

Surprised by Joy – Not a Sprint; a Marathon

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Let's pray for God's blessing upon our time in the word. I hope will reinforce exactly the messages that have preceded my message this morning, but also the heart of that prayer. So, let's pray.

Holy God, thank you that you go before us. Thank you. That just like the very first words of the Bible: In the beginning, God. No matter what we do, you're there. And so, we pray, even now, this morning. As we listen to your word, it's you have spoken prior. When we respond in faith, it's your faithfulness through the years, through the history of Israel, and then culminating in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ who came among us. Who lived a life of sacrifice and love and obedience to you, even to the point of death on the cross. A painful, humiliating, agonizing death. And then rose from the dead and imparted to us your very spirit so that we could follow you. God, we pray even in hearing your word this morning, may we grab hold of your outstretched arm to us and respond. By your spirit, directed by your word and to your glory. We pray in Christ name. Amen.

It was a day that was planned and just imbued with excitement. Now, this was years before I would ever even hear of Hershey Park or Dorney Park or you would ever think of flying or driving down to Disneyland or Universal Studios. If you lived out in Long Island or in New Jersey, Six Flags Great Adventure was the Mecca of fun, and for my two nephews, aged roughly about four or five and seven years old, for them to go to Great Adventure was like the highlight of the year. You know, there were roller coasters galore, amusement shows and treats. The only place you could get them were at an amusement park. I think that's because our parents were wise to make us think that and not make them a regular part of our diet. But for those kids, just going to Six Flags was excitement. But on top of that, they were to meet Uncle Johnny, their single uncle who used to be around all the time to play with, but now was off at seminary and I was coming up from Philadelphia and they were coming out from Long Island to meet at Six Flags. Now, it probably wasn't the best thought out planned to just say, 'We'll meet at the entrance. You know, it's like saying to someone, We're going to Hershey Park. We will be there about 830. We'll just meet at the entrance. And it's kind of a hit or miss thing. It can be done. And it did happen that morning, but here's what added some unexpected excitement to our meeting. As my brother walked through the parking lot, they had parked at a distant parking lot, and so there was a lot of walking to get to the entrance. They're walking through the parking lot and I'm I got there earlier, so I'm standing on the sidewalk just surveying the parking lot, trying to get a glimpse of them as they arrive and come closer to me. And all of a sudden, my eyes catch Joey's eyes. The younger of the two brothers. And although the two of them had been by my brother's side all along, walking through the parking lot as soon as he caught my eye, he broke ranks and took a beeline to me. Now again this is across a busy parking lot. So fortunately for us, as he ran into the traffic, the traffic had kind of dissipated near the very entrance because, again, that parking lot had been filled, but there were a couple of cars that came to drop off their contents, you know, all the passengers before they went for their space. So, at this point, not only is it exciting to see Uncle Johnny, but I'm now running to him to make sure he doesn't get hit by a car. And also because, you know, I have a rescuer a complex in my mind. I'm thinking if the last thing I ever do is I save Joey while I get hit by a car, that's how they'll always remember me. Uncle Johnny has saint-like status. But anyway, that didn't happen. So we go out and Joey reaches me and he jumps up into my arms and he's beaming with a smile that only like a five year old can do. And he looks into my eyes and he says, Uncle Johnny, it's me! Now it is hysterical. If you know Joey, that fits. But you kind of expected him to say, 'Oh, I missed you so much'. Or 'it's so great to see you'. No, It's me! And he says it with 'you get it?' You know that look in his eyes like you get it. Aren't you thrilled to see me?

Now, look, honestly, I understand that it's really hard to derive a lot of theology from what a four-year-old says. But I do think this is a kind of fitting illustration for what Paul says is not the right way to approach God,

