

Reasons to Rejoice

Reflections from Philippians

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I'm sure we could all identify with various emotions that we felt over the last several weeks. Maybe it's anger; maybe it's fear, anxiety, frustration, annoyance. But I'm wondering if one of those emotions that's defined you over the last several weeks has been joy. You might think that's kind of a strange thing for me to say. Some might even think it sounds kind of insensitive. But here's the deal. If your joy is dependent on your circumstances, you're destined to live a pretty unhappy life. The fact is there are very few circumstances we can control. I think we've been reminded of that the last several weeks. Joy is a choice. It's an attitude, and we make that choice based on what we believe to be true.

That's what we want to talk about today. So if you were to ask a New Testament scholar what book of the New Testament most celebrates what it means to rejoice or to be joyful as a Christian, I think they'd probably all agree it's the New Testament book of Philippians. So that's what we want to look at today. If you happen to have a Bible with you, go ahead and turn to Philippians. It's helpful to understand the background of the book of Philippians. It's written by the Apostle Paul and he's writing from a Roman prison, chained to two guards, waiting to find out if he's going to be executed or released. So think about this. Over fourteen times in a short, four-chapter letter, Paul talks about the theme of joy or rejoicing. When we're going through this today, we're not going to go verse by verse, line by line, like we normally do. I'm just going to pick out themes that he talks about—that he rejoices about—because he knows they're true. I've identified six reasons to rejoice, no matter what the circumstances, so the first one I find in chapter 1. He opens in verse 3, talking about thanking God for the Philippian believers, and verse 4, offering a prayer with joy. Why? Verse 6:

For *I am* confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. (*NASB, Philippians 1:6)

Paul is praying for these believers in Philippi and he says he does so with great joy in his heart. Why is that? Because he knows that they have believed in the gospel, and that means that Jesus has started something in them that He's going to finish. He's going to complete it all the way to the day of Jesus Christ, all the way to the return of Christ and the ushering in of the new heaven and the new earth. So, Paul isn't just rejoicing that this is true of him, but rather he knows this is true of these people and because Jesus has started something, he knows He's going to finish. Think about this. He is sitting in a Roman prison; he is imprisoned because of his commitment to the gospel. They've arrested him because he proclaims the message of Christ. He has literally given his life that these people might believe. But now, sitting in a Roman prison, he knows they truly believe and because of Christ, then what the Spirit of God has started, He's going to complete. They're going to make it all the way to the finish line, and their future is glorious! And he would say, "That's something worth dying for!"

So Paul says in the book of Galatians, "*What the Spirit starts, the Spirit's going to complete.*" Jesus doesn't start something; then *you* have to somehow complete it. The Spirit starts it; the Spirit completes it. He says in Ephesians 2:10, "*Through His grace, Jesus is going to make you into a masterpiece of His grace, something so glorious that He's going to hold you up in the heavenlies and the angels will gasp at the wonder of what you've become.*" And since Jesus has started that work, we're all going to get to the finish line, and it will be glorious! Paul's reminding us that there's nobody

that can change that. That's never going to be diminished. Nobody's going to take it away. So I would say, *“Not only do I find joy in knowing that's true of me, I find joy in knowing it's true that Jesus will complete His work in you!”*

The second reason to rejoice I find in verse 12 and following, where Paul says:

Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel,

So think of it this way: Paul finds great joy in knowing that not only he, but also these Philippian believers have trusted Christ, and what Jesus has started, He is going to complete in them. But then he extends it. If that's true, if the gospel is that wondrous, we need to add more names to the list; we need to advance the gospel. We want more people to know Jesus, to know this joy and to know this future that has been made possible. So when he opens up verse 12, and he says, **I want you to know**, basically what he's saying is he needs to correct something in their thinking. They're confused about his circumstances, and he needs to teach them or correct them in order to help them regain a correct perspective. So when Paul is talking about his **circumstances**, basically what he's talking about is on his second missionary journey, he arrived in Philippi, and this is a pretty famous story in the book of Acts, chapter 16.

