 tied in sacks and thrown into the Tiber to drown. They were hanged, drawn, quartered, and crucified. They were thrown into the arena to be torn to pieces by wild beasts.

One night this unmitigated scoundrel gave a garden party. During the 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 set fire to, to illuminate an Emperor's garden party.

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 so to do. 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.

Caesar's household was a strange place to try to be a Christian. Think of the occupations of the Christian slaves with nothing to refine the soul in their employments. Think of the companions they had -- heathen, steeped in superstition, and sunk in sin. Think of the monster whom they served -- Nero, the foulest monarch who ever ruled. Yet it was in his household that those Christians kept their loyalty, their love, their zeal. From this fact you and I can see that by the grace of God we can be saints anywhere. Saintliness is never easy, but it is never impossible. If Christianity could flourish at Rome and within range of Caesar's palace, it can flourish anywhere. Christianity enables one to win a spiritual victory in the face of hostile environment.

Christ's gospel has won its greatest victories in what seemed the most unsuitable surroundings. Paul and Silas at Philippi in the inner prison, with their feet fast in the stocks, yet sang praises to God at midnight and all the prisoners were listening to them. How could they do it? Though their feet were fettered, their souls were free. Whenever you find a saint in Caesar's household in any realm, you may be sure that he has centered his attention on his interior resources rather than on his outward circumstances.

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.