

**“Joy in the Storm”**  
**Sermon Series on *Christ: The Source of our Joy and Strength***  
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**First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC**  
**January 13, 2019**  
**(Phil. 1:12-30)**

**Introduction.**

Recently, I learned that in the Chinese language the word “crisis” actually combines the characters of two other words: “danger” and “opportunity.” It all depends on your perspective, and it depends on your attitude.

That’s the way the apostle Paul looked at his life whenever a crisis came his way. He wasn’t blind to the danger, but he also saw it as an opportunity for him to trust God more, increase the effectiveness of his witness, and even experience the joy of the Lord to a fuller extent. How was this possible? In the passage before us this morning, we’ll see how Paul was able to do it in the words he writes to the Christians in Philippi. Let’s take a closer look.

**I. Joy in Adversity.**

In the first century AD, when people wrote letters whose primary purpose was to inform a friend or a family member about the writer’s circumstances, the transition from the initial greeting to the letter’s crucial information was often made with the words, “I want you to know....” That’s exactly how Paul begins our passage when he writes, *“Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear” (1:12-14).*

The believers in Philippi were very concerned about Paul’s life. They knew he was in prison, and that was one of the reasons why they sent Epaphroditus with a financial gift to help the apostle. They were worried sick about their pastor, and they had great affection for the person who had first shared the gospel with them. So Paul begins his letter by putting them at ease, and he tries to help them view his situation from the right perspective. He wants them to know that his imprisonment hasn’t turned out to be a devastating blow to him or to the gospel. On the contrary, it has, in fact, helped advance the gospel and his opportunity to tell others about Jesus.

Paul tells them that there were two immediate positive results of his imprisonment. The first was that he had become a rather famous prisoner among the soldiers who had been assigned to him. These soldiers Paul refers to as the “palace guard.” Elsewhere in Scripture they are also called the Praetorian Guard. These were elite soldiers who numbered several thousand, and they were actually the personal guards of Nero, the emperor. They were a select group of fighting men. Think of Maximus in the movie “Gladiator,” or the soldiers in the film “300.” Think of guys with washboard abs, and you begin to get the picture.

These soldiers who had been assigned to guard Paul in prison were his constant companions, and many scholars say that when they were on duty they were actually chained to Paul in four hour shifts. Can you imagine being chained to Paul for four hours? What do you think he talked about during that time? Jesus, of course! And as time went by all of these elite soldiers heard

the gospel and the reason Paul was in prison. The apostle wanted his friends in Philippi to know that God was using the adverse circumstances of his imprisonment to advance the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul might have been in chains, but the gospel still went forth unfettered!

The second positive result of his imprisonment that he mentions is that most of the believers in the Christian community in Rome had been encouraged by Paul's example, and they had become more confident and fearless in the Lord. Paul uses an interesting word to describe their reaction, and it's the Greek word *aphobos*. It literally means "without fear." We get our English word "phobia" from the Greek *phobos*, and when the vowel *a* precedes a word in Greek, it means "away from" or "without" or "no." So he says that his friends in Rome were talking about Christ with no fear. And because of this he rejoices.

What a remarkable development! Political and religious tyrants and systems of oppression often achieve the very opposite effect of what they intend to accomplish by means of force and terror. They meant it for evil, but God used it for good, and this has happened throughout the history of the world. God has a way of taking evil acts and turning them on their heads like a person doing Judo. He takes the destructive force of evil and turns it for a good result.

In this passage Paul also refers to a situation in which some people have tried to harm him by supposing they could make his suffering worse by stirring up trouble and preaching in a manner which was motivated by envy and selfish ambition rather than by love. Regardless of their motives or their desire to harm him, Paul rejoiced that in either case Christ was being proclaimed. At the end of the day, all their efforts to oppose Paul only succeeded in doing the thing that mattered most to him – namely, that Christ was preached.

This is a great passage to remember whenever another believer comes at the faith in a manner that is very different than how we interpret Scripture. It's easy to become critical of others, and even jealous or envious, when they don't believe or do life the way we think they should. But everyone has to answer to God for what they believe and how they live, and we can leave it to Him to sort everything out when all is said and done. What is most important is Jesus Christ, and if some people don't have the right motives or do it all wrong from our perspective, we should still rejoice that Christ is being lifted up. Whatever the adversity, with Christ we can find a reason to rejoice.

