



Christian Opportunity!

by Mark Brunner

If You Can't Beat 'Em! (Philippians 1: 12-14)

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em! We've all said it at times when it just seemed hopeless and there was no other way to cope other than giving in to the problem. But, perhaps sometimes it may be our best option.

Here's a story: Back in the late 1940's the extensive system of railroads that crisscrossed the United States found themselves in just such a situation. For over a century rail had been not only THE way to ship goods between towns and cities, it was about the only safe, secure and fast way to travel as well. In the early part of the last century it appeared to most who owned, operated, worked-on and used the over a million miles of steel rails in this country that the future of the railroad would go on forever. Then in 1906 something called the Lincoln highway went on the drawing boards. And, by 1914 cars and trucks began sweeping from the New York to the Midwest in the incredible time of only eight to nine days. By the mid-1920s the Lincoln Highway was connected to the Los Angeles and the west coast of the United States by U.S. Route 66. By 1938, for the first time in nearly a century and a half, more freight was being hauled by truck than by rail. But the major rail lines refused to accept their own demise. They began to see what had been viewed as a threat as a beckoning opportunity. Seeing an opportunity to buyout the little guy and

merge many of the less than competitive lines, a handful of major railroads began to build a smooth system of long haul, interstate rail lines. National railroads finally found their niche and by the 1970's many had once again become profitable as long haul, freight and passenger services. What had been a threat to their very existence turned out to be the very opportunity that saved them.

So it was with the Apostle Paul. Being thrown into prison, especially the brutally cold and dank confines of the infamous Mamertine prison of Rome, was not a treat. Yet, thrown into a dark and cold cell unjustly, Paul, recognizing that he was "in chains for Christ," gloried in the hardship and reveled in the opportunity. The "brothers" used Paul's misfortune and suffering to inspire and teach others about Jesus. They were holding him up as an example of courage, faith and hope, hope that could only come from a believing heart and a spirit that was daily replenished and restored by the pure Word of God. His body was suffering but his spirit was soaring. Paul turned the bad situation of Mamertine into a wonderful opportunity to reflect the glory of his Lord. Deep in that dark and dirty hole, a magnificent light was reflecting skyward. The circumstance that had dictated his defeat and turned into an opportunity would eventually reflect his victory. Paul had found through hardship a new purpose for living even as he was dying to do it; often its best to treat misfortune as a possibility. Can't beat 'em? Joining our misfortune may give us the best chance to to be a winner.

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The Devil's In The Detail! (Luke 23: 50-56)

Recently I had my old car into the shop for major bodywork and repainting. The wear and tear of nearly four decades of driving had really taken their toll. The original paint finish had faded. In places the brown undercoating was showing through and it had become nearly impossible to tell just what color the car had been in the first place. Surface rust had spring up in abundance over the entire chassis. There were dings, dent and creases everywhere. Both rear

fenders had been buckled due to accidents and there was a good size dent in one of the front fenders. The car looked pretty sorry as I left it in the capable hands of the body shop. It would be many weeks before it would be finished.

Over the course of the next several weeks I had occasion to stop into the shop just to see how things were going. I was amazed the very first time that I stopped to see that all the dents, creases and dings had been eliminated. But, the old paint remained as well as the surface rust. The car looked better, but unfinished as it was, it still looked kind of sad. The next time I stopped by I was told that the car had been stripped and readied for painting. There it sat, chrome taped up to prevent over-painting and completely devoid of color and finish. Improvement? Sure, the surface rust was gone and there were no more dents, creases and dings. They had put a lot of work into it; but it still seemed a long way from being finished. Weeks later I finally I got the phone call I was waiting for. My car was "finished and I could pick it up any time." I rushed down to the shop and there she was; gleaming, painted and smooth. As I paid my bill I asked to see the guys who had done the work. I thanked each of them and then got into my car to drive back home. The first thing I noticed, however, was that there was no wax on the car and that the entire interior was coated with a thick layer of dust. There was also a missing chrome bezel over the back running light. The car was finished but not complete. Several weeks later, new bezel in hand, interior cleaned, and a fresh coat of wax on the entire surface, the old car gleamed. It was the FEW final details that made all the difference. The devil was in the details, but the details FINISHED THE JOB.

The Galilean women that followed Jesus it seems were not important enough to be pursued by the authorities as "followers" of the "Galilean prophet." They were not preachers or baptizers but they did what they could. They were the "detailers," the ones who took care of the little things, like preparing Jesus' body for burial, that on the surface did not seem that important relevant to the whole picture. Yet their deeds were works of completion and finishing. On the one hand small, on the other great. It's like that with you and I as well. The devil may be in the detail, but it's God that complete the whole picture. When serving our Lord, we need to remember that often in great tasks rest small opportunities.

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Temptation Disguised! (1 Samuel 23: 7-12)

Several years ago, with the dawning of a New Year and some great financing deals on the market, Holly and I decided to trade in our old, rusted Suburban. Despite the fact that the engine and transmission were in good shape, we kept looking at the rust and decided that it would be better to replace the truck before something truly did fall off of it. Then we saw it: "0% financing on all vans and trucks!" We thought that it would be great to own a full-sized van. With the excellent financing package, additional room, and lower price point, it just didn't seem like there really was any decision to make. We had found the perfect vehicle to replace our rusting but trusty old Suburban.

