

“Joy in Life or Death”

Philippians

Downtown

May 23, 2021

I want to start with something that I know that you already know but I want to say it anyway. As someone with an outside perspective, I just want to say out loud that you guys have an awesome staff here. They are gifted, great leaders and even more importantly they are some of the best human beings that I know. And they love you and behind your backs they actually think it's a privilege to get to serve you. You are blessed. And I know that you know that, and I want to encourage you to make sure they know that you know that. Don't just assume "well they know I appreciate them." I'll just tell you that being in ministry, we get about 1 praise or encouragement for every 10 complaints and criticisms and unfortunately the criticism tends to stick with us longer than the encouragement. I know that you know that they are wonderful, make sure they know that you know.

And then one other thing just as I'm looking around the room. I see a lot of familiar faces. I know some of you were with us Downtown before being here. Some of you in fact helped us plant our Downtown church. You were around for all the loading in and loading out at all the different locations and the bad rap videos at volunteer appreciation nights and all of it. You sacrificed so much to help us get going. And just when Downtown was getting a bit more established, permanent facilities and consistent programs, you came here to start all over and help plant this church. Church planting is very difficult and painful and costly. To be honest I don't recommend anyone do it once, and some of you have now done it twice. Because of your love for Jesus and love for your neighbors, you're here. And I want for you to know that your sacrifice is seen and noticed and appreciated. You are missed, Downtown. Many of you are the people who made our church family for me and my family. But as a fellow Lexington County resident, I am glad that you are here. I grew up in Lexington and even as a kid I remember thinking "a lot of these people go to church, but I'm not sure many of them are actually Christians." So thank you for what you are doing here.

And praise God you finally have a building so there's no more loading in and and loading out on Sundays!

Ok, let's get to work. As you know, our Family of Churches is studying the book of Philippians together over the summer. Today our passage is chapter 1 verses 18-26.

Philippians 1:18-26

Yes, and I will rejoice, 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. 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. 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.

If you've been with us so far in this series then you know that suffering has been a theme up to this point. And it's a theme that is universally applicable. Everyone who has ever lived has suffered. To some degree. There is no avoiding it. It's one of the very few things that all human beings can relate to. We suffer. Now, some more than others to be sure. But there is no dodging it.

To be fair, we do a good job escaping this reality, at times. I mean, you and I live in one of, if not the best, civilizations when it comes to eliminating pain and increasing comfort in our lives. Historically speaking, our standard of living is incredibly high! The wealthiest person in the world 100 years ago did not have things that you and I have.

I mean what would your great, great grandparents think of the fact that your house has water and electricity and cold air pumping through it at all hours of the day?! They would think you were the king of the world?!

I can't even imagine not having running water, or air conditioning. Or having a splitting headache and there being no such thing as Tylenol. Today my head aches go away in 15 minutes. Back then it was like, sorry you'll just have to sit there feeling like your head is exploding until it goes away on its own...or you die. Whichever comes first. I don't even know how long headaches last. I have no clue. I've never had to find out.

And yet even with all of this common grace, life is hard. You know this, there are still moments where it feels like your soul is being ripped out of your chest. A diagnosis. A death. A failure. An embarrassment. Life can be incredibly painful at times.

That's some of the context for this book of the bible. Paul, who started this church, is now in prison. And he is in a season of suffering

He's imprisoned, away from friends and family, future uncertain - doesn't know if he'll live or die -, he's got critics mocking him & trying to make things worse for him. His suffering runs the gamut - It's physical, mental, emotional, relational, financial, legal... and even spiritual, too.

No clue how long this will last, or what the outcome will be (no finish line to run to)

And yet in this letter Paul writes some of the most famously joyful, grateful verses in the whole bible.

I mean, he says has much here in verse 18 "Yes, and I will rejoice"- You can throw whatever you want at me. You can lock me up. You can take away my livelihood. You can threaten me with death, you can fill my life with pain... and I'm still gonna rejoice.

And as we study this book of the bible, we are asking How? What can we learn from Paul about joy and gratitude that can carry us even on our worst days?

Today's passage gives us more insight into the answer. And I will go ahead and give it to you so that the rest of the sermon is optional listening.

In Christ, the pain of life becomes like birth pain. That's the big idea for today. The pain of life, when we are with Jesus, becomes like birth pain.