It's the story of the Philippian jailer. Paul and Silas are thrown in prison, and God brings an earthquake. Basically the jail is opened up but Paul and Silas remain in the jail, and the jailer says, “What must I do to be saved?” Well, this is the birth of the Philippian church, so these are the people that he's talking about. They experienced a miraculous deliverance from jail, and perhaps somewhere along the way they concluded that's the way it's supposed to always work. But what happens is Paul goes from Philippi to Jerusalem, and when he gets to Jerusalem, he's arrested. He's then sent to Caesarea where he spends two years in jail there. As a Roman citizen, he appeals to Rome. Rome accepts the appeal, so he gets on a ship to go to Rome, but the ship gets in a storm. There's a great shipwreck; almost everybody dies, and he ends up on the island of Malta. While he's there, he's picking up sticks for a campfire, and a deadly snake bites him, and finally he ends up being stranded for three months. Then he gets to Rome and in Rome he's chained to two guards. That's what he means, by **my circumstances**. And so they're trying to figure out, if Paul is the premier church planter, he's the premier missionary, why would God allow him to seemingly rot in jail and rot in prison? Why not another Philippian jailer story and deliver him so he can advance the gospel? So maybe they're thinking Paul isn't telling the truth, or maybe he doesn't have God's favor. In their minds, something's kind of messed up here. So what he's wanting them to understand is that his circumstances, whatever they may be, have been used by God to advance the gospel. *So the second reason to rejoice is the reminder that God uses all of our circumstances to advance the gospel.* It doesn't matter what we're going through. We can always trust that God can use whatever is happening in my life, in our community around the world, to advance the gospel, that others might come to know Jesus.

In January of 2003, we as a congregation were studying the book of Philippians and that was the first time I ever used the illustration of the cruise ship and the battleship, and it actually came from this particular text. Just a quick review of that: Imagine you're at a harbor, and there's a cruise ship and there's a battleship. Those are two really different ships; they're for completely different purposes. When you're boarding the cruise ship, you're thinking about vacation...you're thinking about the buffet...you're thinking about the hot tub...the entertainment, and all the things you're going to do. But when you're boarding the battleship, you're in a completely different frame of mind. You're

thinking about the mission...about the danger...about your assignment. Now all of that's fine, but where it really gets messed up is if you think you're boarding the cruise ship, but you've actually boarded the battleship. Nothing's going to make sense. This isn't what you thought; you want your money back. You can't find the pool. You can't find the hot tub. You can't find the buffet. The food is terrible, and about the time you're so confused, people start shooting at you and you can't figure out what's happening. That's essentially what Paul is saying. When they came to Christ, they didn't board a cruise ship; they boarded a battleship. The goal is not to spend the rest of your life sunbathing on the deck of the cruise ship. It's to accomplish the mission; it's to advance the gospel. So that's what he's saying, "Yes, the circumstances have been hard, but God is using it to advance the gospel."

The book of Philippians is full of all kinds of military language and metaphors, so what he says specifically is that he's been chained to what were called the Praetorian guards. They're kind of the Navy SEALs of the Roman army. These are the elite Roman soldiers, probably two of them in six hour shifts—so eight different soldiers a day. So what Paul is saying is, "I have this amazing opportunity to share the gospel with these people of significant influence," and that's why he says, the gospel is spreading among them. It's spreading among everyone. He goes on to say, "As a matter of fact, even the brethren who have heard of my courage in prison have themselves been inspired to share the gospel with others." So he basically is saying that everywhere he looks, God is using his circumstances to advance the gospel, and so he rejoices in that.

He even goes on in verse 20 to talk about an expectation, **an earnest expectation and hope**. Literally the Greek there is *to stretch your neck*. It has this idea that you're anticipating someone coming over the hill or around the corner, and you're watching for them. So he's talking about the fact that he doesn't want Jesus, when He comes back—and that's the expectation—to find him sunbathing on The Love Boat. He wants Him to find him busy about advancing the gospel, accomplishing the mission, and that's essentially what he says. So Paul says, "I can rejoice, even sitting in prison, because I know what Jesus has started in you, He's going to finish."

I can rejoice because He can use any circumstances—including the circumstances we're in with this virus—and everything that has to do with it. How might God be using that to advance the gospel? He's doing amazing things around the world, and we need to trust Him and rejoice that God is accomplishing the mission. He's advancing the gospel.

The third one is also in chapter 1. I see it in verse 21 where Paul says:

For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

That's an amazing statement. Essentially what Paul is saying is, "Either way, I win. There's no losing in this deal." Remember, Paul is sitting in a Roman prison and he's awaiting word as to whether he's going to be executed or released, so this isn't just theory for him. This is the real deal, but he says, "I win no matter what." When he says, "**For me to live is Christ,**" again he's not saying the goal is to live to be ninety, sunbathing on The Love Boat. He says to live for Christ is more fruitful labor, in other words, more opportunity to serve, to plant more churches, to advance the mission. But he also says **to die is gain**. As a matter of fact, he says not just that would be better, he says that would be very much better. The reality is, when we start thinking that this world is where it's at, that this world is what matters most, that this world is where I'm going to be happy, that this world is what I want to live for, then everything becomes about survival. Everything is about doing whatever we have to do to live to be ninety because what matters most is *this life*. Then we start fearing death; then we start denying death. All of that changes when we understand correctly that our hope is in the world *to*

come. Our hope is in the promise that Jesus is coming back, that Jesus will deliver us to the new heaven and the new earth.

