

You Pick The Sermon: How Does Paul Have Joy In Prison?

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Psalm 116; Acts 16:16-34; Philippians 1:1-20

Our final reading tonight comes from Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 1, verses 1-20. May God's blessing rest upon the reading of His holy word. "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ -- to the glory and praise of God. Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death."

Every now and then we sing a song called "Jesus, Lover Of My Soul." You know the words: "It's all about You, Jesus, and all this is for You, for Your glory and Your fame. It's not about me, as if You should do things my way. You alone are God, and I surrender to Your ways." We sing *The Wonderful Cross* with its line, "The wonderful cross bids me come and die and find that I may truly live." Abandonment to God no matter the cost: that's a core theme throughout the Bible.

So why do we sing these songs but not practice what they preach? If we're frank, it's because all of us want a life of ease. I pick on prosperity preachers sometimes, but the easy life is front and center in the evangelical world too. The top Christian books on Amazon's lists include "You Are Special," "The Power of Positive Thinking," "A Book of Blessings," "The Secret Prayer: The Three-Step Formula for Attracting Miracles," "The 7 Most Powerful Prayers That Will Change Your Life Forever!," and "Living Well, Spending Less." None are outright heretical. But they appeal to our desire to live a comfortable life and still be OK with God.

That desire comes butting heads with tonight's You Pick The Sermon topic: How Does Paul Have Joy In Prison? This is way outside our comfort zone. We can't even comprehend it. Paul's joy in prison flies in the face of everything we know about happiness. We're not sure it gels with what we've been told about God – if God loves us so much, then why would somebody go through as much as Paul? If somebody loves God as much as Paul loves God, shouldn't have God given him riches and not the abuse he suffered? That's what we're up against tonight.

For two years, Paul was under house arrest in Rome, which was no picnic – he was confined to a single room, likely chained to a Roman guard at all times. But many times, he's in hardcore Roman prison. Modern prisons aren't nice, but they don't hold a candle to prisons in the ancient world. They were usually subterranean, built under a building or street, so virtually no natural light got in. Prisoners and guards were lowered in via something like a manhole cover. Most didn't have separate rooms, only separate spaces with stocks and chains attached to the floor and earthen walls. They were filthy.

The Romans only fed prisoners enough so that they didn't starve before their court date or their punishment – and many left in prison a long time died of malnutrition anyway. Prisoners were abandoned by friends and family because when the only way in or out was a manhole cover, visitors were at the complete mercy of the guards. Not to mention the fact that their society based everything on honor and shame. To be a prisoner was so shameful that abandonment was the only way for friends and family members to save face.

Paul writes four to six of his letters from prison – some under house arrest, but others in the nastier version. And in his letters, he is joyful! In Acts, Paul sings with Silas in prison! In Philippians 1:4, Paul prays with joy. In Philippians 4:4, Paul encourages us to always be joyful; in verse 11, Paul says he has learned to be content in all circumstances. In Ephesians 1:3, Paul includes himself in the list of those who are blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. These are just a few examples of Paul directly speaking about his own joy. The tone in his letters speaks of joy all the time even when the word doesn't show up.

So why is he so joyful when he's in such awful conditions – in a gloomy dungeon locked in chains? There's the simple answer, and there's the complex answer. Paul gives us the simple answer in our reading tonight: his imprisonment helped news of Jesus spread. Everyone who came in contact with Paul knew he was in prison solely because he told people about Jesus. And now, lots of people are speaking out courageously about Jesus. Instead of silencing them, Paul's imprisonment has made the Christians bold! It's bizarre because some of them are preaching to get Paul into trouble...but Paul is happy because they are teaching about Christ's death and resurrection and salvation. Paul even says his imprisonment will “turn out for my deliverance.” He's not talking about being released – he's talking about eternal deliverance. He says he “expects and hopes” that “Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.”

So the simple answer is, Paul has joy because people are coming to know Jesus as Savior and Lord through his work, whether he's out in the community or sitting in prison. That should inspire us to think about how important it is to us that others hear about Jesus and have the opportunity to believe in Him for salvation. Like Paul's contemporaries, it should inspire us to action.

But that answer doesn't seem like enough. Because Paul didn't just have joy in prison. Paul found joy despite the list of terrible things that happened to him. His back was scarred from receiving 39 lashes from a whip on five separate occasions. He was beaten with rods three times, stoned once, and shipwrecked three times. He's often without basic needs. Yet in 2 Corinthians 11, where these awful events are catalogued, he boasts in his weakness – because in his own weakness, Paul shows God to be strong. Most of us can't imagine going through those things, and we can't think of ourselves finding joy in them.

Paul doesn't say that his joy doesn't have challenges. In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul writes, “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.” In all of these hardships, in all this suffering, even when Paul isn't seeing the gospel spread, even when he feels that death is right on his doorstep, He finds God as the answer. He relies on God for life and peace and joy.

And that's the deeper answer to the question. How can he find joy in the spread of the gospel even when it brings suffering? It's because Paul finds joy in God Himself. In Colossians 2:10, written in prison, Paul reminds us that we are made complete in Christ. In Colossians 3, Paul urges us, “Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” In Philippians 3:3, Paul exclaims we “glory in Christ Jesus.” Writing to his friend Philemon, Paul says, “I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.” In Romans 6 and Philippians 2, Paul teaches that believers are “united with Christ.” Believers are one with Christ; that's how close we are.

Paul uses the phrase “in Christ” 85 times in his letters. It's key to understanding who we are as believers. We believe in Christ, we are united in Christ, we live in Christ, we die in Christ, we are raised in Christ. Everything that Paul does, he does for the sake of Christ and for the love of Christ. He's totally devoted to Jesus. And that makes all the suffering, the imprisonments, the beatings and hardships, worthwhile. He no longer expects to derive joy from this world. He expects to derive it from his life in Christ and the love that Jesus has shown him.

