

4th October, 2020

“Living Joyfully”

Philippians 1:12-26

A former colleague wrote during the week; *“Growing older is one of the hardest tasks we ever have to face in this life. Growing older is all about losses. We devote most of the early years of our lives to acquiring things, but they are only things, things which we will lose as we age.*

We lose our strength, our looks, our friends, our job. We may lose our wealth, our health, our home, our spouse, our independence, our sense of dignity and self-worth.

At first, I thought he was having a down day, which I think he probably was! He was certainly reflecting on, and grappling with these changes that occur as we get older. He continued; *“But there is one thing that we will never ever lose and that is the love of God”. One of my favourite Bible promises is Isaiah 46:4 “Even to your old age and grey hairs I am He, I am He who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you”.*

Another of my favourite promises is Psalm 92:12-14 “The righteous will flourish like a palm tree....they will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green. How wonderful! God will never forget about you! “Jesus loves me this I know, though my hair is white as snow, though my sight is growing dim, still He bids me trust in Him”.

Today we commence five weeks in the book of Philippians.

Key Themes in Philippians:

This letter of Pauls, unlike many of his letters to other churches – was not prompted by serious internal church problems. Instead, Paul wrote it to express appreciation and deep affection for the Philippian believers. He delights in their partnership in the gospel (1:5) and God’s grace (1:7). They had been particularly generous in their material support for his ministry (4:15-18). Paul’s love for them is clear throughout the letter, and he particularly delights in the courage and friendship shown by Epaphroditus. He encourages the church to persevere and live out their faith in unity (1:3–5, 25–26; 4:1). He also assures them: *“He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus”* (1:6).

Background:

Let me remind you some background. Paul was in miserable circumstances. He was under house arrest on trumped up charges awaiting a trial whose outcome could result in his execution. He was facing a trial before Nero, who was not exactly known for his niceties towards Christians. On the way to Rome, he would have faced shipwreck, being stranded on an island, bitten by a poisonous snake, all before arriving to Rome and spending another two years there. In Rome, he would have no privacy. Every four hours he would get a new guard. He would be chained up 24 hours a day. I think you could say that Paul was in miserable circumstances. But what does Paul say in v18? He says, *“I rejoice. And I will continue to rejoice.”* What’s Paul’s secret? How can he be so joyful in prison?

Pastor Chen spent 18 years in a prison work camp in China. Because he came from a background of moderate wealth and opportunity, the guards at the camp worked hard to break his spirit and indoctrinate him. He was so hungry at times that he was tempted to eat toothpaste. He was separated from his wife and his young church. While he was in prison, his wife died.

One of his greatest hardships was that he had no privacy to worship, pray, read, or memorize the Scripture. He was under constant surveillance. Frequently, he prayed that God would allow him a place of privacy so he could enjoy fellowship with God.

Soon the prison officials gave him a new assignment. In order to break his spirit and indoctrinate him further they gave him the most difficult work assignment in the camp. They assigned him to the camp cesspool. The sewer pit where he worked served 60,000 prisoners. His assignment was to scoop out human waste to be used for fertilizer. No one else wanted the job because it was lonely and repulsive and they feared deadly diseases.

His heart was broken when he went to work on his new assignment. Day after day working in the foul pit he wondered if his prayers were heard. To withstand the hardship, he would sing, pray, and quote Scripture aloud. One day it occurred to him that his assignment was a specific answer to prayer.

Because he worked in such a foul hole none of the guards would get anywhere near him. He worked completely alone. He could pray, sing, and quote Scripture as loud as he wanted! He began to thank God and rejoice. There was no one there to hear him but his faithful God. His cesspool assignment lasted six years, and miraculously he never contracted a disease from it.

When he was released, the church for which he had laboured and prayed had exploded in growth and vitality. He travelled to poor villages where he saw the hand of God at work. The song that he used to sing, was a favourite of my mothers. She would sing it as a solo at one of the small Methodist churches in Footscray when I was growing up.

*I come to the garden alone
While the dew is still on the roses ...
And He walks with me and he talks with me
And He tells me I am His own
And the joy we share as we tarry there
None other has ever known.*

Joy in the Midst of Difficulties:

There were three groups who made life difficult for Paul and early Christians in Philippi. The first was Roman society in general, which Paul describes as “crooked and perverse” (2:15, 3:19). A second was competitive Christian preachers who opposed Paul out of envy (1:15-17). A third was legalistic Christians who polluted the gospel of grace by insisting that Christians must keep old rules and regulations (3:2).

Add to those difficulties the reality that Paul was in prison and that the Philippians were under constant threat of persecution from Roman authorities. Despite these dark circumstances, the letter brims with joy. The words *joy* or *rejoice* are found sixteen times in the four chapters. It has been called “*The Letter of Joy*”.

Joy is not the absence of problems; joy is the attitude that we carry regardless of our problems. Happiness is external, it tends to be related to what is happening around us. Joy is internal, and tends to be constant despite what is happening! As Nehemiah said: “*Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.*” Nehemiah 8:10

A lot of people don't enjoy life, they endure it. They think that they can't be happy because of all the problems in their life. How then do we have joy in spite of what is going on in our lives? Our reading gives us three essentials for living joyfully:

1. Having the right perspective:

We all have problems. They may be health problems, work problems, family problems, or money problems. It's easy to get discouraged about personal circumstances, or to take unimportant events too seriously.