and he kind of outlines it in the passage and we do see actually a lot of the New Testament is trying to undermine this type of sentiment. As we approached God and Paul in chapter three of Philippians, which we've been going through, talks about the danger that the Philippians are facing from alternative teachers to Paul, who are kind of encouraging this kind of approach to God 'by look at me'. And he details it before he's going to go on to talk about the right approach where he writes this: He says, you know, beware of these guys who are pointing to all their achievements. And then he says, to tell you the truth, if you want to play the game of can you top this? I can better all of them. If we were to approach God with our pedigree and our performance and our ritual keeping, we'll listen to this. If anyone else thinks that he has reasons to breed confidence in the flesh, I have more. I was circumcised on the eighth day, according to the law. I'm of the people of Israel, of the tribe, of Benjamin, a Hebrew, of Hebrews. I mean, I'm a thoroughbred. In regard to the law. I'm a Pharisee. Those who are really painstakingly studied the law and apply it to their lives thoroughly. That's the rep that the Pharisees have. As for zeal, I was persecuting the church, which meant that I was all out to protect the traditions of Israel. And according to legalistic righteousness, I was faultless. So if someone was to come before God and give them a list of achievements, look at me. I don't think anyone could top me. Now this way of approaching God is actually kind of captured in one of Jesus's parables of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. In chapter 18 of Luke, Luke, tell us this tells the story. He introduces the story by telling us why the motive behind Jesus sharing this story, this story of contrasts, he says. He said: This parable addressing to those who trusted in their own righteousness and looked down on others. There are two people who go to temple. And there's one who is a Pharisee who's standing, and he lifts his head up and he says to God, God, I thank you that I'm not like other men, like robbers, like adulterers, or even like this tax collector. You know, I go about fasting twice a week, I pay my tithes and offerings faithfully. Thank you. That I'm not like them. The tax collector. On the other hand, he's not standing up. Nor is he looking up. But he's hunched over and he's standing a far distance in the back of the temple and he's beating his breast and he all he can muster is God have mercy on me, a sinner. And Jesus' kind of punchline is- I tell you the truth. It's the second one who goes back justified? For he who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted. So this idea of coming before God, with all of your achievements and it's funny, in the parable by Jesus, it says he prays to God about himself. It's all about himself that he's thanking God for.

Well, I have another story about a young man, and this is going to supply kind of the alternative that Paul talks about of the right way to approach God and to come before God. And this happens to deals with my own son. And he's a little older. Caleb, when he was young, didn't talk for the first couple of years, about almost five years. And he was a little slow in his recognition of concepts. In our house, Valentine's Day and Mommy's birthday coincide. So, you do the math. I save a lot of money over the years, but actually but it's a special day. And so it's a special day for him, too. And I was trying to train him how to buy gifts. You know, every husband learns this the first couple years that even though I love books, my wife doesn't necessarily appreciate when I get her that perfect book, you know. So I was trying to explain to Caleb, Look, Caleb, when you buy someone a gift, you really have to get them something that they love. So, Caleb's first, though, was to buy her a Lego little box, because that's what he loved at the time. So it took a few weeks and then the day before Valentine's Day, I said, you know, have you thought of something for your mom? He says, 'Yes, I have'. This is my wife, so, you know, we don't spare any expenses, so we go to Target and at Target he's just leading me. He's not telling me what he's going to get, but he knows exactly what he wants to find. So we're going down an aisle and he turns and he turns right into the place where a whole bunch of picture frames are. And so he goes and he finds a little picture frame, and it's probably two by four, two inches by four, two and a half inches by four inches. And I'm thinking, that's fascinating. What's the logic? So that's what you came up with, you think mom is going to love a wood frame? And he says to me, he goes, 'Well, you said, I need to get her something she loves. Well, I know she loves me. So, I'm going to get her a frame and put a picture of me in it'. Now, even though you could think he's going to give this to mom and say, look, it's me. But I think, you see, there's a whole different

logic behind his. It is that his mother loves him. In response to that he's giving to her himself. Now, again, I know it's tricky to derive theology from what children say, but I think he could see if you push that logic a little bit, in a sense, Paul is going to advocate exactly what's behind that statement. God in Jesus Christ has loved us. He has made himself known to us. And so, what Paul's priority and passion and purpose ends up being. I want to know that God who knows me thoroughly. So you said to give her something she loves. I know she loves me. I'll give her a picture of me. Paul goes on to say, In light of what Christ has done, I want to know Him. I want to know Christ in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. And so somehow, to attain to the resurrection of the dead. This is his purpose in reaction to all that Christ has done for him. Now we talk about Christianity not being a religion, but a relationship. And this is where right at the core motive of Paul the Apostle's passion for following Christ is his passion for Christ. And in a sense, he wants to know Jesus through thick and thin. You know, when he says in the power of his resurrection, there are some who just want to follow Jesus to see, you know, all the excitement that could happen and the possibilities that can happen to Jesus. But he also knows he's been a missionary for quite a while. He knows it's not all roses. But even in the suffering that he experiences, he gets to know God, and that makes it all worthwhile. It is a sad reality. When Jesus talks about him preaching the word, he knows there'll be different reactions and he compares his ministry to a sower going out and just scattering seed. And he talks about the seed that goes out. One of the patches of the soil responds immediately and the flowers start coming up. But as soon as the harsh conditions of, you know, drought or just overly heat hot sun without any nourishment, those flowers wither. And when he explains that leaders to his disciples, he says, those are those who respond with joy at first to the message of God loving them. But then when life gets hard, they wither. But Paul sees everything that he endures, even the hard things as potential to know Christ in the midst of. And that's where the Holy Spirit really challenges us. It's always great to delight in answers to prayer, to delight in even things that we see as God working miraculously or beyond what we expected. But when the twists and turns in life come. Even in the midst of those we can learn of Jesus Christ, our Lord, who endured things for us.