This overturns all the world's thinking about life, meaning and purpose, and even the church. The world and the Christian differ in outlook by one participle – *from* vs. *in*. The world loves what it receives *from* others; Christians love what we find *in* others, particularly in Jesus. The difference between *from* and *in* makes every difference.

The world and the people who live by the world's standards love what they can get from others. This week, Amazon and Walmart were in a big fight over a Black Friday in July sale, and how you feel about them this week might depend on whether or not you got a good deal from them. Many friendships are based on what we get out of them – whether or not we have similar interests that we enjoy in common. I'm your friend as long as you give me some benefit from our relationship, but don't lose interests in my interests or we'll wind up drifting apart.

It explains why marriage is in trouble today. With enough money, you can approximate many of the benefits you receive from marriage. While we would consider it immoral, if your relationships are defined by what you receive from the other person and you can purchase everything from cooking and cleaning to intimacy, why is marriage necessary? If there is no moral reason to get married, why do it? Sadly, many of us have seen marriages break because one or both parties were only valued for what they contributed. When Catha and I talked about it this week, she wisely called it “a vending machine relationship.”

Unfortunately, this mentality has crossed over into the church. For many decades, the church has been seen as a provider of religious goods and services. I pay a little bit each month if I feel like it, and in return I can take classes on how to fight addiction, how to be a better parent, how to manage my money, how to have a healthier marriage or recover from divorce. There’s an expectation of good music and a positive, encouraging message that will get me through my week without asking too much of me. There are local churches with stage shows each week that rival what you’ll see at The Palace and kids’ areas with video games, bounce houses, and indoor climbing walls. It’s all a whole lot of fun. And because the church needs money to run programs and to pay staff, it has to put on a great show to keep funds rolling in.

But when things stop becoming fun, when there’s not a program tailor-made for me or for my children, when the music isn’t great or the pastor’s challenges make me feel uncomfortable, because I’m in it for what I get from it, I start shopping for a new church. In my experience, many people leave a church after they’ve gone through a difficult chapter in their lives – not because the members and the pastor weren’t supportive and loving, but because they thought that being a part of a church and coming a couple times a month would save them from the struggles and difficulties of life. With so many churches promising your best life now, why wouldn’t you try one of them instead of the church you associate with suffering? But ultimately, this pattern left unchanged leads to self-centeredness that does not honor Christ, a life that can lead to death.

The only way to combat the disease of wanting to use people for what I get *from* them is to delight *in* Christ, the one in whom all goodness, love, and truth can be found. To find our joy *in* Christ is to go beyond what He does for us. And He does a great deal. He provides salvation for all who believe. He is the great physician who heals when we call upon Him. Everything in the universe was made by Him, through Him, and for Him, and He cares for it all. All the goodness and joy and happiness in this life come from Him and are derived from Him, even when we do not acknowledge Him.

But there is far more to find *in* Him. He is perfection. He is holiness. He is all-knowing, all-powerful, perfectly just and perfectly merciful, perfectly kind and compassionate. When we look at Jesus, we find the perfect person, the One who will never leave or forsake us, the One who re-creates us in His image, the One who loved us enough to willingly suffer for us.

And most of all for our conversation today, He delights *in* us. He didn’t die on the cross because He had to. He endured for the joy set before Him, says Hebrews 12. The joy was us, our salvation! For us -- disobedient, unlawful, unmerciful, untrusting, unloving sinners. He delights in us so much that as Romans 5:8 puts it, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Not people who'd turned the other cheek or begun to love, no! Jesus died for us while we were still in the depths of sin, in the depths of unrighteousness! He delighted in us knowing what He would do for us and in us, and He delights in us now even as we take slow and unsure baby steps towards Him. He delights in us as a groom delights in his bride, as a mother delights in her newborn.

How do we delight in Jesus? We concentrate on who He is, beginning with His incredible holiness and love. We delight in Him by finding more of Him in the pages of His Word. The whole Bible is a testimony to Jesus; He is on every page. From the beginning of time, He is there, and the Word speaks to Him if you listen carefully. You see echoes of His coming in the stories of Adam, of Noah, of Abraham, of Moses. Spend enough time in those pages, and you will begin to love Him for who He is.

Delighting in Him is not unlike those words many of us made to our spouses one day many moons ago. We promised to be there "for richer or poor, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, for better, for worse." Everyone makes mistakes along the way and doesn't keep those vows to their fullest extent. But Jesus does. Jesus remains beside us through it all. And when we begin to delight in Jesus, we love Him through both good times and bad, through heartache and gladness, because He is always there for us. We start to realize that if we go to prison for Him, even if we go to death for Him, He already delights in us and we delight in Him, so it's nothing at all.

And what we find if we delight in Him is that we get all of His benefits, too. It's wonderful if following Jesus does improve our marriage and our families, if we find friends in the fellowship of the church. It is awesome to find joy in the delights that Jesus gives us freely. It's simply a matter of direction. If we pursue our joy solely by deriving it from others, we will not find lasting joy in them or from them. But if we pursue our joy by finding joy in Jesus, we will not only find lasting joy in Him, we will enjoy the good fruits of His mercy and grace both now and forever.

Despite hardship, persecution, and prison, Paul found unending joy in His Savior. You can too, if you will only find your heart's delight in the person of Jesus and in the splendor of our Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Will you join me today in seeking out your heart's joy in nothing other than the Lord? If you do, no matter what comes, you will find your heart is satisfied in Him.