

JOY – THROUGH IT ALL

“Suffering does not rob us of joy; idolatry does.” ...

Before we can **fathom** today’s passage in Philippians... we must first recognize this as true. ... What Paul is about to relate to us in Philippians chapter one... will be absolute jibberish... without a full recognition of this truth... which... by the way seems to contradict our own developed common sense thinking. ... But those who come to embrace this as true... have a great opportunity for learning how to live above circumstances... and keep a strong joy in Christ.

So... for greater understanding and opportunity... let me say it again... and then break it down... before we turn to today’s passage. Whatever trial you face... unimaginable persecution... the loss of a loved one... a completely destroyed reputation by vicious rumor and gossip... financial difficulty... divorce... rejection... abuse... ..It is **not** your burdensome ordeal that drains your joy. ... **THAT** doesn’t deprive you... cheat you... or strip you of your joy.

If you are going through some very difficult circumstances in your life... and you discover that all or part of your joy is missing... this indicates the presence of **idols** in your life. Suffering will never affect our joy – unless we have idols in our life.

One of the definitions that Merriam Webster gives for idolatry is:
“immoderate attachment or devotion or veneration to something.”

While you may not have a gold or silver image that you pray to... or a shrine that you light candles in front of... you may have one or more idols in the sense of valuing something or someone so much that it is an “immoderate attachment or devotion.”

Here is how you can find out... I have a simple question for you...

What is the one thing in your life that if God were to take it away, you'd feel life was not worth living?

Family... friends... health... finances... job... ambition... mission... dreams for the future... security... significance... a hobby... a reputation... sports... or ?? ... Do you have more than one...? This is a penetrating question... isn't it?

Of course... we all have attachments... and even devotion to people that we love. ... We have special attachments and memories of experiences and even places that we hold dear. ... But... my point is that once we venerate them to the degree... that we feel life is not worth living... if they were taken away... they have become an idol to us.

Suffering can strip any or all of these away. Suffering can bring us to the end of ourselves and to a place of honesty. What am I counting on more than God in my life? Especially when things don't go my way—or the way I'd planned.

Listen – at any time that you sense your joy has been diminished... do a heart check. Ask yourself what idol(s) you have venerated ... Personal Ambition...? Personal Aspirations...? Your Reputation...?

Our passage of Scripture in Philippians this morning will teach us that suffering is not the result of our condition. ... It will also show us that we must learn to focus on the Who rather than the *what* and the *why* (of our circumstances) in our times of suffering.

One more thing... before we get to the Apostle Paul's lessons for us in Philippians... It isn't just the Apostle Paul. ... There are many stories in the Bible of people who suffered and felt no need to clearly understand the *what* and *why* of their circumstances. ... Hebrews 11 is a classic listing of such experiences. That chapter ends, "These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them receive what had been promised. God had planned something better ..." Their lives exhibited a focus on the *Who* rather than the *what* and *why* of their suffering.

Paul will declare in a verse of our passage: "*For me to live is Christ... and to die is gain.*" ... Paul's life focused on the Who... Christ!

Do you ever wonder if Job had been told ahead of time, "*If you would just hang in there during the suffering that is about to come... then you will be rewarded by receiving a double-portion of all you have,*" what the outcome would have been...? ... If Job would have been given such understanding ahead of time... my best guess is that he would he have decided to endure for *Job's* sake — for what he - Job - would have gotten out of it. ... His veneration of family... flocks... and prestige in the community... would more than likely... have taken a higher priority than his relationship with God. ... If Job was given understanding – ahead of time – or while he was going through it... Job would have succumbed to idolatry.

However... one of the beautiful things of Job's story... is Job's cry and deep longing for God to "show up" in the midst of his pain. ... When seemingly everything Job had... including his reputation... was taken away... we see his focus was on the *Who*. God. ... His desire for God remained strong... a priority.

Likewise... in the midst of unimaginable difficult and unfair circumstances... Paul does the same thing... He focused on the **Who** – "For me to live, is Christ!"

Philippians 1:12-26

The Philippians were certainly concerned for Paul's well-being... They had sent him a financial gift and they had sent Epaphroditus to take care of him while he was in prison... but mostly... they seem concerned... that Paul's imprisonment had slowed down the spread of the gospel.

By the time of this writing... Paul had been in prison about two years. He had effectively been put out of commission... for further traveling and preaching. ... And in light of this and the Philippian's concern... Paul wanted them to know... beyond any doubt... that everything that had happened... had actually helped to **spread** the Good News. ... Although one of Christianity's most tireless missionaries had been imprisoned, God's work could not be slowed down.