## **II. Joy in Life and Death.**

Paul's report on his own circumstances continues in verses 18-26, and he turns his attention to the future. He says that he not only rejoices to see God at work in his present circumstances, but he says he will continue to rejoice as God's faithfulness perseveres into whatever awaits him down the road. This is a courageous statement because the possibility of his execution is a very real one, and he faces it head on. When Paul appears before the court, he might be sentenced to death. So he addresses this possibility with his friends in Philippi.

Paul says, "*For me to live is Christ and to die is gain*" (21). It's a remarkable statement, but it doesn't indicate resignation or fatalism on the part of the apostle. Instead it is simply the result of Paul's journey with Christ who was his Savior and friend. Paul had entrusted his present circumstances and the future of his life into God's hands, and he looked to the Lord to be with him regardless of what happened.

Paul sees himself as a steward of his life. He knows that he has unfinished work to do, so there isn't any hint of a death wish here. He simply trusts Christ who stands at the end of his life just as strongly as the Lord stands with Paul in his present circumstances. He knows that whether he lives or dies, he's going to be with Christ. So he finds himself on the horns of a

dilemma, and he muses about which situation would be better by contrasting the benefits of life and death. In the end he decides that although dying and being with Christ would be “far better,” the joy and progress in the faith of his friends in Philippi would be better served by his continued work among them. So that becomes his “choice.”

Statements like this are common in Paul’s writings. Elsewhere the apostle said that he was buried with Christ so that just as Jesus was raised from the dead Paul might also be raised to a new life (Rm. 6; 2 Cor. 5). He said that he had been crucified with Christ so that Christ now lived in him (Gal. 2:20). And the apostle said that his life *is* Christ (Col. 3:4). Such statements can only mean that Paul’s relationship with Jesus was so close that his entire existence derived its meaning from the Lord.

Physical life and death are not of ultimate importance to Paul. Living simply meant carrying out his call to do the will of God, and dying meant both the joy of heaven and fellowship with the Lord forever. If we are to let this passage speak to us on its own terms, we’ll need to stare Paul’s astonishing indifference toward death squarely in the face and ask ourselves whether our attitude toward death imitates his.

In his wonderful book *A Grief Observed* C.S. Lewis wrote, “You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. It is easy to say you believe a rope to be strong and sound as long as you are merely using it to cord a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn’t you then discover how much you really trusted it?”<sup>1</sup> As Paul looked at the possibility that he might die, he learned that his faith in Christ was strong enough to hold him. Is your faith that strong?

Christianity has always believed that death isn’t the end of our lives but merely a portal to an even greater existence. Heaven isn’t just a hope; it’s a real place that God has prepared for those who know and love and follow Jesus Christ. And when you begin to develop this kind of perspective then the fear of death loses its grip on your life, and you develop a new freedom as you think about the future.

Sure, it would be wonderful to go on living here so I can see my children and grandchildren grow up and be there for my youngest son David whenever he gets married. It would be great to have an opportunity to impact the world around me and try to make a difference in the lives of the people I meet. But that may not be what God has in mind for my life, and none of us knows how long we have on this earth to live. Our days and our years are numbered, and they are in the hands of God.

As you know, I lost my wife Lorie to cancer in the fall of 2016, and I’ve thought a lot about life and death in the last two years. I’ve missed Lorie so much, and on many occasions I have wished I had her back. But then I began to realize that in many ways that’s a selfish desire, because it doesn’t take into account what Lorie is experiencing in the presence of Christ right now in heaven. For her to live was Christ and to die was in fact gain.

Last summer I had the most amazing dream. In my dream I was riding my bicycle on the Muddy Creek path near my home. Somehow I knew that Lorie was on that path too, but I didn’t see her anywhere and I was riding alone. In my dream, as I was riding my bike, up ahead I could see a woman who was also on a bike. She was a very small person on a very small bicycle. As I rode up alongside her, I looked over at her and she looked at me. And somehow I knew it was Lorie. However, she didn’t look anything like Lorie. Her features were very small. She had tiny eyes and a very small mouth – almost like a person in a diminished or reduced state.

Then all of a sudden she was transformed before my eyes into the most glorious vision of Lorie I had ever seen. She was absolutely beautiful! Her eyes were brilliant in color. She had

that big smile of hers, and her teeth were so white that they emanated light that was almost blinding. She was young, and her skin was smooth, like peaches and cream, and her hair was dark and flowing and luxurious. It was the most beautiful vision I had ever seen of Lorie. No words were spoken between us, but somehow I knew she was communicating something to me. And it was as if she said, “Peter, everything is okay. I’m in a great place now. Be at peace.” And then she was gone, and I woke up.

