

**The Rock: 02-21-2021**

**Philippians: The letter of Joy**

**First reading:** Genesis 50:15-21

**Title:** Advancing the Gospel

**Scripture:** Philippians 1:12-18a

**Theme:**

Understanding our life and circumstances in light of God's purposes helps us to be joyful even in the most trying of times.

**Introduction:**

Viktor Frankl, a holocaust survivor, in his book: Man's search for meaning said:

"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms -to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances."

**-Man's search for meaning Pg.86**

In looking at this particular passage this morning, just one more observation with regards to our choices:

"If we pursue happiness instead of choosing joy, we'll become, as Frankl put it, playthings of circumstance. Our inner peace will be tossed back and forth

according to the whim of events beyond our control. But if we choose our attitude -the one basic freedom that can't be taken away from us- we can choose joy even in the midst of the cruelest circumstances."

**-Swindoll's insights Pg. 23**

I often wonder how much Paul thought of Joseph, the patriarch. That snotty kid who was sold into slavery by his brothers and then imprisoned for simply doing the right thing and obeying God.

I wonder, if as Paul wrote, not only this letter to the Philippians, but also when he wrote Romans 8, and specifically verse 28, he thought of that story from the first book of the Pentateuch:

"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

**-Romans 8:28 ESV**

It is just too similar to Joseph's encouragement to his brothers from our opening reading to not think so:

"But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many

people should be kept alive, as they are today.”

**-Genesis 50:19-20 ESV**

The attitude Paul has here to celebrate in spite of his circumstances, much like Joseph, speaks to the deep belief and understanding of God’s providential care upon their lives.

Much of this comes out in our text before us this morning.

**The Story:**

We learned last week that Paul was in prison simply for preaching the gospel, and that his deeper concern, or joy rather was that the church in Philippi was thriving.

That they were concerned for him and had sent help and encouragement. We really saw his pastor’s heart for his people as he told them how much he missed them and yearned to see them.

No passing, “Hey I’ll see you sometime.” It pained him that he couldn’t see them, but he didn’t want them to worry at all, but to love one another and keep growing in your walk with Jesus.

Instead of being discouraged, his attitude affects -infects others. It

seems that those who are in Christ are actually emboldened to speak about Jesus, not afraid and quiet.

I thought about this as I studied, it seems clear: The worse the persecution, the louder the proclamation. Quite the paradox isn't it?

Typically, when you remove the "head" of a movement, their followers tend to disperse and disappear.

Not here, not the Church. Why? Because they didn't get rid of Jesus. Being that they crucified Him and "killed" him, and they did.

Only to find that He rose back to life and was seen by so many people that it became impossible to refute the claim, that and they could never come up with His body.

That begs the question, and one we ought to be asking today as well: What exactly could you do to a follower of Jesus that could or would unsettle them?

Think about it, well think about one other name: Lazarus. Dead four days. Literally DEAD and buried, walks out of the tomb and joins his sisters and Jesus for supper.

How are you going to threaten someone like that, how are you going to take their joy away? "Stop talking to people about this Jesus or we're going to kill you!"

"Really? Been there, done that, lived to tell about it." I mean that alone is funny when you think about it in reality. Let's not lose focus on the truth that Jesus was dead, and He is alive.

I know in this day and age people think it's absolute rubbish, but they thought the same then. If you believe the Gospel, those who do not will think you are a foolish person, and that's ok.

Everything Paul has done was simply to advance the Gospel:

"I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel..."

**-Philippians 1:12 ESV**

Including ending up in prison, and from every worldly perspective that makes no sense. What has happened to him in his ministry?

Only stoning's, beatings, ship-wrecks, false accusations, prison. One would think that after a while these things would silence the messenger.

Yet every bit has served to advance the cause of Christ, and has encouraged Paul in ways that many people couldn't understand.

Why? He loved Jesus! His life was preaching the gospel. I'm reminded of what Jesus said in John 12 when some Greek people came looking for answers:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him."

**-John 12:24-26 ESV**

Paul was following the way of the cross. To live that cruciform life in this world means we will look and act like Jesus.

Bizarre for us to understand at times, I know, in the day we live. That Paul had joy, and so much so, that the people guarding him know he's done nothing wrong.

But he is simply there because he is preaching that a dead guy is alive. These guys were used to hearing about the good

news, just not this good news -the Pax Romana, that their emperor had brought peace and justice to the world.

But not like this, not how Paul was explaining it and not through an obscure little Jewish carpenter from Palestine. No, it was all about power and strength, but not with this crazy Paul.

Attitude and demeanor -Paul was different and people could tell. No matter the accusations against him, no one could say that he actually did anything wrong.

He simply believed that this Jesus was dead, but that on His way to Damascus, he saw Him very much alive, and now has his assignment. "Paul, tell people that I am alive, and that I have come to save them from sin."

Live exemplary lives. Strive for excellence in all you do:

"And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

**-Colossians 3:17 ESV**

We should never simply mail it in and say good enough with anything we do. Why? Because everything we do, we do for His glory and the benefit of others.

Paul, of all people, had every right to be sour, to be angry, to complain, and to be frustrated. But he wasn't. He joyfully accepted what came his way, so long as he had the opportunity to tell people about Jesus.

