

Unifying Joy

4 of 12 in *Journey Into Joy* (A Series in Philippians)

January 28, 2024

Philippians 1:27-30

We're continuing in our current sermon series which is going to take us through the entire New Testament letter of Philippians by the time we're done. The series is called *Journey into Joy*.

Indeed, joy is a prominent theme in Philippians, with the words "joy" or "rejoice" occurring 16 times in the space of just four short chapters. The other week Pastor Jeremy explained that because of this, Philippians is sometimes referred to as "the epistle of joy."

Speaking of which, last Sunday, someone approached me after service and asked about our recent emphasis on joy. Here's the thrust of the person's questions as I understood them: "How does all this talk about joy square with the harsh realities of suffering that are so present in this world? Is it disingenuous—kind of phony at best— or perhaps even cruel at worst— to suggest that people should rejoice when there is so much suffering everywhere, including, in some cases, smack in the middle of our own lives?"

Those are excellent questions— questions which Paul's letter to the Philippians speaks to at a profound level. Because the context of this so-called "epistle of joy" is actually that of struggle and suffering.

In fact, at the end of the passage we'll be exploring today, Paul says to the Philippian Christians that:

... you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have. ¹

With their own eyes, the Philippian Christians had seen Paul suffer for the gospel of Christ when he first founded their little church in Philippi. Paul had been persecuted there, to the point that he had to leave the city. In one of his other letters, Paul speaks of how:

We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition. ²

Even as he wrote his letter to the Philippian church, Paul continued to face strong opposition, except this time it came in the form of being chained to a guard in a Roman prison cell, unsure if he'd even survive.

And as we just saw, Paul acknowledged that the Philippian Christians themselves were also going through the same kinds of struggles. Philippi, you see, was a proud Roman colony, and the large majority of people who lived there built their public lives around the declaration that Caesar, the Roman Emperor, was the world's true king. They did not take kindly to the Christian message that Jesus is the world's true King.

In Philippians, there is zero attempt on Paul's part to deny or to minimize the reality of his own suffering, or that of the Philippian church. And yet, the call to rejoice persists in the letter of Philippians— in the midst of, and in spite of their suffering.

¹ Philippians 1:30 (NIV)

² 1 Thessalonians 2:2 (NIV)

Now, to say that we are to rejoice *in* our sufferings is not to say that we rejoice *for* our sufferings. Not at all. We are not masochists.

But because of our hope that Jesus will ultimately prevail as the world's true King, we can experience his joy right here and now, even in the midst of and in spite of the realities of suffering. And this joy becomes a foretaste, a preview of the eternal joy we will know when King Jesus returns and sets the whole world right, once and for all.

Yes, for now we live in a fragmented world, and sometimes we will feel fear, discouragement and sorrow. Because of this, scripture openly invites us to bring our prayers of lament to God with full emotional honesty. That said, scripture nevertheless commands us, to "rejoice in the Lord always" because of the eternal hope we have in Jesus. ³

Last Sunday, we read Paul's reflections about whether he would survive his current prison ordeal or not. On the one hand, to go on living would allow him to engage in fruitful ministry *for* Jesus. On the other hand, to die would mean to depart and be *with* Jesus, which Paul said is better by far. In last week's sermon, Pastor Andrew shared that Paul summed up his situation with these words:

Alive, I'm Christ's messenger; dead, I'm his prize. Life versus even more life! I can't lose! ⁴

This is the radical hope that allowed Paul and the members of the church of Philippi to rejoice even in the midst of their suffering. God also calls you and me to the same kind of hopeful joy in Jesus— while in no way downplaying or denying the difficult realities of our own sufferings and the brokenness of the world around us. Paul goes on to express that he's persuaded he'll carry on living, at least for now, to help the Philippians continue to grow as followers of Jesus. Here's how he puts it:

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...** ⁵

That brings us to our passage for today. Please turn in your Bible to Philippians 1:27-30. Please follow along now, as I read the passage from the NIV. Your progress and joy in the faith, says Paul to the Philippians, depends on this:

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 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. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have. ⁶

In the original Greek text, those four verses constitute one very long and complex run-on sentence. Paul was brilliant writer but had he been educated in the Canadian school system he would have failed grade

³ See Philippians 4:4

⁴ Philippians 1:21 (MSG)

⁵ Philippians 1:25 (NIV)

⁶ Philippians 1:27-30 (NIV)

6 grammar. The governing clause of these verses, however, and Paul's main exhortation to the Philippian Christians—and to us—is this: In the face of opposition and all the pressure that comes with it, *conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ*.

How do we conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel when the pressure is on? Paul gives us two essentials along these lines. The first is to:

1. Stand united in the Holy Spirit and gospel mission.

When Paul tells the Philippians to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel, the key Greek word he uses in this sentence is *polis*, from which we get our English word “politics”. But he's not referring to politics in the way we usually think of it— elections and voting and political parties and so on.

The word *polis* has to do with being a citizen. But of which country? Rome? Because Philippi was a proud Roman colony, like we talked about earlier. And we *are* to be good citizens of whatever country or province or municipality we happen to live in. Indeed, in his other letters Paul instructs believers not only to pray for and submit to the governing authorities, but also to bless the greater community through our good works.⁷ However, as much as God has put us here to bless the country and especially the local community in which we live, our true citizenship does not ultimately lie in any earthly nation or city. In Philippians chapter 3, Paul makes this explicit, saying:

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ...⁸

And so, in calling the Philippians to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, Paul is calling them to live in a way that is consistent with their ultimate citizenship in heaven. They are to conduct themselves in public in a way that that reflects the kingship of Jesus, and the values of his kingdom— values like moral purity, honesty, humility, patience, kindness, self-sacrificial service, and even the love of enemies. The church, you see, is a colony of heaven on earth, and together we are called to live as ambassadors of our true country, and our true King— Jesus— even as we eagerly await his return to earth, where he will one day establish his kingdom forever, in all its fullness.

And at the very heart of what it means to conduct ourselves in this manner is *unity*. Here's how Paul puts it in our passage:

... stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel.⁹

The unity of the church is one of the key themes we find in Philippians, and the reason it comes up so much is because the Philippians church's unity was showing signs of cracks. There was grumbling and disputing among them. So not only did they face pressure from the pagan world outside, but from emerging disunity within.

And so, in the verses immediately following our passage for today, Paul goes on to say to the Philippians:

⁷ See Romans 13:1; 1 Timothy 2:1-4; Titus 2:11, 3:8 (cf. Matthew 5:16)

⁸ Philippians 3:20 (NIV)

⁹ Philippians 1:27b (NIV)

... make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. ¹⁰

Because things like selfish ambition, vain conceit, grumbling and disputing are not in keeping with our heavenly citizenship. In Jesus we are united as one through the Holy Spirit, and therefore such behaviours are not worthy of the gospel of Christ. In fact, such behaviours harm our witness as a church, and undermine our God-given mission to share Jesus' love with the greater community.

I'm a big Toronto Raptors basketball fan, and those of you who follow the Raptors know that last year, team President Masai Ujiri talked about how the problem of "selfishness" had crept into the Raptors culture. This resulted in some tensions and divisions among team personnel, and Masai explained that he had to make some changes in the organization to correct that problem. Because how can a team win when its players are playing for themselves rather than for the team as a whole? How can a team play together effectively when there are divisions among them?

In fact, when Paul tells the Philippians to "strive together as one for the faith of the gospel," he uses a compound form of the Greek verb *athleo*, which means to work together side by side as teammates in an athletic contest. The verb in this form only appears twice in the entire New Testament— both here and then again in Philippians 4 where he speaks about how two women named Euodia and Syntyche "have contended at my side" for the gospel. ¹¹ Now, however, the problem was that Euodia and Syntyche— Paul's teammates in gospel mission— weren't getting along with each other. In fact, they were likely dragging other brothers and sisters into their conflict, compromising the unity of the church.