Philippians 1:12-14

It saddens me greatly... how most of our current translations... when trying to help the modern reader understand verse 13... have actually missed

what the original Greek says... I just read it to you from the ESV. ... When this translation came out a few years ago... I was hopeful that they would have kept closer to what the Greek actually says. ... Now in their defense... anyone who translates from one language to another... sometimes has to add a word or two... in order for it to make sense in the new language. ... But I think it is a huge mistake to take the Greek word “Praetorium” and translate it as “imperial” and then **add** the word “guard” in verse 13. ... A case might be made to translate “praetorium” to imperial... but then to add the word “guard” ... “Praetorium guard” ... goes too far.

Paul’s original writing simply said... “so that it has become known throughout the whole *praetorium*. Like I said... in their defense... modern translators looked at that sentence and said, OK... how do we put into English this word “praetorium?” ... If we just leave it alone... it will not make sense... no one will know what Paul was saying. ... To their credit... they sought to explain it. ... I just happen to believe they did a poor job and minimized what Paul was actually saying. ... Does this shake my faith...? No. It does not shake my faith at all... simply because the translators missed the meaning of one word – which does not affect theology or doctrine or important beliefs. ... It just **lessens** the impact of what Paul was indeed saying.

A few years ago... I did a word study on this word “praetorium.” ... I came across some fascinating information in the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia... which has opened my eyes to this verse. ... This research tool explains that the word “praetorium” was the term used for a council of war... when officers met in the general’s tent... on the battlefield of war. The praetorium would assess the battle and try to figure the outcome.

When Nero became the Emperor of the Roman Empire... Nero would sit with 20 Roman senators and judge trial cases... of Roman citizens who made their appeal for such a trial. (To make an appeal to Caesar was one of the privileges of being a Roman citizen.) It was the highest appeal to make... and Paul... being a Roman citizen... made that appeal... which is why he sat for two years in a Roman prison waiting for such an opportunity. ... Would anyone like to guess what this council of 20 influential Roman senators... led by Emperor Nero was called...? ... Nero... who liked to deliver this council's verdict in person... called it "Praetorium!"

So... forget this wrongful notion that verse 13 is telling us that Paul has spread the Gospel from one imperial guard to another... (The word "guard" is **not** in Paul's original writing...) ... and Paul is not rejoicing because a bunch of prison guards have now heard the Gospel. As glorious as that would be... Paul's message is even greater! **Nero**... and 20 influential Roman senators have heard the gospel!!!

This fits the context of the next several verses and so many of the other portions of this letter that Paul writes... much **better!** Our passage today shows Paul going back and forth about whether to live... or die... Paul is pouring out his personal feelings... as one who **is about to hear** his verdict any moment now... "*You know... I am not exactly sure which decision they are about to make concerning me that I prefer...*" (verses 23-26) ... Paul gave a Gospel presentation to the **praetorium**... it was made clear that he is a prisoner for Christ's sake (verse 13)... and others around Rome have been emboldened by this... (verse 14.) ...I think it is more inspiring to know that Paul boldly proclaimed to the message of Christ to the Emperor

and 20 Roman senators... then Paul spoke to every guard who was chained to him.

More than anything else... Paul's desire as a missionary... was to preach the Gospel in Rome. ...The hub of the great Empire... Rome was the key city of its day. ... If Paul could conquer it for Christ... it would mean reaching millions with the message of salvation. ... It was critically important on Paul's agenda:

Acts 19:21 (ESV)

Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome."

When he was in Corinth... Paul wrote this to the Romans:

Romans 1:15 (ESV)

So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

Paul wanted to go to Rome as a **preacher**... but instead he went as a **prisoner!** ... And he got to preach the Gospel to the whole praetorium !!!

Paul was illegally arrested in the temple in Jerusalem. ... The Jews thought he had desecrated their temple by bringing in Gentiles... and the Romans mistook him for an Egyptian renegade... who was on their "most-wanted" list. ... Suddenly Paul became the focal point of both political... and religious plotting... and unfairly remained a prisoner in Caesarea for two years. ... When he finally appealed to Caesar... he was sent to Rome.

En route... the ship he was on was wrecked! In a dramatic event everyone thought they would die. ... But they made it to the island of Malta... where after three months of waiting... Paul was finally on course again for the trial he had requested before Caesar.

To many... all of this would have looked like failure... but not to this man... who said... “for me, to live is Christ...” Paul did not find his joy in ideal circumstances... he found his joy in being **faithfully present to Christ**.... And if his circumstances promoted the furtherance of the Gospel... that was all that mattered!

