

## ***suffering and rejoicing in Christ***

If you have a bible with you, turn with me to **Philippians 1:12-30**.

Once again, for those of us who’ve been around the faith for a long time, this is another passage that will catch our attention with familiar phrases. As I mentioned two Sundays ago, Philippians is probably the primary source of **life-verses** – and in our text today, we come upon one that is well-known or **well-loved**. **Philippians 1:21** – “**For to me,** *to live is Christ and to die is gain.*”

But as we also noted in our introduction to Philippians, the danger in these familiar verses is that we can confuse our familiarity with a few inspiring, scattered lines for a true understanding of what Paul is saying in Philippians and what God is saying through it all to us.

And I’ll be honest, I think it is because of Philippians being so full of these kinds of verses that I’ve tended to steer clear of Philippians over the years. Because I have a real hard time with “slogan Christianity”. Maybe you do to.

In the passage we are in today, there is something at the core in it – the themes – that I’ve always somewhat pushed against because it felt like this empty and elusive slogan. And I think that’s true of many verse in Philippians... But for me this week, this theme has become very clear and very real... We’ll get there...

And **this week, as I’ve lived with this** text in the backdrop of my thoughts and prayers, I’ve been struck with how easily we can misinterpret or simply mis-apply what Paul says here to our own lives or the lives of others. And the impact can be devastating.

Truth is, our **misinterpretation** or **misapplication** of the example of Paul’s joy can actually end up **eating away** at our joy in Christ. And we need to explore this this morning...

But let’s start by simply listening to what Paul says here.

And it’s worth knowing or remembering right from the start that up till this point in Paul’s letter, Paul has simply been bringing greetings, expressing his heart for the Philippian church, saying how much he misses them and transcribing his deep and abiding prayer for them.

And so in **v.12**, Paul shifts to really giving them an update on what’s been going on for him – some of which they’ve heard about and are pretty concerned about – specifically, that he is imprisoned.

Remember, Philippians is not an abstract theological treatise or just a truth bomb. This is a letter between people – an apostle and a church community – who know and love one another deeply. Who rejoice in the joy of the other and who weep over the suffering of the other... That’s the simple context, right?

So with that in mind, let’s listen to what Paul writes...

**Philippians 1:12-30.**

*(12) Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. (13) As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. (14) And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.*

*(15) It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. (16) The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. (17) The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. (18) 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, (19) for I know that through your prayers and God’s provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. (20) 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. (21) For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. (22) If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! (23) I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; (24) but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. (25) **Convinced of this,** I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, (26) so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.*

*(27) Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel, (28) without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. **This is a sign** to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. (29) For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, (30) since you are going*

*through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.*

### **Let's pray.**

Twice in this passage Paul uses a phrase that I'm sure grabs many of our attention. He refers to “*what has happened to me*”.

Maybe I'm more alert to this than some because I'm a pastor and so people tend to tell me their story – but over the years, I've come to be convinced that we all have a “*what has happened to me*” story... Right? You sit down with an old friend, or a new friendship finally gets to the place of significance, and you share your story of “*what has happened to you*”... or *hasn't happened*... The Philippians had a “what has happened to us” story... We all do...

Paul's words take us there...

We hear it right away in **v.12**, “*Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me...*” And then again in **v.19**, he **refers again to** “*what has happened to me...*”

And as we listen to Paul, I suspect many of us find ourselves calling to mind what has happened to **us**. I know that's often been what I've experienced as I've read this part of Paul's letter... I've found myself reflecting on my **own** story, or that of others, as I've listened to Paul.

Which is understandable, **but also potentially dangerous** – depending on how we distill the core of Paul’s example and what it means for us in our situations or stories...

So before we get to **our** stories, let’s focus on **Paul’s story** first.

Since last he’s seen the Philippians – this church that he helped start – his life has taken some significant and hard turns. And although he doesn’t get into it here, the list of hardships he has endured is startling and sobering – unjust arrests, trials and imprisonments, shipwrecked more than once, flogged, beaten and left for dead by mobs, beaten with rods, pelted with stones, in danger from fellow jews, in danger from Gentiles, in danger from false believers, without food, betrayal by former friends, the list goes on – all leading to his current state of being a prisoner (most likely in Rome) under the constant watch of members of the praetorian guard. Which, unlike in our prison systems today, did not include provision of daily meals.

Which meant that Paul’s survival, while waiting for trial, was solely dependent on the constant provision of others coming to his aid. *Which the Philippians have participated in – sending Epaphroditus with aid for Paul.*

So, the Philippians are not out of the loop. **They know** of what’s happened to Paul. They don’t need to be informed. They know **and are concerned**. Deeply concerned. They have shed tears over this. They have prayed for his release. They have wrestled with God over this. And because of it, they are discouraged, disheartened, losing heart...

