

Good morning!

So glad you are with us today – in person or online!

We are continuing our series on Joy in Paul's letter to the Philippian church, and our theme today is Enduring Joy.

For many of us, the idea of enduring joy seems impossible. Because joy—especially when we equate it with a feeling of happiness—often feels elusive, doesn't it? Like a puff of smoke, or a wisp of cloud it is there, then disappears. The sun goes behind the clouds, and our joy evaporates.

These days, when I think of joy, I imagine this image. (Slide of old oak). This tree is an oak tree in San Antonio, Texas. Years ago Tom and I were there, and I was so taken with these trees. They are old. They are rooted. They have not withered in drought, nor have they fallen in storms. Rather, despite the circumstances, they remain rooted in place, they continue to flourish, they endure. These trees help me imagine joy. Joy is not just a sense of happiness, although that may accompany joy at times. Rather, according to one definition, Joy is “a settled state of mind characterized by peace, a confident way of looking at life that is rooted in faith in the living Lord of the church.”

This definition moves us away from emotion and the pressure to feel happy. Instead, it shifts the focus on to the source, the origin of joy – which is Jesus.

We are reading today from Philippians 3: 1-16. Please turn to it if you have your Bibles, or follow along on the screen as we read:

Whatever happens, my dear brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. I never get tired of telling you these things, and I do it to safeguard your faith.

² Watch out for those dogs, those people who do evil, those mutilators who say you must be circumcised to be saved. ³ For we who worship by the Spirit of God are the ones who are truly circumcised. We rely on what Christ Jesus has done for us. We put no confidence in human effort, ⁴ though I could have confidence in my own effort if anyone could. Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more!

⁵ I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish

law. ⁶ I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault.

⁷ I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. ⁸ Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ ⁹ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, ¹¹ so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!

¹² I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. ¹³ No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.

¹⁵ Let all who are spiritually mature agree on these things. If you disagree on some point, I believe God will make it plain to you. ¹⁶ But we must hold on to the progress we have already made.

Paul launches into this new segment of the letter with his customary expression to rejoice – but here he expands on it, he zeroes in on the object of our joy as he instructs his readers to “rejoice in the lord.”

So how do we do this? How do we rejoice in the lord? And how does this practice bring us “Enduring Joy.” This morning we are going to unpack three insights about enduring joy from this passage.

First, **Enduring Joy is threatened when we put our confidence in anything other than Jesus.**

In verse 2, Paul switches gears, as, right out of the gate, he vehemently warns the Philippian church about a situation that threatens to steal their joy. He writes,

² Watch out for those dogs, those people who do evil, those mutilators who say you must be circumcised to be saved.

Whether these false teachers were already in Philippi, or whether they were on their way there, we don't know, but Paul is seriously concerned that their teaching will have dangerous ramifications for this little church.

The group Paul refers to are those who claim that circumcision is necessary for full inclusion in the community of faith. They taught that true faith included belief in Jesus – *and* following other Jewish practices, such as circumcision.

And to this Paul says a hard no! Did you notice the very strong language to describe these false teachers? He calls them “dogs,” “evil workers,” and “mutilators.” The colourful language Paul uses has lost some of its power in our English translations, and in our context. After all, we love our dogs! But in ancient times, dogs were not nice fluffy companions. They were semi-wild, ran in packs, and were considered dangerous and unclean. Paul uses very descriptive language to describe the work these teachers did as evil, and to emphasize the seriousness of the threat to the Jesus followers of Philippi.

Paul then turns his attention to a positive example. If circumcision does not qualify people to be part of God's new covenant community, what does? Moving away from external evidence of inclusion, Paul points to a change of heart and behaviour as evidence of belonging to God's family:

³For we who worship by the Spirit of God are the ones who are truly circumcised. We rely on what Christ Jesus has done for us. We put no confidence in human effort...

Here we find 3 defining marks of those who belong in God's new covenantal community:

1. **They worship God as empowered by the Spirit.** Paul is writing to a church that included Gentiles who came to faith in Jesus out of a pagan context where everyone worshipped their ancestral gods. True believers are those who have done away with the worship of other gods, and now worship the one true God through the power of the Spirit.
2. **They rely on Christ.** True believers put their confidence in Jesus as their Messiah and Lord and recognize the work of Jesus on their behalf.
3. **They refuse to place their confidence in human effort.** Instead of placing confidence in human efforts and practices (such as circumcision) they place their confidence elsewhere (and we will get to that in a minute!)

Paul now turns the spotlight on himself as he uses his own story to illustrate how one puts their confidence in human effort.

