

What Insufferable Itches Have to Do With the Advance of the Gospel

By Steve Burchett



When hard times come, what do people hear from your lips?

Those who saw Paul in Rome under house arrest awaiting trial (see the end of Acts) probably didn't think he was doing so well. After all, he was in chains! I can imagine the guards who were chained to Paul in four hour shifts initially thought Paul would be like any other prisoner.

Even the believers throughout the Roman Empire who were aware Paul was in a difficult spot might have understood if he just "laid low" for a time — a date with Caesar awaited!

However, here's what Paul wrote to the church in Philippi:

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. (Philippians 1:12-13)

Paul was very close to this church, having started it over a decade prior to writing Philippians. They would have been concerned for Paul. Yet, Paul wrote as if things couldn't be going any better. You can almost hear Paul saying, "I just wish you all could come and see what the Lord has done!"

How does the gospel advance? Paul's experience in Rome provides what might be a surprising answer: the gospel advances through faithful believers providentially placed in difficult circumstances. Paul didn't see his suffering as a hindrance to the progress of the gospel, but as the design of God through which the gospel might spread farther than it might have otherwise traveled.

Think, for example, of "the whole imperial guard" hearing the gospel. These men were elite Roman soldiers who served directly under the emperor. There were thousands in

Rome and beyond that city, and there probably wasn't a single one who would have sought Paul out to hear what he had to say. But then one day guard duties were assigned, and the regular rotation of time with Paul began, and before long, they were not only hearing the gospel from him, but seeing it's power in his life and the hope it gave him. I can imagine one soldier saying to another, "I've never met a prisoner like him. He seems to really care about me. He's always asking about my family. He even prayed for my sick daughter the other day! I'm not sure I'm ready to believe what he's telling me about God, but he definitely lives his life under the rule of this man he's always telling me about — Jesus Christ. He's even willing to die for this man he keeps telling me died for him!"

In my travels for ministry around the world, especially in less developed countries, I've sometimes found myself praying something like, "Oh Lord, please keep me from the kind of sickness that would put me in a hospital here!" There's nothing wrong with that prayer. However, the Lord may have other plans. In fact, he did one time in Ethiopia. After a long day of Bible teaching followed by a meal in a dark house due to a power outage (a common occurrence), I was back in my hotel room when the itching started. I'll spare you the details, but what looked like welts were spreading all over my legs. And it was 11:30 pm. Off to the dimly lit hospital I went with my Ethiopian brother and fellow partner in the ministry. Thirty minutes later, I found myself in a room full of sick and hurting people, including a lady who was giving birth *right next to me!*

At this point, you are probably thinking, "Oh, Steve's going to tell us about how, in that experience of physical suffering, he spoke up boldly for Jesus." No, I'm not, because it didn't happen. In fact, I think I sat there, a little scared, and mostly stunned. However, I was not alone. My Ethiopian brother was with me, and he took advantage of this less than ideal circumstance to try to minister to people in that room, including the family of the lady who was giving birth. The next day, we ran into those family members again and heard the news: the baby was born safely, but the mother may not survive. I don't think everyone in that room heard the gospel that night (or the next day), but I'm fairly certain at least two or three people did.

I wonder if we will enjoy eternity with some of those Roman guards because they heard the gospel from Paul and believed. And it would be just like God to have ordained my insufferable itches in order that the gospel might reach a few people in that Ethiopian emergency room. The next time you find yourself in a tough spot, look around. The Lord probably put you there to tell someone about him.

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