*The Jesus who delivered Paul years before from the Philippian jail... The Jesus who delivered the Philippian slave girl years ago from oppressive demonic and inhuman masters... The Jesus who delivered Lydia from the false-security of her wealth years ago... This Jesus doesn’t seem to be doing much.*

And this to them said it all – **Paul, their spiritual father, was in prison**. As far as they could see, **Rome was winning**. And Jesus was nowhere to be found. Or if found – if present – powerless...

**But Paul saw things differently** – so differently.

So much so that he is **full of joy and hope**.

And so he writes to the Philippians to comfort and encourage them... And to invite them to share in his joy

Listen again to what **he writes,**

*“Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has **actually** served to advance the gospel. <sup>(13)</sup> As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. <sup>(14)</sup> And because of my*

*chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.”*

As far as Paul can see, which he wants the Philippians to know, what Rome intended to crush his influence and ministry has actually, by the sovereign work of God, served to **advance the gospel** – both inside the palace walls and beyond. (You wonder if his imprisonment actually **increased** his influence and the spread of the gospel.)

At one point, in **v.16**, Paul subtly flips the whole scenario on its head. He refers to being “*put here for the defense of the gospel.*”

Which didn’t seem that significant to me, until I learned that the word Paul uses here for being “put here” actually means something like being “stationed here” or being “put on duty”.

In other words, Paul wasn’t simply left here or stuck here. He’s been placed here – on duty – by Jesus.

I love how one commentator explains this. **He writes:**

“Paul did not see his suffering as an act of divine forgetfulness (‘Why did God let this happen to me?’), nor as a dismissal from service (‘I was looking forward to years of usefulness, and look at me!’), nor as the work of Satan (‘I am afraid the devil has had his way this time’), but as the place of duty, the setting for service, the task appointed. When the soldier came ‘on duty’ to guard Paul, did the apostle smile secretly and say to himself, ‘But he doesn’t know that I am here to guard him—for Christ?’” (J.A. Motyer)

***I am put here** for the defense of the gospel...*

Again and again, throughout Philippians, we discover that Paul had a radically different perspective on his situation – **on his suffering**.

Which isn't to diminish the reality of his suffering, or the very real possibility that he'd never be released (the Romans could simply kill him), but in the economy of God's sovereign purposes, Paul **knew** that his suffering and imprisonment was bearing much fruit. Through all that was going on, Paul could see that **Jesus**, not Caesar, was prevailing. That Jesus, not Caesar, was winning. That Jesus, not Caesar, was being glorified.

And this **caused Paul to rejoice** – that in and through his suffering and imprisonment, the gospel was being preached and Christ was being glorified.

**v.18f** – “*Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, <sup>(19)</sup> for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my **deliverance**. <sup>(20)</sup> 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. <sup>(21)</sup> For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*”

Those words are stunning, shocking, startling in their context...  
For us, as much as for the Philippians.

Honestly, what does **deliverance** mean but to be **set free**. Right?  
When we talk about and pray for the deliverance of someone, are we not praying that they'd be **set free**? And nothing less...



And yet here, Paul talks about his deliverance regardless of whether he is **set free**. Because he knows that Jesus is not chained by these shackles that hold Paul. He knows that Jesus will prevail no matter what... that Jesus is using, even purposing all this, to advance the gospel.

And this causes him to **rejoice!**

**So, what are we to** do with this? How do we apply Paul’s example to our own lives? Because we’re called to do so. Later in this very letter, Paul tells the Philippians – ch.**3:17** – “**Follow my example.**”

Which is where I think sometimes we end up in trouble. Not necessarily in mis**interpreting** what Paul says, but in mis**applying** it as we think about our own lives or the lives of others.

I’ve heard it said and I think it’s very true, that “in the church today, the danger of heresy is most often not in interpretation, but in application.”

And this is what we need to be cautious of here with Paul’s experience and example – **and what it means for us.**

Because it would be easy (and common) to distill Paul’s example here to a word or slogan about **joy**... or more specifically, about joy in **suffering**... That we are to **rejoice in our suffering, as did Paul.**

I’m sure Philippians is often heard and applied this way.

But to do so would be to misapply Paul’s example – because, as he makes so clear to us, his joy is not in his suffering, but that in and through his suffering and travail, **the gospel is advancing** – *the gospel is being proclaimed and Christ is being exalted.*

“**Because of this**”, Paul says, “*I rejoice*”.

Let me say that again – because this is so important for us to understand – Paul’s joy is not in his suffering, but that in and through his suffering and travail, **the gospel is advancing** – *the gospel is being proclaimed and Christ is being exalted.*

“*Because of **this***”, Paul says, “*I rejoice*”.

If this was not the case, Paul would not be rejoicing in what was happening to him.

We need to be careful, as we immerse ourselves in Philippians for a season, and we hear again and again the joy of Paul in Philippians, that we don’t forget what Paul says and does in his other letters.