I will never forget going to the hospital when my wife Courtney was pregnant with our first child. When it's your first you have no clue what to expect so there is this fear and excitement and adrenaline and nervousness.

We got checked into our room, it's almost go time, one of the nurses is in the room walking through a few things with us and Courtney is nervous so we're both telling her she can do it and all of the sudden, from the room next door, we hear the worst shrieking blood curdling scream that I have ever heard in my life. I mean, it was horrifying. And we're like "what was that!?" And the nurse says "they didn't get to hospital in time to even give her a tylenol. So she walked in and immediately delivered her baby." Courtney was like " I'm gonna need that epidural right now. Hook it up now, do not wait."

A little bit later Courtney went into labor and we got to work. And, I don't want to brag, but I played my role very well. I held courtneys hand, fed her ice chips when requested, and was very encouraging.

Courtney doesn't remember this but at one point mid-delivery she was so tired and hurting so badly she

said to the doctor "ok I can't do anymore right now so I'm gonna leave and just come back later." Delivery is just awful. Like, hard to describe awful.

But then the craziest thing happens. That baby is born and just a few minutes later you are holding...this little miracle, this beautiful, amazing little baby. And moms in the room, is there any word that could be used to describe that feeling as you hold that baby other than the word joy. Deep, profound, grateful joy. You ask most moms, was labor awful? yes it was
Was it the worst pain you've ever felt? Yes it was
Was it worth it? yes it was.
It's pain that births joy.

In this passage, Paul helps us understand how, in Christ, life's pain becomes birth pain. Pain that births joy.

Three things we have in Christ that cause life's pain to become birth pain.

1 - An unconquerable spirit

2 - A new purpose for life

3 - The secret of alchemy (That's a phrase from the bible commentator Matthew Henry in the 1600s. I'll explain it.)

1 - An Unconquerable Spirit

My friends and I have a saying, "both favorites." What that means is when someone is like "Do you want a cheeseburger or pizza for dinner?" you can say, "Both favorites." These two options are so equally good that I have no meaningful preference and my happiness is already guaranteed.

Paul says something in verse 21 that fits in this vein, but taken to the extreme: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

This is probably one of the most quoted and highlighted and tattooed verses in the entire Bible. But I don't know if the tattoos really grasp the weight of what Paul is saying here. He's sitting in jail, facing a very real possibility of death. And he's able to say, "Both favorites." To live is to glorify Christ and spread his kingdom. To die is to be with Christ. He later will go on to have a mini-debate with himself about which is better...

Philippians 1:22-24

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. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.

This is just wild if you stop to think about it. For most of us, I assume it would be a challenge to respond this way if faced with the same choice. I for one really enjoy life here. It's wonderful.

But what Paul puts on display here is that for those of us in Christ, we win either way. If this happens, I win. If that happens, I win. There are different pros but I win either way.

When Christ is my life, nothing can take away my life. I live to serve Jesus, I die to be with Jesus.

"To live is Christ, to die is gain."

For the Christian, this life is as close as you'll ever get to hell. This is as bad as it gets for you. For the non-Christian, this is as close as you'll ever get to heaven. This is as good as it gets.

And death comes for us all. You can do all the yoga and yogurt, you're gonna die. You'll just die full of yogurt and be very flexible.

Even in the face of possible death, Paul says “if I live I serve Jesus, if I die I go be with Jesus. Win/win. I live, I win, I die, I win. I can rejoice or I can rejoice. Either way. Because what sustains me cannot be taken from me. I have a meaning in my life that pain and suffering cannot rob me of...to glorify Jesus.

For Paul, life's greatest joy is knowing Jesus and making him known and there is nothing that could take that away from him. In fact, he believes that whatever happens to him only delivers him more of it.

A few years ago, a pastor named Jonathan Evans was giving a eulogy at his mothers funeral. And was reflecting on watching his sick mother pass away and praying for her, and he says he had a realization.

“There was always only two answers to my prayers—either she was going to be healed or she was going to be healed. Either she was going to live or she was going to live. Either she was going to be with family or she was going to be with family.

Either she was going to be well taken care of or she was going to be well taken care of.

The two answers to prayer are yes and yes. Because victory belongs to Jesus.”

That is an unconquerable spirit. You can't defeat that, nothing on Earth can. Only with Jesus do you win when the worst earthly thing happens to you. Do you see how this limits the power that pain has over you? It's a win-win scenario. Live, Jesus. Die, Jesus. Both favorites. Which leads us to point 2.