We have said many times before in our sermons that biblical joy is profoundly relational. It's all about our relational connections with God and each other. We cannot be a joyful church without also being a united church. It turns out, as Paul put it back in chapter one, that our "progress and joy in the faith" is directly related to staying united in the Holy Spirit, and contending side by side in gospel mission— even and especially in the face of pressure and pushback from the culture at large, not to mention resistance and attack from demonic spiritual forces whose modus operandi is to divide and conquer.

But united as one, we find the strength and courage in Jesus and each other:

... 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. ¹²

When we stand united, our fear will dissipate, and we will find courage, because we know we're all in this together, and that together, we all belong to Jesus, the world's true King. Our unity in the Holy Spirit and gospel mission will in turn serve as a sign to those who oppose us— whether humans or demons— that our message about King Jesus indeed true, and that one day, the whole world will acknowledge him as Lord.

What made Paul pray with joy? Perhaps you'll remember that in chapter one, he told the Philippians:

¹⁰ Philippians 2:2-3 (NIV)

¹¹ See Philippians 4:3

¹² Philippians 1:28-29 (NIV)

In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ¹³

In the wake of a long and depleting pandemic, when we're still tired and weary, and society seems as divided and adversarial as ever, what is going to see us through to the other side is standing united together in the Holy Spirit and in the shared partnership of gospel mission. Teamwork still makes the dream work, so when it comes to your part in the life of this church:

Are there any grudges or grievances do you need to let go of?

Is there anyone you need to forgive?

Is there anyone you need to apologize to, and ask to forgive you?

How might God be calling you to connect more deeply with others in this church, beyond just coming and going on Sunday mornings?

How might God be calling you to get reconnected in church life after having kept your distance for quite some time?

How might God be calling you to step up and serve alongside others in the mission God has given us together as a local church?

Taking such questions seriously and prayerfully will help us to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

The second essential for conducting yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ when the pressure's on is to:

2. Identify the grace in your suffering.

Let's take a look at verses 29-30 of our text, where Paul says:

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have. ¹⁴

In the original Greek, the phrase "has been granted" includes the root word for grace. So here, Paul is saying that it's a gift of God's grace that you should not only believe in Christ, but also to suffer for him.

Um, does that come with a gift receipt, Lord? Because that's a gift I want to return!

But it's important to understand that until Jesus comes back and God's kingdom comes in all its fullness, we continue to live in a fallen world. For that reason alone, we are all bound to face suffering sooner or later. And if we are truly loyal to Jesus, we are also bound to face suffering *for his sake*, because living as

¹³ Philippians 1:4-5 (NIV)

¹⁴ Philippians 1:29-30 (NIV)

faithful citizens of heaven means we will go against the grain of the world's values and beliefs. And we'll get flak for that.

For example, New Testament scholar N.T. Wright says:

Try telling people whose lives revolve around sexual immorality that the Lord Jesus summons them to use their bodies in a way that honours the world's creator.¹⁵

In fact, this coming fall, we are aiming to address the challenging subject of Christian sexuality, including what the Bible teaches on complex and sensitive topics like marriage, singleness, gender, and what it means to relate with both grace and truth to our LGBTQ+ friends. We're expecting to have a sermon series as well as a couple of semester group electives on subjects like these, and possibly to make some small group materials available as well. Please pray for us as we take the next several months to prepare for that.

But as loving and gracious and Jesus-like as we hope to be in addressing these matters, standing for a biblical sexual ethic is bound to put us at odds with many in today's society. And because of that, we will probably be the recipients of some criticism, pushback, and ridicule. But if that happens, it won't be a big surprise, because opposition often comes when we seek to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

In such a situation, Paul would encourage us to pray, "Lord, in the face of opposition, help us to see your opportunities." Or, to put it another way, "Lord, help us to identify the grace in our sufferings."