**Here** Paul rejoices that the gospel is preached even through those who’s motives are wrong... who hope to take Paul’s spot in his absence... Though he is not happy about their motives, he knows that the gospel they are preaching is the true gospel, and because of this, Paul rejoices...

But elsewhere, in his letter to the Galatians, for example, when Paul hears that others are preaching a false gospel, Paul is full of fire, anger, cursing even. Paul has no joy in this because God is not exalted in this.

Again, Paul’s joy is not in his suffering, but that **through it**, the gospel is being proclaimed and advancing. And that for him personally, he is being given an opportunity to witness to Christ to an unreached people – to the palace guard.

We need to be careful to not unwittingly conclude that Paul’s example of joy in **this particular experience of suffering** is prescriptive of what we should **all** feel **all** the time in **all** that we face.

Because that’s not what we see in Paul – or, all the more importantly, **in Jesus**. Paul does not rejoice in all that happens to him, around him and to others. ***To do so would be to not rejoice in Christ.***

And let me explain what I mean because I don’t want this to be heard as simply **sermonizing**.

Paul’s joy, at its’ source, is in Jesus Christ and his being glorified.

This is Paul’s deepest joy – what he values and treasures about all – Jesus Christ and Him being worshipped and honored, as He deserves.

Which means that whatever happens to Paul that contributes to this – like what is happening to him through his imprisonment – brings Paul **joy**. Great **Joy**.

His joy in Christ means more to him than personal comfort or safety. So his suffering is worth it. Because through it the gospel is being proclaimed and Christ is being exalted...

And so his joy in Christ causes him to rejoice in what is happening...

But conversely, whatever works against this – against Christ and the glory of Christ – causes Paul to burn with anger. Holy anger – fueled by joy in Christ.

Are you with me? Does this make sense?

Paul’s letter to the Philippians **is** chock-full of joy. But not indiscriminate, arbitrary, mindless joy. Not joy as simply an attitude regardless of what’s going on. But **joy in Christ** – in His grace and His glory and His kingdom and will being done.

This is the joy that Paul models for us. And invites us to experience in Christ ourselves.

A joy that can stand tall amidst suffering where God’s purposes are prevailing, and a joy that can stand tall against injustice and falsity where Christ is not honored.

Both are natural expressions of joy in Christ.

As I mentioned last Sunday, we need to be diligent as we journey through this letter and encounter Paul’s joy – to constantly ask: **What is behind Paul’s joy and the joy he invites us to experience in Christ?**

Because if it is merely an invitation to **put on a happy face** in the face of tragedy or betrayal or whatever is counter to Christ and the glory of Christ, then we have not truly heard Paul, and we are not talking about joy in Christ and the joy of Christ.

But if it is an invitation to **delight** in all that exalts and glorifies Jesus – even in and through suffering – then we have joined Paul in **rejoicing in Christ**.

Similarly, if the invitation is to **fight and stand against** all that stands against the glory and will of Jesus – even in and through suffering – then again we have joined Paul in **rejoicing in Christ**.

Or if the invitation is to live with **fierce hope** in the face of great suffering and tragedy, hope that there is coming a day when Jesus will prevail and bring His kingdom and will **over all** – then again we have joined Paul in **rejoicing in Christ**.

Simply put, the invitation of Philippians is not some cheesy milk ad with the tagline “Got JOY?” but the invitation of Philippians is:

**“What would it look like for you to rejoice in Christ in this situation?”**

Which is where Paul directs the Philippians as he shifts from reflecting on what’s happened to **him** to what’s happening to **them**.

He writes... **v.27** – “*Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner **worthy of the gospel of Christ.***”

In other words, in a way that conveys the great **worth** of Jesus Christ and His kingdom and glory. ***In a way that naturally flows from rejoicing in Christ...***

Let me read the whole passage for us - **v.27f.**

*(27) Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel, (28) without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. (29) For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, (30) since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.*

Here Paul applies the call to rejoice in Christ to the Philippians – inviting them to “***stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel, without being frightened...***”

Why? Why this? Because this is what glorifies Jesus – this is what God delights in – this is what His kingdom looks like – **a community united together in the gospel and for the gospel.**

Even when and where it means suffering and hardship...

We'll talk more about this next time – but for now let us simply return to this core invitation from Paul's letter to the Philippians:

***What's happened to you? What's happening to you?***

***And what would it look like for you to rejoice in Christ in the situation in which you find yourself? In the situation in which Christ has placed you?***

**Let's pray** ----- invitation to the Lord's Supper:

- Repent for the ways we have not rejoiced in Christ – lived as though other things are worth more than Christ.
- And, as we come to Jesus, may God open our eyes to see the surpassing worth of Jesus – that we might rejoice in Christ above all.