2 - A New Purpose For Life

Everybody, you included, has a "to live is..." belief. Every single one of us. Regardless of whatever our theological convictions are, we have a “to live is” belief. For some of us it's...

- to live is to climb the corporate or social ladder.
- To live is to have a healthy, solid family.
- To live is to get married
- To live is an achievement of my children.
- To live is a lifestyle that at least matches the people I see and am around every day.
- To live is to have fun.
- To have comfort.
- To live is... fill in the blank for you...

Difficult circumstances are one way you can discern the answer to this question. When your thing is threatened or taken away. The degree to which it devastates you is a powerful revealer. It exposes.

Paul is experiencing just such a circumstance at this moment. He is being squeezed, and if his “to live is” belief was any of those things, he would be devastated. Because they are all maximally threatened.

But at the end of his debate about life vs. death, notice what he says:

Philippians 1:22-25

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. **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** (emphasis added)

I want you to notice how much Paul interprets things based on it's impact on others.

In fact, before this in verse 12. Paul says 'I got put in prison unjustly. but it's ok because I got to share the gospel with others.' He's not thinking of what's fair to him, he's thinking about what's good for others.

verse 15. A bunch of people lied about him and ruined his reputation. But the gospel is being spread and that's good for people, so it's good with me.

When he talks about giving in chapter 4...He says, I'm not asking you to give because I need the money. I have all I need. I want you to experience the blessing of giving.

Philippians 1:23-25

I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. 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...

He says, 'if I'm thinking about myself, I would rather die and go be with Jesus.

'to depart and be with Christ is far better.' Far. That's how much better. Far. Paul says "honestly dying would be way better for me personally. But if I stay here, alive, it's better for you. So I'll stay because it's better for you. This is part of how Paul evaluates the things that happen to him. He doesn't first ask 'am I happy? Do I like what is happening? Is this fair? Is this what I want?' He asks 'is this good for others? Then I'm good with it.' The specific language he uses is for others 'progress and joy in the faith.' That is an altogether different purpose that will reshape how you think about life's pain.

Fill in "to live is _____" with any other word and Paul is a defeated mess here, but this purpose enables him to boldly sit in prison chained to a prison guard worried about people *outside* of prison and say "To live is Christ."

I heard a story recently of a couple that went overseas to an unreached people group, to take the gospel to them in hopes of planting a church there.

It was an interview and one of the questions was...what all did you have to give up in order to move you and your family overseas. What did it cost you? And they thought for a second and said "well, a lot." It was a struggle, at least at first. House, cars, stuff. Friends. Our kids see their grandparents infrequently at best. So many of the things that a lot of Americans think they couldn't possibly give up. We really had to grapple with the question, 'what are we giving up if we go?' But then we just asked ourselves the question...what does this unreached people group give up if we don't go?" and we realized we had our answer.

A totally different purpose for life. Not just "is this good for me?" but is it good for others, specifically for their progress and joy in the faith.

Let me be direct with you here...

Too many Christians think they will grow by receiving. And they never pivot into the realization that some of our growth comes through sacrificing and giving to others

I was talking with a friend who is in recovery and we were talking about a pattern that exists in AA. He said the pattern is, in many different addiction programs, people come for what they need, but stay to help others find their way. Come for what you need, stay for what you can give. So I asked him why that is and why it is so consistent.

He said it is the 12th step, to carry the message to those who need to hear it. In fact, he said helping others stay sober helps you to stay sober. When someone relapses the first question asked is how were you helping others. Direct correlation between giving and helping others and maturity/growth. Almost all those who relapse didn't or stopped serving/giving/helping.

Some of you came here and your life was a mess. Your marriage was a mess. Your faith was a mess. Your friendships were a mess. Your kids were a mess. Your finances were a mess... and praise God, you got help!

You received the input, the training, the teaching, the coaching, the community that God knew you needed. What a blessing!

And now you're not perfect by any stretch but you are experiencing more health in your life than ever before. You need to realize that means it's time for you to think mostly about giving to others now. You will still need to receive some, but at some point, your growth will now mostly come through pouring out for others... and your joy will be connected to that, as well. Come for what you need. Stay for what you can give.

Philippians 2:17

Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.

Who cares what happens to me. Did I help you? Did I contribute to your joy and progress in the faith? Then I win.