It seemed like an opportunity sent from heaven. It really didn't take us long to sign on the dotted line and then away we drove in our brand new full-sized van. We had decided not to trade the Suburban in since it would not have netted much on a trade. We parked it and used it as a utility vehicle. It was funny, though. Every time I drove up the driveway in my new van and passed the place where we had parked the Suburban, the old truck seemed to mock me. It was quite some time before I discovered why. When the time came for us to trade in the van we discovered to our dismay, that in just two short years and only 22,000 miles, it had lost over 50% of its value. We also discovered that had we purchased another Suburban it would have retained 75% of its value. In the long run what seemed like a golden opportunity ended up costing me several thousand dollars. Opportunity had knocked all right. But, we were too quick to open the door this time. If we had done our research we would have discovered that this opportunity was not from God after all. Rather, it was a temptation cleverly disguised as an opportunity.

Not all opportunities come from God. The Israelite King Saul found that out the hard way. What he thought was a great opportunity to catch his rival David, really turned out to be a temptation from the devil. If he had taken the time to think about it and consult with God, he would have known this. But he was too

wrapped up in his own desires to be able to be able to differentiate between what was opportunity and what was temptation. Opportunities come from God but not temptations. God does not tempt. Only the devil can do that. When opportunities arise to do something that simply doesn't make sense in light of what we know about God's will, we need to double-check our motives to see if we are reacting to an opportunity or jumping after a temptation. It's God's desires that should motivate our actions; not our own. Sometimes the perfect opportunity is nothing more than a temptation in disguise.

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Cutting Timber When It Beckons! (Numbers 14: 20-25)

Although summers tend to be busy, I am often amazed how busy the winter season can be. One of the jobs that just never seemed to get finished is making wood. I've looked with concern at the half-finished wood stacks and have decided I have to get to that before the snow flies. There are plenty of deadfalls and old elms available. Setting aside the time, however, is critical. Each morning as I leave the house and get into my truck to go to the office, the sun rises through the branches of several old elms just up near the highway. Their branches sway and creak in the wind. Morning after morning I get into the truck and drive up that same driveway. The sight, however, doesn't trigger the need to set a priority on getting them down. I simply have other things on my mind. The opportunity to make wood is rapidly slipping away.

As winter sets in and January and February beckon, and the amount of daylight dwindles, so will my wood supply. I know that I would have to make wood soon before the stocks are exhausted. I remember the old elms up on the hill overlooking the highway. Just one of these two big giants would supply enough wood to replenish my wood supplies for the entire winter. So, with chain saw, maul and wedge in hand I headed out recently toward the end of the driveway. But, as I neared the stand of old trees I discovered that the path to the trees was blocked by snows that had accumulated to a depth of several feet. It would be too deep to drop a tree of that size safely. And, even if I could

manage the heavy chain saw effectively, the trees would be felled into several feet of snow making it nearly impossible to cut them up for splitting. I looked with regret skyward toward those same beckoning limbs that I had seen throughout the fall. Two great big opportunities that I just would not be able to take advantage of this year. I had missed the big prize and would have to settle for lesser trees somewhere else in the forest.

When opportunity knocks you'd better be ready to answer the door. The funny thing about opportunity is that it simply knocks. Unlike temptation it will never try to kick the door in. No, it simply knocks, softly and gently, waiting for someone to answer its steady and plaintive call. The Bible states that: "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded" (Luke 12:48). You and I have been given much in the way of opportunity. Unfortunately we often chose not to heed the calling and we pay a high price. God has revealed His glory to all of us in the pages of our Bibles. Finding that glory and reaping the benefit of it, is like knowing we need to stack the woodpile soon and living in the hope that tomorrow may be sufficient. With things of this importance, tomorrow is not a sufficient promise. It is always better to cut the timber when it first beckons.

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Gold Mine of Opportunity! (Genesis 41: 1-14)

Here's a story: There was an old, Dutch farmer who owned a farm in South Africa that had, over the years, become arid. Even though his crop was wheat which required little moisture to grow and his few livestock did not require much in the way of feed and forage, as the land grew more and more arid, it was not long before the wheat that he did plant was stunted and fruitless while his livestock had to be sold. He loved the land. Yet, he slowly became convinced that his was the last farm on the land. He would have sell and move on. But, who would buy it? Day after day he rode his horse out to a ridge in the center of his land. From this vantage point he could see his entire ranch, and in the distance he could hear the mournful lowing of the few cattle he had left.

Here he would dismount, sit and cry. One day a man drove up from the city and offered to buy the land. The price was right, only \$25,000. He seemed all too happy to make the farmer an offer and the farmer was happy to accept it. Several weeks later, after the farmer had moved, the new owner came back. But, this time he didn't come alone. He brought a geologist and a small mining crew. Less than a month later, news quickly spread that a great discovery had taken place on an old farmstead near Durban, South Africa. One of the richest gold mines in Africa had been discovered on a rocky outcropping in the middle of an arid plain. (Author unknown)

This true story illustrates tragically how close we often find ourselves to new opportunities when in the depths of sorrow and despair. Life can be pretty brutal sometimes and it is easy to fall prey to succumb to our own fears when things just don't seem to pan out the way we planned it. We put so much time into the planning, the planting, the cultivating and the nurturing of our best schemes and ideas. We ask for God's blessings on our labor and then trust that all things will come to pass and we will be favored to reap a harvest if only we work hard and "keep our nose clean." That seems like a pretty good formula on the surface of it. Doesn't the Bible tell us that idleness will bring sorrow and work will bring blessings?

God does expect us to work hard at whatever He charges us to do in this life. Of that there is no doubt. Nonetheless, He doesn't promise that everything we do, even if we work hard at it, will bring us material gain or even satisfaction. The fact is, God often allows us to reap a harvest of sorrow in order that we might be blessed in ways that we could have never imagined except that ill fortune would reveal them to us if only we had the patience to look for them. When hard times come knocking, perhaps the best thing you can do, is to get down to work and start digging through the sorrow and despair. Odds are you might be sitting on a gold mine of opportunity that only a patient faith can reveal.

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