

The Rock: 03-07-2021

Philippians: The letter of Joy

First reading: 2 Corinthians 1:8-11

Title: To live is Christ

Scripture: Philippians 1:18b-26

Theme:

No matter what the circumstances, Paul didn't let his feelings and fears get in the way of who God was and what He had done and was doing for him in Christ.

Introduction:

The best way to tackle life is with eyes wide open. To know what you are faced with and how to deal with it in light of your attitude, your outlook and your hope.

I think back on my life and wonder sometimes what makes people get back up. What is it that keeps them going, wanting to do more, to tackle the next thing?

Even though it may be harder than the last thing, there is a resilience about some people that no matter what has happened to them, or how hard the next thing looks, they simply, and it seems confidently, step in and step up.

What drives a Tom Brady to keep playing? What does he have to prove? Isn't it easier to just hang up the cleats and stop doing the hard work to succeed?

I'm not sure if it's simply the drive to succeed, since he is already there. "This is theirs", he said about the Superbowl trophy he just won, pointing to his teammates.

Maybe as Winston Churchill said:

"Success is not final; failure is not fatal; it is the courage to continue that counts."

It takes courage to look beyond your set of circumstances and to the future that God has for you.

The Story:

Paul here in the text this morning is wrestling with living and dying in a very real way. In a passage that is at the same time a beautiful testament to confidence in God's sovereignty, we find a man torn between the desire to leave this life, and the necessity to stay.

I don't want us to miss that because in a world that absolutely fears death and has created so many ways to avoid even talking about it and processing loss, we

should find the balance that Chesterton spoke of:

"Courage is almost a contradiction. It means a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die."

That is Paul, not just here, but his entire life and ministry.

"For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death."

-Philippians 1:19-20 ESV

Happy and joyful because of the friendship and prayers for his deliverance, Paul has his courage built and his expectations raised because of these people.

Super cheerful as he is and comes across, there is also a sense of impending trouble. He's not out of the woods yet, and what he says next, well let's read it:

"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet

which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better."

-Philippians 1:21-23 ESV

This statement makes no sense to anyone who is outside of Christ. Heck, it is hard enough for those of us who are saved and in Christ.

It is a great verse to remember, one of those worthy of the fridge, because it is a deep encouragement in times of trouble.

But to be in a place in life where we can joyfully say: Hey living is Christ. IE: I can do and be all He wants me to be in this world. But if I die -well I've actually gained.

Gained what? You're dead! Gained glory! Please, when we look at this set of things Paul tells us, let your worldview frame them out. Why do I say that?

Because depending on if you have accepted Jesus as savior and king or not, will determine how you feel about a statement like this.

Because if we fear death, or somehow think that death isn't a part of living, or even worse have a bizarre theology or no theology for death, these things he

says makes you think he's a deluded man who may need counselling.

I think it's powerful for us to see also that he wants to be with Christ, and yet is torn and knows he needs to stay -not for his sake, but for others.

Nothing made Paul happier or gave him more joy than serving others, and seeing people come to Christ. His story, which we are going to look at is an ugly one.

There is a lot we know, he was full of hate, he approved and oversaw the arrest and killing of believers. He actually thought that in doing those things he was pleasing God. These things never left his mind. Not because he was a morbid guy, but because they helped him understand God's grace to him through Jesus.

What's your story? Because we all come from different backgrounds, situations, circumstances, education, family constructs. You name it, we bring a great deal of STUFF to the table. Each one of us.

But at some point, in your life, if it has happened, God got a hold of you, you encountered Christ, and the Holy Spirit changed you.

All that stuff didn't just disappear, did it? No, it's still a part of you, of me.

But it doesn't (or shouldn't) define us anymore. It helps us to know where we came from and how much God's grace poured over us, changed us and made us his own.

I'm never going say that any of us got to where we are now in a nice clean cut straight line. Goodness I know I didn't!

But when I look back now, I see no part of my life where He didn't have His hand on me. That gives me great comfort, and helps me when I am struggling in things. That is my reference point which helps to pull me forward.

Because the best way I have found to at least help in those times of struggle is to work myself. In other words, to do the right things God has gifted me in that bring Him joy.

Nothing is a better salve than to help others even when you are hurting. Because in that serving / helping, you and I are served and helped. Even if it's just through the Holy Spirit.

Joy is found in spite of your circumstances and sometimes because of them. It is focus and attitude and ultimately who you are really seeking to please.

The longer we stay in the doldrums staring at our belly buttons and

grumbling about our circumstances, the farther down that rabbit hole we go.

Now there are genuine clinical issues that sometimes affect us, and those need the care and help of professionals, but that is not what I'm talking about here.

What I'm talking about is what I call my pity parties. Those moments, and sometimes lengthy ones where I just sit around fussing about all that's going on with the woe is me attitude. I can choose that, OR NOT.

Really, the secret to living well and right and having joy in spite of what is going on -is keeping Jesus in the center of your life and thinking. -Not myself, not yourself.

Keeping Him our priority and main relationship. If you are here and you haven't stepped into that type of relationship, this seems really weird and extreme. It is.