3 - The Secret of Alchemy

Matthew Henry wrote a commentary on the Bible in the late 1600s . And as he talks about Philippians chapter one, he says God is the only alchemist. Back in the Middle Ages, alchemists were people who were trying to find the secret for turning lead into gold. And this was a serious pursuit for many years. In fact government leaders actually became concerned that someone would figure it out and stockpile so much wealth that they would take power from the government so in 1404 King Henry the 9th made it illegal to turn lead into gold.

Lead, they thought, was a base, useless, worthless thing. "Could we find a process by which we could turn a base useless, worthless thing into something exquisite and beautiful, gold?" Well, nobody ever found it, but Matthew Henry says that God does that all the time with the circumstances of your life.

Remember Joseph back in the book of Genesis? His brothers sell him into slavery to get rid of him. They say, "Finally, that's the last we'll ever see of him." Of course, Joseph prayed to God, "God, why are you letting this happen?" God turned lead to gold. In the end, he becomes prime minister of Egypt and saves his brothers.

Here's Paul saying the same thing. When Paul comes into a situation, he actually starts by saying, "I wonder how God is going to turn this base and worthless situation into gold.

Philippians 1:19

For I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me [the injustices and difficulty] will turn out for my deliverance.

That word for deliverance is the same word for salvation. And in scripture, salvation is used with different tenses. Past, present, future.

Sometimes the word saved is used in the past tense, which means we're saved from the penalty of sin. Our sins are forgiven. Sometimes the Bible uses the word salvation in the present tense, because a Christian has been saved from the penalty of sin but is being saved now from the power and the effects of sin in our lives, and eventually, we will be saved from the very presence of sin. This is what Paul is saying.

Paul is saying, "I rejoice because I know that the suffering and tragedy, whether I end up facing execution or not, is saving me. It's making me the man I want to be. It's refining me. It's making me more like the person I want to be. It's making me more like my Savior, more a man of love, more a man of humility." It's not just that Paul says, "God can turn my circumstances into gold. He can help others through this. He can bless others through this. And he can change my situation if he so chooses," he is also saying, "He's going to turn me into gold through this." Paul actually is saying, "I need this."

When he gets into a troubled situation, he is not overthrown; he is not cast down. It doesn't mean he doesn't weep, doesn't mean he's not grieved, doesn't mean he doesn't struggle, but this is what he does. What he does is he says, "God is turning this into gold, and God is turning me into gold. I need this. This will make me more like my Savior. Through this happening, others are being saved, and I'm being saved."

It would have been easy for Paul to think his ministry had been stifled. Actually God was using his situation to draw out of him a letter that has encouraged and built up billions of Christians for 2000 years. One of the most famous writing works in all of human history. There's absolutely no way Paul could have known that at the time. All he can know is that God is the only alchemist and we rarely see the full picture of what he's doing.

And of course the centerpiece of our faith is an example of this very thing. Jesus's followers understood him to be their long awaited Messiah, the one who would usher in the Kingdom of God and deliver them from Roman occupation. But instead of all that they expected him to do, one night 2000 years ago they helplessly watched him be murdered. Almost nobody understood what God was doing. They all scattered and wept and thought it was an irredeemably bad situation. But God knew exactly what he was doing and the pain of Jesus' death gave birth to the joy of resurrection and it turns out it was the very thing we needed in order to be saved.

The problem isn't that God doesn't know what he's doing. The problem is that I don't know what God is doing.

This is one great example of the need for our corporate practice during this series. Gratitude. When we recount the ways in the past that God has turned lead into gold, it reminds us and fills us with confidence that he will do so with our present lead. This is why the practice of gratitude is critical. It fuels us with the confidence in God that we need, in particular when we simply don't know what he's doing.

Your pain, your trials, are so great. Don't waste them. They cost too much, they hurt too much for you to waste them. Don't waste them by getting bitter, by walking away from the Lord, by nursing a hurt, by numbing yourself, by detaching, by sinful coping mechanisms.

In Christ, you have a new basis for life. A basis that nothing can take away from you. So that your pain can give birth to joy.

In Christ you have a new purpose, to pour yourself out in service to others, even in your worst times. So that your pain can give birth to joy.

And you have a God who turns lead to gold. Horrible situations and horrible people into beautiful things. Your pain doesn't have to be wasted, Instead we can have the sort of pain that God uses to birth joy in and through us.