In the first century, consistently through the New Testament, the message was that the hope of the gospel is Jesus is coming back and the world that you long for is yet to come. So Christians understood that the goal is not to survive as long as possible. The goal is to be faithful to the mission; it's to advance the gospel. So the Apostle Paul will get released from this imprisonment, but soon enough he'll be arrested again, and then he will be executed by the Romans because he was a missionary of the gospel. His goal was not to live as long as possible. It was to advance the gospel and it would cost him his life. Almost all of the original twelve apostles ultimately gave their lives; they died for the cause of Christ. The goal was not to see how long they could live; it was to advance the gospel. They were on a battleship; they're on a mission. Most of the Christians in the first century would end up being persecuted. Many of them would die for their faith, but they died for their faith knowing that the world that they longed for is the world to come. Throughout history, the last two thousand years, Christians have understood that the goal is not to see how long we can live. The goal is to advance the gospel. Why would missionaries give up all the comforts that they had and go to remote places, many of them dying for the cause of Christ? Because they understood the goal isn't how long you can live. It's to be faithful; it's to advance the gospel and, if they die in the process, that's part of the calling. Even today in our world, there are so many Christians that suffer persecution and they're put to death for the cause of Christ. The Voice of the Martyrs estimates that somewhere around once every six minutes a Christian somewhere in the world is executed for his or her faith. All of that flows out of this understanding, *"To live is Christ; to die is gain."*

Historically there have always been problems with diseases and infections. Some of them have been worldwide; some of them have been much more in a particular locality. But historically, when people had a contagious disease, they often were ignored; they were neglected; they were left in the streets to die. But it was the Christians who rolled up their sleeves, who went out in the streets and they treated them with kindness, with compassion, with care. They took care of them, and often they contracted the disease and they died of the disease. It was understood that the goal, the mission, is not to see how long we can live. *To live is Christ; to die is gain*. It's about being faithful. It's about being diligent to advance the mission and being obedient to what God has called us to.

I don't know what's going to happen in this particular situation. I don't know what's coming five years from now. Nobody knows that. But I do know if there is great sickness and great suffering and there is a need for kindness and compassion and care from people who may actually die from whatever that disease is, that God calls the church to roll up our sleeves, to get in the streets and make a difference—to be the church! We're never going to live that way unless we understand, as Paul rejoiced, *"To live is Christ; to die is gain,"* and there's no losing in that deal. It's only when we understand the world to come—and that is our hope—that we actually learn to live well in this world now.

The fourth reason for joy I see in chapter 3, and that is that Paul identifies that he stands righteous before a holy God, not on the basis of his religious performance or good works, but on the basis of what Christ has done for him—and he believes that by *faith*. In the first part of chapter 3 he goes through the list of all the things that he accomplished. He was a high achiever; he was a Pharisee; he was full of self-righteousness; he was zealous; he was the best of the best. But he goes on, starting in verse 7:

Whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss... in order that he might gain Christ and in order that he might know Christ.

He even goes so far as to say he counts it as **rubbish**. It's just trash in comparison to knowing Christ. He goes on and says that he stands right before God, based on the righteousness of Christ, that he received by faith. So think about that. What if, in times like this, what was required of us to stand righteous before God was to get to a certain building, was to get to a certain ritual, was to have some pastor or priest do some certain thing that makes us right before God, but you can't get to them because everything is shut down? What a horrible, desperate feeling that would be! But the reality has nothing to do with a building or a pastor or a priest or a ritual. It has to do with faith in Christ. And so Paul says, "I rejoice sitting in a Roman prison cell," because he stands right before a holy God because of his faith in Christ. He goes on in chapter 3, in verse 14:

I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

That's an interesting verse. The **upward call** is Greek language that would be referencing that when someone won what would have been their Olympic games, they basically were called up to the metal stand, as we would call it, in front of an emperor/king—somebody of significance—and they would receive their prize. So Paul is saying that he presses on because, at the end of the story, (*He who began a good work will be faithful to complete it,*) and he'll be invited up to the metal stand and receive his prize. And his prize is this relationship with Christ. It's the resurrection from the dead. It is the new heaven and the new earth, everything that's promised in Christ. And it's not based on his performance. It's based on his faith in what Jesus has done for him! So, no matter what, he says, "I rejoice because I'm confident. I know this is true in Christ!"

The fifth reason to rejoice is in chapter 4, as a matter of fact in verse 4:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice!