But Paul teaches us that our problems aren't as important as our perspective towards these problems. What is perspective? Perspective is a right evaluation of your circumstances.

Paul says v12: *"And I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, that everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News. For everyone here, including all the soldiers in the palace guard, knows that I am in chains because of Christ"*.

Why could Paul rejoice? Paul had always wanted to go to Rome to do an evangelistic crusade, but he was never able to make it there. Now he's in Rome, and he's chained to the palace guard – possibly the most elite troops of the Roman Empire. If these guards were the elite troops, then there could not be a more strategic group for Paul to reach with the Gospel. When they retired after 12 years, they were made leaders in Rome. God puts Paul in Rome, Nero pays the bill, and chains a future leader of Rome to him every four hours. These guards had an inside route to the emperor. Eventually Paul himself would speak before Nero. Paul was held captive, but as a result, Paul had a captive audience with whom he could share the gospel. They tried to shut him up, but instead they gave him a pulpit.

Not only this, but look at v 14: *"And because of my imprisonment, many of the Christians here have gained confidence and become bolder in telling others about Christ."* Others were emboldened by Paul's example. They saw what he was doing and decided that they could do it as well. If Paul had become depressed by his circumstances, it would have depressed the others. Instead, Paul saw that his attitude was affecting the attitudes of other believers around him. Other believers became bold because Paul was bold.

God has a purpose in every single one of my problems. God never wastes a hurt. Many times, we don't see the purpose until later, but we can be assured that God has a purpose in every single one of our problems.

We need this perspective. You need to know that God has a purpose in what you're going through. No matter what it is, God has a purpose for you.

2. Having the right priorities:

When life gets tough, you need your priorities to be clear. A lot of people aren't joyful because their priorities in life are mixed up. They are focused on themselves and their happiness. They are focused on what other people expect from them. They even make their priorities the problems that other people give to them. What was Paul's priority?

In v15 Paul writes:

"Some are preaching out of jealousy and rivalry. But others preach about Christ with pure motives. They preach because they love me, for they know the Lord brought me here to defend the Good News. Those others do not have pure motives as they preach about Christ. They preach with selfish ambition, not sincerely, intending to make my chains more painful to me".

In essence, he's saying, "These guys are kicking me when I'm down. They're taking advantage of the fact that I'm in prison to build their own reputations." This group were delighting in Paul's difficulties, thinking that the worse it got for Paul, the better it would get for them.

How did Paul react? He tells us in v18, *“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.”*

Paul said that he wasn't going to let anyone – critics included – steal his joy. Their motives might be wrong, their style may be wrong, but so what? They're preaching the Gospel. Paul had a priority to live by. He lived to see good news about Jesus preached, and as long as that was happening, Paul didn't care about anything else. I need a priority to live by.

The problem in life is that we let unimportant things crowd out the important things. We tend to forget what's important and live for what's urgent. How many times do you have a fight in your marriage and you realize that it's over something trivial?

Jesus said of God in Matthew 6:33 *“He will give you all you need from day to day if you live for him and make the Kingdom of God your primary concern.”*

What's your primary concern? What's your priority in life? Is it your work? Is it your family? Is it your sport? Your marriage? Jesus said, *“He will give you all you need from day to day if you live for him and make the Kingdom of God your primary concern.”*

There's a word for putting anything else first in our lives: Idolatry. The minute that we make anything else first in our lives, we're idol worshipers. When we have our priorities right – when our priority is God – nothing can take our joy away.

3. Having God's Power:

Life has a way of wearing us down. When we're young we think we are invincible. We think we can take on anything and anyone. As we age, we realize our limitations more. If you're not a little bit tired – if you haven't yet hit your limitations – then either you're not old enough, or you're not hanging around enough young people.

We need a power to live on. Paul did. In v19, Paul says, *“For I know that as you pray for me and as the Spirit of Jesus Christ helps me, this will all turn out for my deliverance.”*

Paul says that there are two things that keep him hanging in – the prayers of God's people, and the help of the Holy Spirit. You need a power to live by.

What can you do with God's power? Without God's power, it's all up to you. When we think it's all up to us, we become stressed out and joyless. When we think that everything is up to us, we lose our joy because we're not sure what is about to happen in our lives. We're not sure if we have enough energy to face tomorrow.

But with God's power, you can know that you will have anything you need to face whatever happens in your life. Paul wrote in Philippians 4:13^L: *“For I can do everything with the help of Christ who gives me the strength I need.”* You and I don't have enough strength to face our life on our own. We don't have the resources within us. But we don't need to. Our strength lies with the one who can continually empower us for everything that we will face in life.

Living joyfully is about being grateful, it's about living with the power of God. If today you feel a tad overwhelmed by your problems, take a few moments and ask God for a perspective that shows you what he is doing through those challenges, and trust Him. If you are unclear about your priorities, and need to clarify your primary concern, confess to God you have messed up, by trying to live your life your way. Ask Jesus to be the centre of your life, and surrender afresh to the new management of His Lordship.