Paul's example is impressive and clear: **Put the advance of the gospel at the center of your aspirations**. ... All the evidence of idolatry in our lives... our own comfort... our bruised feelings... our reputations... our misunderstood motives — all of these are insignificant in comparison with the advance of the gospel. ... As Christians, we are called upon to put the advance of the gospel at the very center of our aspirations.

What are your aspirations? ... To make money? ... To get married? ... To travel? ... To see your grandchildren grow up? ... To find a new job? ... To spend more time with friends? ... None of these are to be despised. The question is whether these aspirations have become **primary**... are they drowning out what is to be the Christian's **dominant** passion...?

If we try to source our joy in our idols... instead sourcing it in the Gospel... circumstances will **always** disappoint us.

Paul lived above his circumstances... using them to preach Christ. ... Not only was the gospel being spread by Paul preaching to the praetorium...

but other circumstances... outside the prison... were helping to spread it. These would be Paul's critics.

Philippians 1:15-19

Notice that these critics were true followers of Christ. They were not the Judaizers... the false preachers who sometimes followed Paul as he travelled and planted churches... opposing Paul. ... These were **genuine** preachers... who were ministers in and around the metropolis of Rome. ... We know this because Paul **agreed** with their preaching... he just regretted their opposition to him. ... Instead of supporting Paul... they were speaking out against him... hoping to silence his influence and to get rid of him.

However... not all the preachers throughout Rome opposed Paul. ... Some were preaching Christ out of love... and they were encouraging their members to show their love for Paul... by visiting and supporting him in his ministry of proclaiming Christ.

It pains me to ponder this outloud... but I will anyway... How often has this scene been repeated? ... How many are repeating the scene right now? How many believers and Christian workers are jealous and envious... of the position of someone else...? ... Of the attention... support... and loyalty that someone else receives...? ... Of the results that another Christian worker is having?

How many of us begin to question and speak against a Lord's servant out of our own envy and jealousy? ... Oh... we may speak quietly... perhaps... to only one or two others... nevertheless... we do speak out. ... God forgive us!

We must always remember... we are *all* ministers and workers... if we have been truly called by Christ to preach and teach His gospel. ... Each one has his call... and no matter the call... the road is always difficult. Therefore... we must support each other. ... The Lord does not require *big ministries* and *big names* and *big followers* from us all. ... What he requires is faithfulness — only faithfulness in the ministry to which he has called us. Therefore... let us be **faithfully present to Christ**... Lift our eyes off our own circumstances... and the circumstances of others... and simply be faithfully present to Christ. “For me to live, is Christ.”

Criticism is usually very hard to take... particularly when we are in difficult circumstances... as Paul was. ... The only way the apostle was able to rejoice... even in the face of such diverse criticism... was that he possessed the single mind!

Philippians 1:18

Paul was confident of this ultimate deliverance... whatever Nero decided to do with him. ... His confidence in deliverance rested upon the prayers of the Philippians... which then would bring on the supply of the Spirit of Christ in his life....

Philippians 1:19-20

Paul believed that the Philippians' prayers would bring about God's supplying the Spirit to Paul. ... How could that be? ... After all... Paul was already indwelt by the Holy Spirit... as are all believers. ... Furthermore... all believers have all of the Spirit all the time. ... However... and here is

the point... there are times when you and I have a need to experience through a greater **awareness**... more of the Spirit's fullness and power.

The dramatic encounters of the book of Acts affirm this repeatedly. ... As the Apostle Peter stood before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin... he was "*filled with the Holy Spirit*" and spoke (4:8). (This was after Pentecost... when the Holy Spirit came...) ... When the apostles were released by the Sanhedrin, we read that "*they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness*" (4:31b). ... Next... prior to Stephen's stoning, we read... "*But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God... and Jesus standing at the right hand of God*" (7:55). Later... when Paul confronted Elymas the magician... Paul was "*filled with the Holy Spirit*" and judged him" (13:9). ... And... lastly... when Paul and Barnabas were driven from Pisidian Antioch... we read of those left behind, "*And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit*" (13:52). ... So we see that the book of Acts repeatedly demonstrates that God's servants regularly receive special awareness... or fullness of power to accomplish God's work... during times of trial.

Thus as Paul sat in Roman custody he was confident that as the Philippians prayed... a freshness... fuller supply of this Spirit of Jesus Christ would be poured into his heart... empowering him for every trial and securing his ultimate deliverance. ... Paul knew that his converts in Philippi... those who shared in the fellowship of the gospel (1:5)... prayed for him... and that is why he naturally solicited their prayers... knowing that they **would** pray. ... This fueled his towering confidence in his difficult situation.