- Circumcised on the 8th day
- A member of Israel
- From the tribe of Benjamin
- A Hebrew
 - These refer to Paul's Jewish identity
- A Pharisee
- A persecutor of the church
- A blameless follower of Torah (the law)
 - These refer to his achievements; his impeccable Jewish life

He demonstrates how his status in the Jewish community was based on his credentials and pedigree. Paul first points to his stellar Jewish roots, his identity. He then points to his achievements and practices that prove his commitment to Judaism.

This is a spotless list! Paul's point in listing his credentials is to demonstrate that he has been an exemplary Jew. If anyone could put their confidence in credentials or achievements, it is Paul.

When I read Paul's list of accomplishments, it is a little like looking in a mirror. I have a pretty good spiritual pedigree too. I was born on the mission field, the daughter of missionaries. When we returned to Canada, I was a pastor's kid. I've been involved in ministry from the time I was a teen. I helped plant – and lead - a church. I went to Seminary. I swam in the sea of church and Christianity, and I ticked off all the boxes as someone who was an exemplary Christian. I could easily put my confidence in my achievements, my bible knowledge, my ministry experience, my credentials – and I did. The message I had internalized was that performance, articulating correct beliefs, adhering to specific behaviours—while avoiding other behaviours—were necessary for following Jesus. Following the “rules” was the way to gain God's favour and acceptance and ensured you a place in the faith community.

But here's the thing—following hard after these things became a weight; a joy-stealer. You may have found the same. It's so exhausting, isn't it? Trying to keep up with the expectations, the rules, the worry that if I don't perform, I will disappoint God, and those in my faith community. Trying to live up to an external

standard also makes one insecure. Is what I have done enough? Am I good enough? I was so busy trying to live the right way, I missed out on knowing Jesus.

This, I think, is why Paul reacts so strongly to those who insist that a right standing with God depends on accepting Jesus *and* other things such as correct behaviours. These things draw our focus away from Jesus as we try to stand on a faulty foundation that will never hold us firm. These things will never provide enduring joy.

Paul continues his argument as he reflects on his former self in light of his new life in Jesus.

⁷I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. ⁸Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage...

Paul moves into accounting language, as he stacks up his gains and losses. Those things he once thought of as gains— all his achievements, his esteemed status, his Jewish pedigree—he places on the “losses” side of the ledger. And on the gains side, he places knowing Jesus, which is of far greater value than anything else.

Although Paul speaks of his former life as worthless and garbage, I think he may be using strong language to emphasize a point instead of saying that his former life is completely worthless. After all, Paul’s early life set him up to be a powerful communicator of spiritual truth to the early church. One commentator suggests that what Paul was getting at can be understood in this way: Think of a ship with valuable cargo that is sailing on rough seas. The only way for the ship to survive is for the cargo – valuable as it is – to be jettisoned overboard to keep the ship afloat, and to preserve human life. It’s not that the cargo is not valuable, but life is more valuable than cargo. Paul therefore understands that those things which served him well in the past no longer will serve him in the same way now that he has met the living Jesus. The former cargo that Paul carried has been tossed overboard so he can fully enter into the life of Jesus. Knowing Jesus becomes his greatest pursuit, and his greatest joy.

And this brings us to our second insight: Enduring Joy is the result of an intimate and interactive relationship with Jesus.

⁸Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. ... ¹⁰I want to know Christ...

And what does Paul mean here when he speaks of knowing Jesus?

First, knowing Jesus is relational. To “know” refers to an intimate relationship; one in which two persons live together without shame and fear. It has echoes of Eden in it – where God and humans walked together in the garden, enjoying each other’s company and sharing in each other’s lives. This means we talk with him, hear his voice, experience his presence, enjoy his comfort, and are assured of his faithful love.

Second, knowing Jesus is living life *in and with him*.

We live *in him* because Jesus instills his life in us. Through his work on the cross, we are given a new righteousness which makes it possible to enjoy an intimate relationship with him.

And because we can now enjoy this relationship with Jesus, we live *with* him. Theologian Dallas Willard uses the phrase “living interactively” in Christ to describe this type of knowing.

We “*live interactively*” as we participate in his life by entering into his resurrection and death.

¹⁰ I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, ¹¹ so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!

Paul begins and ends this section with resurrection. The promise of new life encircles the idea of suffering and death – it is as though death and suffering do not have the last word – resurrection does!

Paul links knowing Jesus with experiencing the resurrection power of Jesus. Our knowing Jesus involves new life as we experience the living power of God that renews, restores, and empowers us.