But in reality, each of us actually has someone or something that is the center of our attention. That is never the question. The question is: Is it the right thing, the right person? Jesus IS! I ask you to consider Him and his life.

He will not get rid of all of your problems. Anyone who is has Him as savior

will tell you that. But He does change you and reframes your thinking with regards to them.

It is what he has done for this great Apostle, he has done it for me and for anyone who accepts Him as King and Lord of their life.

How many, everyday are struggling to find joy? To accept themselves, yourselves as created and loved by God? Knowing, at the same time that we are just the broken and imperfect.

How many books does one need to read in an effort to make you a better you from the inside and by your own personal effort? NONE.

And here's why. None of us can make ourselves better. Paul thought all he was doing in life before Jesus was making himself better by "obeying every letter of the law."

He found out though, that all he was doing was getting angrier, farther away from God, and a less than kind man.

Nothing in life, no effort on our part can make us better or happier. Not the next car, the better job, or whatever will give me that sense of peace and joy.

That's what the world has to offer and all of that is geared toward and based on our feelings. That's why many, myself included, struggle when things don't go our way.

Paul's not sure how this whole thing is going to turn out. But, for whatever reason, in his mind he believes he will be released, and he looks forward to that moment when he can see his friends:

"But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again."

-Philippians 1:24-26 ESV

Yet, even though it seems that he's sure, he's not really 100%. So, he's letting them know that: "Hey, I really believe I'm going see you again, but if I don't and this all goes south, and this turns out to be the end for me - That's OK!

I'm with King Jesus at that point.

And that's a better deal in the end. But for your sakes I know that I need to stay and probably will, if God allows. That's why he says what he says here.

Put yourself in his spot. How are you feeling at this moment in life? The hope of release, yet the potential for the end, is hanging out there right in front of you and you just don't know.

Again, don't we feel that way sometimes in our lives, our circumstances? We don't know what tomorrow holds or will bring, but the thousand squirrels running around in our heads are coming up with every possible scenario.

For some of us it's always what? Worst case scenario, isn't it. For others it's what? Always best-case scenario. Each person looking at the same set of circumstances, coming away with entirely different outlooks.

So much so that an outsider wonders if they were even looking at the same thing. Finding the balance is where growth and Christian maturity is had.

Let's step back here for a minute and look at the big picture. Because that is always so helpful. This is a great passage!

Full of confidence and joy. Paul is NOT crazy, just balanced. That's why Paul is joyful and happy in spite of his circumstances and concerns, and how he feels about it all.

This is something we cannot miss. We often see these people in the Bible as super-human. Apostles and Prophets and powerful followers of Jesus. They were.

But they were also just broken human beings who felt, feared, cried, laughed, and lay awake at night concerned about tomorrow, struggling to remember that Jesus said "don't worry about tomorrow, it will take care of itself. Today's worry is enough."

Just...Like...Us...

Paul gives us some personal insight when he wrote to the Corinthian church about this time in his life, and it's important to know, because it gives us perspective and reminds us that these folks were no different than you and me:

"For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our

behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many."

-2 Corinthians 1:8-11 ESV

Wow! Is this the same guy who is full of joy? Yes! Is this the guy who wrote in full confidence? Yes! Carried on and upward by the prayers of the churches!!

Here is a guy who is showing us how to balance our feelings in the moment, understanding the reality of our situation, but doing so in light of God's promises in spite of what may happen.

Paul was in jail, in the middle of what we would call today, a crisis of belief, and it is in the middle of that where he KNOWS who God is and how He has provided for him in Jesus.

He knows how faithful God has been all the way up to that moment and that is what he is holding onto because that's all he has. His situation doesn't feel like those things are true at that moment -BUT THEY ARE.

Paul is just a human being, so in his mind and heart he has to work these things out. Recognizing the faithfulness of God even in the worst set of circumstances.

Great Apostle? Yes. But just a guy, a broken clay pot journeying toward the Son and learning as he goes the very things he is sharing and teaching to these Philippians.

Working out his salvation with fear and trembling. Paul was joyful and positive, but to think that his feelings matched his reality of thinking, is wrong.

Paul was afraid, concerned and depressed at times. Just like us. But here is the awesome lesson for us all:

His belief in the promises of God never wavered. In fact, his belief in God's promised provision was actually strengthened.

Even when his feelings came and went, leaving him confused and sometimes feeling all alone, the fact of God's grace and salvation in Christ stood strong.

As always, that was his focus. To make much of Jesus with his life, so others could see Christ in him the hope of glory.

To depart is far better, but to stay will benefit you, and me. Why? Because Christ is known, and you are my friends. It will bring me joy and do my heart good to see

you again. Therefore, I'm believing God for that to happen.

His belief never wavered even though his feelings came and went. For us, in the words of N.T. Wright:

Learning to distinguish between the two (belief and feelings), and to maintain belief and hope with or without the accompanying feelings is itself part of Christian maturity."

-NTEE Pg. 93

Isn't that the goal for all of us, to grow up into the head, which is Jesus our king and Lord. Then find others who will listen to such a great hope -finding the lost and helping to make the lost whole.