First of all, suffering for Christ's sake is a sign the reality of our relationship Jesus. It's evidence, proof, of our salvation.

Secondly, it's a means by which we can also draw closer to Jesus. As we share in his sufferings, our intimacy with Jesus deepens.

Thirdly, it is by partnering with Jesus in his suffering that we can experience his resurrection power—breakthroughs from him— in ways we otherwise couldn't. As Paul goes on to say in Philippians 3:

I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.¹⁶

Indeed, at the very heart of Philippians is the message that by God's design our own our spiritual growth and development is meant to follow the pattern of Jesus' death and resurrection. We lose our lives to gain that which is truly life. This is precisely what Jesus has in mind when he tells us in gospels of Matthew, Mark and yet again in Luke, to, "Take up your cross and follow me."¹⁷

¹⁵ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*, p. 96.

¹⁶ Philippians 3:10-11 (NIV)

¹⁷ See Matthew 16:24-26; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23

It's important to realize that the Christian life does not exempt us from sufferings and trials. Of course, we seek to avoid suffering whenever we can (again, we're not masochists). And of course, we seek to relieve suffering wherever we can, as Jesus did and does.

But please beware of a popular pseudo-Christian message called the "prosperity gospel" which suggests that if Christians have genuine faith, they won't experience suffering. That's just plain bad theology and dangerously false doctrine.

On the contrary, what does the Bible tell us in the book of James?

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. ¹⁸

I don't believe God is the source of all our sufferings, but I have no doubt in my mind that God's grace is at work in all our sufferings. As Paul writes in Romans:

And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. ¹⁹

So the question is, can you identify God's grace in your hardships and sufferings? Whatever you're going through, ask Jesus, "Lord, help me to see your grace in this situation." Ask him, Lord:

- How will you work this or my good?
- How will you use this to shape and mature me, and make me more like you?
- How will you use this to accomplish something greater for me, in me, through me, than might ever be possible otherwise?

When we go through sufferings as a church family, we might ask:

- What lessons do you have for us in this, Lord?
- How are you working to refine us, or to prepare us for a new chapter, a new era of gospel mission?

As the worship team comes back up, I'd like to quickly share with you that this past Monday, I officiated a funeral for a brother in the Lord who first started coming to Cornerstone back in 1998. He had lost his 7-year battle with cancer, leaving his wife, daughter and other family members behind.

They are the ones suffering most of all. And those of us here at Cornerstone who know the family are feeling the pain of this loss as well.

But where was God's grace revealed in and through the suffering?

- We were able to gather and celebrate a life that impacted many people for good, and we were filled with gratitude to God that we had been able to know this brother. This is grace in suffering.

¹⁸ James 1:2-4 (NIV)

¹⁹ Romans 8:28 (NLT)

- We saw the beauty of Christian community, as so many people from Cornerstone came out to the visitations and funeral service to support the family. The deceased man's brother, who is not yet a believer, said in his eulogy that he was blown away by the church's support. This is grace in suffering.
- I had the holy privilege of visiting this brother in the hospital a couple times as his life neared an end. He was in pain, and afraid, and I was able read scripture and pray with him, and witness him reaffirming his faith in Jesus in a special way that I'll never forget. We shared memories and even a few laughs. It was good, and awful and hard and beautiful, all at the same time. God was there. This is grace in suffering.
- And most of all, we can rejoice in the grace of knowing that this brother is now in the direct care of Jesus, relieved from his bodily suffering, and will one day be given a resurrection body when Jesus comes again to rule the earth. And so as scripture says, we do not grieve as those who have no hope. This is grace in suffering.

How is God inviting you this day to identify the grace in your sufferings?

This practice, along with standing united in the Holy Spirit and gospel mission, is what will enable us to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ—even and especially when the pressure's on.