Paul wants to enter fully into the life of Jesus – the good (resurrection) as well as the bad (suffering and death). Think of your closest human relationships. When we love someone, and have joined our lives with them, we enter into all that life brings to that loved one. We celebrate the wonderful things that happen to them, and we journey with them through their pain and sorrow. When one of us suffers, the other is there to suffer alongside, to support and encourage, to speak hope into painful places. Our relationship is deeper, more honest, and more true because we have

shared in both the joy and the suffering of the other. This is how Paul sees his relationship with Jesus – it encompasses everything including resurrection and suffering.

So let's sit for a moment with the idea of Enduring Joy in the face of suffering. When we think of the suffering of Jesus, many of us would immediately think of the cross. This is what Paul alludes to as he links suffering and death. I suspect he is referring back to his writing in the previous chapter, where Paul speaks of the humility of Jesus which took him to the point of death. We are in Lent, and in these weeks leading up to Good Friday and Easter, we are journeying with Jesus as he travels to the cross. We enter into the suffering and death of Jesus in a spiritual way when we place our trust in Jesus to forgive our sin. In Romans Paul says it this way: **⁶ We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin. ⁷ For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin. ⁸ And since we died with Christ, we know we will also live with him. (Romans 6: 6-8)**

But the cross isn't the only way Jesus suffered. Jesus got sick. He was betrayed by friends, he was homeless, hungry, misunderstood, and rejected. He grieved the death of friends, and likely buried more than one beloved family member. Jesus understands our human suffering because he has experienced it himself.

So we enter into the suffering and death of Jesus spiritually, but also through our human suffering. It's a mutual thing: Because we suffer, we can more deeply understand and participate in the suffering of Jesus. And because Jesus suffered, he can more readily enter into our suffering.

Theologian John Swinton puts it this way:

When we think of joy, we should think not simply of happiness but of the presence of Jesus, which may include happiness, but in the light of the cross, also includes sadness and suffering. The power of the incarnation is God's empathic movement into the suffering of the world in order a) to reveal a solidarity that we were not aware of before and b) to share in human suffering in a way that gives hope...¹

When we enter into the suffering of Jesus—and welcome him into our suffering—we are comforted, we are given hope and peace, we find enduring Joy.

¹ Swinton, *Finding Jesus in the Storm*, 81.

Some of you today are in a place of deep suffering. The pain of it is so heavy that there are no words. Songs of joy mock you, and easy answers to your pain just make it worse.

Jesus has entered this place of suffering with you. Jesus holds you. Jesus cries for you when your tears are all used up. Jesus gives you permission to be silent in your pain – or to be angry. In his suffering Jesus models how to lament when suffering, he gives permission to ask if there is another way, to honestly tell God this path is not your desired path. Jesus is your safe person – you can be totally honest with him, just as he was honest with his Father.

Sometimes suffering feels like you are tossed on a stormy sea with no land in sight. Sometimes it feels like you are in a deep pit and cannot see the sky for the darkness that surrounds you. But there is land, and there is sky, and there is resurrection.

And this, my friends is our third insight about Enduring Joy.

Enduring Joy is rooted in resurrection. Enduring Joy is possible because we are a resurrection people who experience the new life of Jesus now, and who anticipate a future resurrection in which God will make all things new, and where all tears will be wiped away. This is what keeps us grounded when suffering threatens to destroy us.

In the final verses of our passage today, Paul continues to share from his own life as a model for his readers. We live in this interim period—the already-but-not-yet reality of resurrection now while we look forward to the final resurrection still to come. And how are we to live in this time? Paul says we pursue Jesus with grit, determination, and perseverance.

... I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.

First, we leave the past behind. We forget anything that could weigh us down or make us lose focus. We leave behind those things we formerly placed our confidence in, so that all our energy and focus is on knowing Jesus.

Second, we strain toward the goal of eventually knowing Jesus fully, at a future resurrection.

Paul uses athletic imagery here. Just as a runner's sole focus is to reach the finish line, so we too run in this way. We find this same idea in Hebrews 12:1-2:

...let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. ²We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne.

As we wind down, let's recap and reflect:

We have learned that enduring joy is threatened when we place our confidence in anything or anyone other than Jesus alone. What needs to be tossed overboard so you can know Jesus more fully?

Second, we discovered that Enduring Joy is found in knowing Jesus, in enjoying an intimate relationship which includes participation in the life of Jesus through resurrection and suffering. Today, how might Jesus be inviting you into a deeper relationship of knowing him more fully? What is Jesus whispering to those of you who are suffering?

And finally, Enduring Joy is possible because of resurrection. We are a resurrection people who place our confidence in the life-giving work of Jesus who makes us—and all things new. Friends, where is Jesus breathing the hope of resurrection over you? What are you sensing about how to pursue Jesus with grit and determination in these next days?