It's kind of a double joy there, and the reason he says is because he's able to trade his anxiety for peace. Again, think about this. He's sitting in a prison cell awaiting possible execution, but he says that rather than being anxious, he prays to God, and the result is he experiences peace. I once heard somebody define *peace* as *the possession of adequate resources*. In other words, Paul is saying, "Because I know Christ has adequate resources for whatever I'm going through, I don't need to be anxious, but rather I can experience peace." As a matter of fact, it goes on and says it's a peace that goes beyond understanding.

I think a lot of people these days are asking what they can do, and people have creatively found ways to help. But it's hard sometimes to know how we can help in these uncertain times. Maybe the best thing we could do to help would be to display a peace that goes beyond understanding. In other words, could the people around us that are experiencing so much despair and fear and panic, look at you and say, "I don't understand, why are you so peaceful?" It's almost like, "Do you not understand what's happening?" Could we say, "I'm peaceful; I don't need to be anxious because I know God possesses adequate resources for whatever I'm going through. It's going to be fine. I just need to trust Him." But the key to that starts in verse 8, when he says:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. (Vs. 8-9)

The key to peace and not being anxious has to do with what you choose to dwell on. If you're going to dwell on the negative, if you're going to dwell on the bad news, if you're going to dwell on all the things that annoy us or upset us or concern us, you're not going to know peace. You're just going to know anxiety. I can't emphasize this enough: In these days of uncertainty, when so many people are stuck at home and wondering what's going to happen, it's easy to feed on bad news. It's on our phones. Every time you open up your phone, there's some warning about the virus. Every time you get a news' feed, it's something about the virus. Almost all the commercials on TV right now have something to do with the virus. The media sensationalizes this thing and creates all kinds of hysteria, and people just feed on that. I would suggest it takes less than five minutes per day to get up to date on what's happening. You don't need more than that.

You need to dwell on the things that are good, the things that are right, the things that are beneficial, the things that are pure, that are lovely. You have to discipline yourself to dwell on the right things in order to experience peace rather than anxiety. So one of the things you can dwell on is the book of Philippians. It's a short book—four chapters. Read it over and over and over again. It's all about joy in the midst of difficult circumstances.

But I also think we have to come to grips with the fact that we can wish all day long that things were different, but they're not different. This is what it is right now, and every single day is a day you'll never get back. It's a day with your kids. It's a day with your spouse, so it's a tragedy to waste those days full of anxiety because you're dwelling on the wrong things. I mean you have to think creatively. What might we do during these days that we could never have done before? Maybe it's just a chance for families to be families and eat meals together and play games and spend time together. Maybe you've had a class you've wanted to take online, a course you've wanted to take, or maybe wanting to learn a new hobby or learn to play an instrument or whatever it might be. But these are unique days, that if we think creatively, we can capture these days and treasure them and remember that God uses all of our circumstances to advance the gospel, so we trust Him with that.

The last reason to rejoice is in chapter 4, starting in verse 10 where Paul says he rejoices, and then he gets to verse 11. Why?

Because he's learned to be content in whatever circumstances he finds himself in.

Now, again, he's writing from prison. He's awaiting possible execution and he says, "*I've learned to be content.*" That's really quite a remarkable statement! That Greek word **content**, this is the only place in the New Testament it appears, and it was connected to the Stoics. The Stoics were all about self-sufficiency, and that's basically what this word means. No matter what was happening around them that they could not control, they, in their own self-sufficiency, would not react or respond to it. Paul is going to essentially redefine the term. How is he able to be content in such circumstances? Well, he tells us in verse 12 that he's learned **the secret**. That word secret is an interesting word. It's a Greek word that referenced mystery religion, and secret had to do with a secret password, a secret passageway. There was some secret they learned in order to enter into this mystery religion. So Paul is picking up on that terminology, and essentially saying, "I've learned the secret to contentment. I've learned the password; I've learned the entrance."

What is it? Verse 13:

I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

What's the secret passageway into contentment? It's the understanding, **I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.** It's not self-sufficiency; that would be a disaster. But rather it's *Christ sufficiency*! It's understanding that no matter what happens, Christ is enough. Whether I live or die, I win. What He started in me, He is going to complete. He uses my circumstances to advance the gospel, and we understand that is all by faith in what Jesus has done. It's not based on my performance, so I can experience peace instead of anxiety. None of us know what tomorrow holds. But we do know that Christ is enough. So, every day there is reason to rejoice! Let's pray.

Our Father, we are so thankful that Christ is enough. We're reminded there's very little in this world that we can control, but what we can control is what we believe. Lord I pray that You would remind us we have good reasons to rejoice because we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. Lord, remind us, day after day, that no matter what, Christ is enough! In His name we pray, Amen.

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