Leaving Ephesus, he knew that trouble was waiting for him there, and the church and elders didn't want him to go, but his life wasn't his. He told them:

"But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God."

**-Acts 20:24 ESV**

Sadly, with all of that good coming from Paul, it seems that even way back then we couldn't play well together in the sandbox:

"Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will."

**-Philippians 1:15 ESV**

Apparently for some this was a competition. Can we outdo Paul? Can we take some of the notoriety and some of the attention from him?



These aren't the legalists that Paul talked about in Galatians, who were telling people they had to become Jewish first, and they weren't the heretics we learned about when we studied John's first letter.

No, these folks, not all of them, but some were preaching with their own agenda in mind. They were preaching the Gospel, and that's why Paul could care less about their fat heads and egos, just so long as Jesus is proclaimed and people are saved.

But it is sad how little things have changed. "I'm not going to work with you because you might steal some of my people, use my ideas and take the audience and attention away."

I don't like him, he's got the "big church" in town and thinks he all that. Nope, they ain't A/G people, we really can't work with them.

It sounds so silly, but it is so very true. What matters, what REALLY matters, as Paul says here in verse 18 is that the Gospel is proclaimed:

"What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice."

**-Philippians 1:18 ESV**

God can and does use petty, self-centered people who think the whole deal is some sort of competition, rather than a God-centered endeavor.

Anyone who preaches the gospel -That Jesus of Nazareth was / is the Son of God -Born of the virgin Mary, crucified, DEAD, risen again and ascended into heaven.

The perfect sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sin, by grace through faith, come to Him and Him alone. In a world of pluralism and self-aggrandizement, Jesus says I am the way, the truth, and the life -no one comes to the Father but by me.

Exclusive, yes. But that is the Gospel. It is strange and bizarre, and not normal in our culture today. But neither was it normal in Ephesus, Corinth, Rome, and Philippi.

But it is true none the less. Anyone, Paul says, who preaches the gospel has my prayers and my help in order to advance God's kingdom agenda here in this world.

It's not about me, or you or even The Rock exclusively. Rather it is about Jesus Christ and Him crucified -He came to this world to save sinners, and I am the worst.

Unpalatable to hear today. Uncomfortable to listen to and digest. Why? Because in confronting the Biblical truth of the Gospel—we have to confront ourselves.

To understand that joy comes when we recognize the insufficiency of ourselves to save and help ourselves, and grab onto the deep Biblical truth of the all-sufficient Christ to transform the worst of lives into a redeemed sinner and useful person in this world.

Last week we learned Paul (Saul) was wanting nothing more than to arrest, throw in prison, and kill these blaspheming, crazy Christians.

What happened? Did he go to Barnes and Noble and find the next best self-help book on the power of positive thinking? Where he learned to channel his feelings in such a way that he would go from being a vile rascal and all of a sudden, he is a saint?

No, what happened was the Damascus Road experience. Captured by the grace of God, converted IN CHRIST, this murderer is transformed into the greatest missionary of His time, giving us almost half of the New Testament.

And doing so from the very place he had wanted to throw the followers of Jesus.

Joy comes when we know, not only who we have in Christ, but also when we grasp the truth of just how tightly GOD HAS US by His grace.

Paul knew, whatever the motive -the most important thing is Christ is made known to those who need him:

"The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment."

**-Philippians 1:16-17 ESV**

Most, and this again is true even today, preach from places of genuine love, while others do so because they are selfish and are taking advantage of Paul's or someone else's predicament.

But Paul pays attention to what is important. Once again verse 18:

"What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice."

**-Philippians 1:18a ESV**

No matter what happens to him, or will happen to him, Christ is proclaimed in

the world, and in that truth, Paul finds joy.

A couple of things in closing that are important for us.

First, in all of my studies on this book and particular set of verses, it is made very clear that Paul is so completely taken up with his calling, invested in it, that it is never about "my job".

It had become who he is and was. He could never distinguish between Church on Sunday and coffee shop on Monday. I am a follower of Jesus and everything I do I want to find joy in and help others come to an understanding of Jesus.

One commentator says that for Paul to reflect on how his imprisonment has furthered the gospel is to reflect on his life.

In other words, that moment, that place became for him his next opportunity, his next pulpit. I am a follower of Jesus and I have to tell people about him.

Again, that is why joy is so easy and so real for him. Not an attitude of, "my circumstances stink", but rather, "I am here because of Christ and FOR Christ."

"Mr. Jailer, perhaps you are why I am in this cell, can I tell you about my Jesus and what he did for me?"

All things we need to think on.

With this I close. N.T. Wright says it best:

"...Paul's reaction is to celebrate. That's fine by me, he says. As long as people are going around saying that Jesus is the world's LORD, I shall be happy.

Paul is saying all this, obviously, to encourage the Church in Philippi. But it ought to be great encouragement to us. How often are we tempted to feel discouraged because the plans we had were badly thwarted, or because malicious people were trying to make life difficult. We need to learn from Paul (and long before, from Joseph) the art of seeing God's purposes working out through problems and difficulties. 'God meant for good.' The King is being announced, and I'm going to celebrate."

**-NTEE The prison letters Pg. 90**

We have the ability and capacity to choose how we respond, even if and when we cannot choose our circumstances and situations.