Honestly, when Caleb was first diagnosed with autism, we had prayed that anything that the therapist would tell us, we were really bad parents. I didn't want to hear anything wrong about my son. But from what I understood of autism back then, I was so angry at God. Why would he do that to us? And yet, through the years, I have to admit that we've seen more prayers answered in his life and around his life in the circumstances of his life than anywhere else. And so you look back and you think, okay, God, I you know, rightly so. I don't think God minds when we tell him we're angry at him. If you read the Psalms, you'll be shocked at the way that David in the other Psalmists speak to God. I mean, God has that book in the Bible for a reason. God wants to hear from us and He wants to. He knows what we're thinking anyway. So you really can't hide those feelings. But it's in those real rough times that even Paul sees and learns of the love of Christ for him. I mean, it's through those tough times that we learn things about God that we may not have realized that he was bringing blessings to us through sources we hadn't identified at first. And so here his main purpose is to know Christ in the power of His resurrection, the fellowship of sharing his suffering.

But here's the interesting thing that Paul is going to go on to argue. Though he knows Jesus Christ, he wants to know more. And all of us know in any relationship as good as that initial meeting might be and even the early years, there's always more to learn in a relationship about the other person. And so Paul talks about having met and known Jesus Christ, but also that there's more to know. And so therefore, he says, I'm not done. Not that I have obtained all this. There is a future to my relationship with God and even the resurrection from the dead. Though I might know its power now, in some instances there will be a final destination, which is resurrection from the dead, where I will be in Christ presence always. I will see him face to face and I look toward that. But we haven't obtained that yet. We're still alive in this earth and we are growing in our

relationship with Christ. It's not that I have already obtained or this or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that which Christ took hold of me. Again, David's prayer beautifully acknowledged this. Jesus took hold of me. And now I want to get my hands on him. It's all through this passage Paul will use a term. The Greek word is *katelambano*, which means seizing, acquiring, grasping. And actually I like the translation grasping because this word can be used in two ways. It is like grabbing something and actually holding onto it. And it also is mentally grasping, understanding, comprehending. The word can have both of those meanings, and it's very possible here the Paul's using the broad semantic range of the word. And so, he goes on and says, Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. One thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called you in Christ Jesus. It kind of slips into this racing analogy where he's going to grab that golden ring. But he says here, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. He has this relationship with Christ, but he doesn't yet have the fullness. There's more to go on and there's more in any relationship through thick and thin. All of us know that in relationships, we age. And there are things that go along with aging that in a sense deepens our dependence on one another, deepens our understanding and understanding of how we relate to things that maybe we hadn't anticipated or that are new to us. Even though the relationship is not new, the circumstances are new and there are new things to learn and to interact about. And so in his living for Christ, he knows that there's more to be gained. And if it's Jesus Paul says- Bring it on. I want to learn as much as I can of him and through his serving he knows it brings glory and it brings pain. So he gets to this running analogy, and I thought to myself, I used to be a marathon runner. And so what were some of the things that went into getting ready to run a race. And David has gone through some of these over the last few weeks, but I thought I would reiterate some of them first to make a plan. Now. With running. Basic plans where I had to because I worked I had to get up early in the morning before work if I was going to get my running in. And especially on the East Coast during the summer, you want to run before the sun is out. It's just safer if you're running great distances. And I would run for an hour that you don't want to dehydrate so bad. So, you make a plan. You're going to wake up at a certain time so that you can get back, shower, eat breakfast, get ready for work and get to work so you make a plan.

So the plan should involve some type of reading of the Bible, because that's a good way to get to know Jesus. We do have for your taking outside the Upper Room magazine, which has a little devotions for each day. If you have a little more time on your hands, there are so many different plans online that you can look up. If you want something that I prepared for a number of my men's groups in the past, I have a reading through the Gospel of John. It was mainly because a good friend of mine asked me, said, You know, you guys are always talking about a personal relationship with Jesus. What does that mean? And I thought, you know, I'd had many conversations with this guy where I thought I had explained it thoroughly. And I said, you know what? Instead of me trying to explain it again. Why don't you start reading the Gospel of John? The Gospel of John, pictures Jesus interacting personally with diverse types of people. And so I wrote a little guided reading through that. Just get to me or contact me and I can get that to you. It's a way of getting through the gospel of John in about a month. And so it's not too much reading, but reading the Bible, because the Bible is in one sense, God's love letter to us. And if we when you love somebody and you want to know what they like and the way to show love is to get them what they love while you read through their diary, in a sense.