I think God gave me that dream to reassure me of where Lorie is right now, and as hard as it is to have lost her, I know she is in a better place. And I can’t wait to see her again in heaven. To live really is Christ, and to die really is gain. I know that to be true. Paul faced death with the same resolve that marked his approach to life, for both death and life to him meant service to Christ. And that was his primary goal. Perhaps more than at any other time in history, the church today needs to adopt Paul’s perspective on life and on death which can become a source of joy.

### **III. Joy in Suffering.**

Paul concludes the passage by writing, “*Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on 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*” (1:27,29).

The believers in Philippi had seen Paul suffer first hand when he and Silas were arrested, beaten by the Roman authorities, and thrown into jail. Then after the arrival of this letter, the Philippians had heard from Epaphroditus first hand and from Paul’s own pen of the hardship he was now enduring in prison. But here Paul shares the perspective he has developed on his own suffering, and on the suffering of the Philippians as well, and he says their suffering and his were part of the same struggle to advance the gospel.

All around the world people suffer for their faith, but here in this country we have been shielded from this to a large extent. Nevertheless, we should be aware of just how often people are being persecuted for the name of Christ in other parts of the world, and we should stand in solidarity with them whenever it happens.

Recently, the *New York Times* reported that an outspoken Chinese pastor and his wife face up to 15 years in prison after being charged with inciting to subvert state power. This was part of a new crackdown on religious groups in China. Wang Yi, who is 45, runs the independent Early Rain Covenant Church in the southwestern city of Chengdu. He and his wife were detained last weekend along with more than 100 members of his congregation. As of a couple of weeks ago, most of the group’s main leaders were still in custody, and police had sealed off the church, which occupies the floor of an office building. This passage in Philippians 1 means a great deal to these believers.

According to the website of Open Doors, in 2018 alone 3,066 Christians were killed, 1,252 were abducted, 1,020 were raped or sexually harassed; and 793 churches were attacked. Here in this country we don’t experience anything like that. Our persecution is more subtle, but it is present nonetheless. And in the future as our country becomes more and more secular, we shouldn’t be surprised if persecution grows in the U.S.

How are we to respond to situations in which we suffer for our faith? What does Paul teach about suffering in this passage? He says that it has been granted to us not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for Him, and the apostle adds that we’re to live in a manner worthy of the gospel. Our citizenship in heaven trumps any citizenship we may have here on earth, and

living in a way that honors Christ is central to the Christian's calling. Whenever we may be called upon to suffer for the name of Jesus, God will reward us one day for our faithfulness.

Someone once said to Mohamed Ali, when the great boxing legend was at the height of his boxing prowess, "Mr. Ali, you must love to train." Ali replied, "No, I don't. Actually, I hate it. But I suffer a little while so I can live like a champion." Good words to remember whenever we have to suffer for the cause of Christ.

### **Conclusion.**

When Paul wrote this letter he was in prison, rival preachers were attacking him, and he was at a point when he realized that he might even die for his faith. And yet he writes, "In spite of all this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice!" The key to Paul's joy was his relationship with Christ who was the source of his joy and strength. That was the bedrock of his faith, and it produced in him a resilience which could withstand any adversity or trial and even death itself.

Every feature of Paul's life when he wrote this letter was molded by his relationship with Jesus. His physical comfort, the opinion of others, the question of whether he would live or die – all these things were impacted positively by his relationship with Christ, and that's why he could rejoice.

Do you have that same kind of resiliency? Have you learned how to bounce back from adversity and even bounce forward like Paul did? And if not, what would it take for you to cultivate this kind of resilient spirit he had? I think the key is found in the short sentence in this passage where Paul says, "For me to live is Christ."

Is that how you would describe your life? How would you fill in that blank? Would you say, "For me to live is my kids"? Or "For me to live is my work"? My success. My accomplishments. My favorite sports team. My family. My reputation. My health. For me to live is what for you?

I have an assignment. Later on today take some time to write out how you would really answer that statement For me to live is \_\_\_\_\_. Be honest. And reflect on what it would take to be able to change the statement to actually say, "For me to live is Christ." Then write out three things you plan to do in the coming week to help make that become a reality more in your life.

Recently I read a great quote. It said, "We need 'tea bag' people. They are people who are at their best when the water is hot!" Paul was a person like that. Are you?

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1961).