Paul had massive confidence. ... But there was not a hint of self-confidence or self-sufficiency. ... He was dependent upon his friends' prayers for the supply of the Spirit. ... Their prayers would actually give him fresh fillings of the Spirit for each new challenge. ... It is the same today. We must practice this as we pray for each other... and especially for those undergoing challenging times. ... Our prayers can affect not only the confidence... but the deliverance of our brothers and sisters.

The first step in applying this to ourselves... then... may simply be to ask God to give us a genuine love for other Christians... and an understanding of their need for our prayers.

But note Paul's "earnest expectation and hope": to magnify Christ in his body. Paul's mind was not upon his terrible plight and circumstances; it was upon Christ—upon magnifying Christ in his body.

Philippians 1:20-21

Paul knew the weakness of the human body... how it tended toward doubt... questioning... self-centeredness... pride... boasting... self-satisfaction... indulgence... extravagance... habit... lethargy... complacency... laziness... enslavement... bondage... and neglecting and ignoring God.

Since his conversion... Paul had totally committed himself to magnifying Christ. ... And there was only one place where Christ could be *magnified and seen*: that was in his body. ...The only place that men can see Jesus

Christ living is in the body or life of a person. ... Jesus Christ was no longer on the earth; therefore, He could not be seen unless Paul and others allowed Christ to magnify Himself through their bodies. Paul knew this; therefore... he gave his body to Jesus Christ.

When I step into the secular college classroom to teach my courses... I really want to be... "Jesus with skin on" to my students. ... Would you please pray for me in this...? Pray for the pouring of His Spirit on me... like Paul had the Philippians pray for him.

Paul was prepared and ready to die at any moment for his faith... and he actually looked forward to death because of the certainty of being with the Lord forever. ... But he knew that his personal desires had to be subordinated to God's will. ... Paul was not afraid of life or death! ... Either way... he wanted to magnify Christ in his body. ... No wonder he had joy!

What if Christians were as willing die... while showing **love** to radical Muslim terrorists... as those same terrorists are... to die because of **hate**? (Just a thought...)

Philippians 1:21-26

Paul confesses that he is facing a difficult decision. ... To remain alive was necessary for the believers' benefit in Philippi... but to depart and be with Christ was far better. ... Paul decided that Christ would have him remain... not only for the "furtherance of the Gospel"... but also for the "furtherance and joy of their faith."

Philippians 1:21 becomes a valuable test of our lives. "For to me to live is _____ and to die is _____" Fill in the blanks yourself.

"For to me to live is *money* and to die is *to leave it all behind.*"

"For to me to live is *fame* and to die is *to be forgotten.*"

"For to me to live is *power* and to die is *to lose it all.*"

What does life mean to you? ... Why are you living? ... What is your great purpose in life?

- ⇒ Are you living for money and possessions (clothes... houses... cars... property)? ... If so... what do you do in a few years when you die — if you escape accident or disease? ... What do you do if you lose it? ... When that day comes — and it **is** coming... there is nothing in heaven or earth that can stop it — if you have lived for money... what good will it do you?
- ⇒ Are you living for comfort... (a good job... a nice place to live... plenty to eat... and enough money to do what you desire in retirement)? ... If so... what happens when disease or accident or tragedy strikes... and medical bills take it all? These kinds of things cannot be stopped. ... If you have lived for comfort... what good will it do you?
- ⇒ Are you living for a position? ... If so... what do you do when you are edged out... removed... demoted... transferred... by-passed... face disease or accident? ... What good will position do you?

- ⇒ Are you living for family? ... If so... what do you do when the family has transferred... moved away... divorce happens... or when the various family members die? ... And it happens to everyone of us.
- ⇒ Are you living for recognition... honor... popularity... recreation... gratification... sensuality — whatever? What good will anything on this earth do you?

"For to me to live is _____ and to die is _____" Fill in the blanks yourself.

If we cannot honestly fill those blanks in with anything other than the words "Christ"... and "gain"... we have idols in our life. ... And should not expect to have much joy.

"Suffering does not rob us of joy; idolatry does."

We must echo Paul's convictions if we are going to have joy in spite of circumstances... and if we are going to share in the furtherance of the Gospel. "For to me to live is *Christ*, and to die is *gain!*"

What does it look like when this is true - "For me to live is Christ"? It means we are seeking all through the day... **every** day... to be faithfully present to Christ. ... Faithfully present... ready... and reporting for duty.

Is this something for which **you** would like prayer...?