Number two was to renew daily. You know, even though you might want to run a marathon. That's a really great goal. Every morning is going to be a battle to wake up early, especially in cold mornings when you reach out from under the covers and you know, the hair in your arm sticks up and you hit the alarm. You can always hit snooze repeatedly or you can actually get out of bed. So I find this even with Jesus, I try to consciously talk to Jesus each morning about, yes, we're getting up, we're going to do life together again today. You have to,

in a sense, think it through. Jesus said in the Gospel of Luke that anyone who wants to follow me, let him take up his cross and follow me daily. It is a daily decision.

And third- stretch. Do you know that when I used to run, I would stretch for 20 minutes before I would run for an hour and stretch 20 minutes afterwards. That's just for safety. That avoids injuries, that prepares your muscles for and also prepares them for after you're done exercising. Well, stretching means besides renewing your commitment each day, stretching is kind of reviewing in your mind exactly what you're doing. And I would suggest this passage that Pastor David had preached on Philippians 3:10, which he said is, you know, the passion, the purpose, the central focus of Paul's life. Take that as a verse to read. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, fellowship of sharing his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. So that somehow I might experience the resurrection from the dead. Or read through Colossians chapter three, which says, If you've been raised up with Christ, set your minds on things about where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, He says later in that passage, for you have died and your life is now hidden in Christ, in God.

Those are fascinating things to think through, and they're not things that you necessarily get. The first time they warrant sustained meditation. There are other passages to think those through First Corinthians nine where talks about running. It's a challenge. You know, do you think why do people train to run in a race? Will they get a crown that's not going to last? And we're running for a crown that lasts forever. There are many, whatever a passage speaks to you. It's good to review that, what I'm calling stretching, you know, going through the same kind of thing of really preparing yourself.

But lastly, one of the most important things is to amass cheerleaders. So often, just like marriage the Christian life was never intended to be lived alone. You can't do marriage alone. You can't do the Christian life alone. One of the greatest gifts that God has given us besides Christ dying on the cross, besides giving us the power of the Holy Spirit, is He's given us the gift of the church. There's other people, kindred spirits, who are in the same race. Fighting the same good fight. Running the same race that you are. And having people cheer you on or to bounce things off is so comforting to know you're not alone in pursuing Jesus Christ. Very, very often you find that so much of what you're pursuing is not encouraged by the world. If anything, it's discouraged by many around you. And so that's why banding up with other believers and if you again, want to be in a huddle where we would put together a number of people who are aiming at the same thing of serving Jesus Christ, knowing him in their particular situation, please let me know and we'll try to band you around other people who are doing that. But that is key. When I ran half marathons, it is inestimable the value of those who are cheering you on the side. You know, usually these half marathon courses are just lined with people cheering you on. When I ran the Philadelphia distance run, you come across the Schuylkill River at one time where you have to cross the river under a bridge. And as you hit that bridge, there's a bagpipe player who's playing and he's under the bridge. So, it echoes. But, you know, you have about six miles to go. And because it's close to the middle of the race, you get such a surge of energy because this guy you figure has been playing for hours, which has to be taxing. And the fact that he's out there in the cold or the heat, whatever, that September day feels like, he's rooting you on. But then usually at the end of the race, there are people who are cheering you as they cross the finish line. There's a half marathon race down in Washington, D.C., the Marine half marathon. And at the end of the race, everyone who crosses the finish line gets saluted, gets wrapped with what they call a heat sheet, which reflects back your body temperature. You exude so much heat and energy while you're running. This keeps you from fainting after the 13 miles and then are given a whole bunch of other, you know, gifts. You get a medal for completing the race, a whole bunch of things to encourage you in your running. And that's what huddling with other people can do to encourage us on, to give us that encouragement that we're not necessarily getting by those whom we work with or that we interact with. CHEERING us on. That's why God gave us the church.

So let it be our prayer, as David started us off, to know Christ and the power and the pain, through thick and thin, to know Jesus Christ in a deeper fashion by him taking hold of us and us reaching to take hold of why he called us to himself.

Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you that you have seized us. You have taken hold of us. Christ has come near. We pray, may we respond by following. May we commit to following. No matter what comes our way. And may we latch arms with brothers or sisters around us to do this together for your glory. That not only you grow in us and our resemblance to you grows, but those around us who don't know you might be intrigued. And might want what they see working alive in us. We pray in Christ name, Amen