

# Joy in Suffering

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, last week we began our new series in Paul's letter to the Philippians and we saw how! Philippians is a letter that is overflowing with joy a joy that goes beyond just mere surface level! happiness because it's a joy that is rooted in Jesus Christ himself and it's not dependent on life circumstances being good that you can have this joy because the apostle Paul as we saw last week writes from prison and yet his letter is full of joy and is full of rejoicing and so today we're going to think about joy in suffering you did hear that correctly joy in suffering because it seems like a contradiction doesn't it how can you have joy when you're suffering sounds patronizing at best and it sounds insensitive at worst now of course we don't want to downplay suffering at all as if suffering doesn't matter we're not making some kind of pious platitude here suffering is real we experience it we have experienced it perhaps we are experiencing it whether we call ourselves a Christian or not suffering is part of our lives but joy true joy biblical joy Christian joy is also very real and so we've got to be careful we don't want to downplay suffering of course but we can't downplay joy either because it's this joy that overflows from Paul's letter to the Philippians despite or in spite of his suffering Paul was able to rejoice because his joy wasn't based on his circumstances nor his circumstances being good his joy was in Christ in the midst of suffering why well because Paul says here the gospel of Jesus Christ was advancing and so what we read in Philippians chapter 1 verse 12 to 26 is that despite Paul being stuck in prison the missionary of the Christian church despite him being in a cell God was still doing his work and that's why Paul encourages the Philippians to share his joy by giving this account of his situation not because he's wanting to dwell on his suffering but to show what God is doing through his suffering and so we'll see in these verses how you can have joy in your suffering well how two things we're going to think about this afternoon first is well we need to get the right perspective God works through suffering we see that in verse 12 to 19 and then secondly we need to have the right priority the priority that Paul has here that to live is Christ and to die is gain so get the right perspective and have the right priority first get the right perspective God works through suffering and we see this here verse 12 to 19 because Paul's less than ideal circumstances were a cause for joy because God's work was advancing the gospel was advancing so look at verse 12.

now I want you to know brothers and sisters that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel he wanted the Philippians to grasp this because in the midst of suffering we don't often see the bigger the wider perspective but Paul recognizes that God is using his circumstances although they're not ideal but God is using them to do his work so his perspective here was much bigger than simply his narrow small prison cell Paul could see beyond himself he could see beyond his immediate situation and see what God was doing through it he knew there was a far greater plan that was being worked out now this is what the theologians call the doctrine of providence which basically describes God's God's wise governing God's wise governing God's wise governing and directing of all things to achieve his purposes and so from a human perspective here just imagine this how frustrating this must have been for Paul because he was the pioneering missionary of the church chosen by Jesus to go and spread the message of Jesus to the world and yet here he is isolated and suffering in prison in a Roman jail we think as a human sense would think that Paul could far better serve God if he wasn't locked up if his circumstances were better or more ideal and yet Paul doesn't see his circumstances as a defeat he recognizes them as an opportunity and so he's not full of despair instead he is filled with joy well why firstly because the gospel of Jesus Christ is advancing inside prison look at verse 13 as a result it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ so Paul suffering in prison possibly facing trial even execution he's in chains meaning that he's chained to Roman guard uh Roman guard but the whole palace guard the whole guard had heard about Jesus the palace guard

would be the emperor's elite troops the praetorian guard basically like the sas of the roman empire the hardest men and paul was probably chained to one of these men at a time all day and all night and so he would have been chained to different guards and rather than talk about his innocence or the weather or the football paul clearly is talking about jesus to them and presumably they spoke together about paul on lunch break do you hear what that man paul is saying he's not complaining about his circumstances he keeps going on and on about this man jesus who died on a cross and whom he claims rose to life again and so the gospel was advancing around the palace guard in fact it even spread to the palace itself to caesar's household we see this in chapter 4 verse 22 and so paul's prison chains are basically his pulpit and so paul was directly used by god for evangelism inside prison but secondly he was indirectly used for evangelism outside prison verse 14 says 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 so paul's imprisonment basically was the prod to other believers to go and speak about jesus christ because paul couldn't do it and so they did it outside of prison they became more fearless more courageous to speak about jesus and so paul was locked up but the other believers made sure the gospel the good news of jesus christ wasn't locked up and so it continued to advance but then thirdly it also advanced despite false motives look at these again in verse 15 to 17 it is true that some preach christ out of envy and rivalry but others out of goodwill the latter do so out of love knowing that i am put here for the defense of the gospel the former preach christ out of selfish ambition not sincerely supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while i am in chains he says some verse 16 preaching christ out of goodwill and love the good guys but others were preaching christ out of envy and rivalry and selfish ambition the bad guys but paul's not talking here about false teachers who were preaching a different gospel these people he says were still preaching christ but they were preaching christ from false motives and were wanting to stir up trouble for paul so that he would suffer even more while he was in prison and it was shocking they were trying to ruin paul's reputation perhaps they saw paul as this massive embarrassment to the christian cause because paul had got himself arrested stupidly and here he was in prison and what use was that to the kingdom of god advancing perhaps they just wanted to promote themselves whilst discrediting paul or maybe they just wanted to form their own tribe of followers whatever the reasons they were out of order and yet it happens it happened then and sadly it still happens today where people can proclaim the true gospel but do so out of false motives i've seen it happen and i've experienced it myself and it comes from those who do preach christ no doubt about it but whose selfish ambition means that they want to damage the reputation of other ministers others who preach the gospel by making them look bad generally by bad mouthing them in an attempt to cause trouble for them or even just they want to destroy their ministry they want to destroy their ministry and it's sickening sickening for paul here and yet here's the thing paul has got the right perspective because he doesn't care about himself and his reputation or about them and their motives all he is concerned about is that christ is preached look at verse 18 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 i'm sure paul was hurt by their disgraceful behavior as we would be and yet despite this paul knows the gospel of jesus christ is what matters what matters most and so he's less concerned about their motives and their deeds and their methods and he is more concerned about jesus being proclaimed and because it was happening then paul was able to rejoice and so when we've got to rejoice and so when we've got this perspective a christ-centered perspective then suffering injustice even personal attack won't stop us rejoicing when we see god's work advancing because it's as we grasp this fuller and wider and wider and bigger perspective that even in our difficult circumstances we won't be robbed of the joy that is ours in christ because god knows what he's doing in all his people and in all of their circumstances in order to accomplish his purposes and i think that's why paul could speak of his deliverance there in verse 19 for i know that through your prayers and god's provision of the spirit of jesus christ what has happened to me turn out for my deliverance what does he mean does he mean deliverance from prison that first sight seems obviously that's what he means but is he talking about eternal deliverance as in his salvation it could be either possibly both but the word translated deliverance here is the new testament term for salvation and so of course getting out of prison for paul would be great it would be for any of us if we were stuck in prison but that doesn't seem to be paul's focus here does it because paul is aware of the far greater perspective than his current circumstances and so i think paul is talking here about his final salvation because the words here turn out for my salvation actually come from a

greek translation of the book of job from job 13 verse 16 where job's talking about himself being vindicated before the judgment of god and so by echoing these words from job the book of suffering paul knows that all of this will work out for his vindication his ultimate deliverance before god and so no matter what the outcome of his present predicament for paul the main thing is that he will be able to stand on that great day and be delivered by jesus christ which means any human judgment from human people on his life matters little compared to his vindication before the judgment of god and this will happen he knows because he is in christ his life is invested in god and so whatever is going on whatever happens paul knows god will ultimately deliver me because i'm in christ and that's some perspective to have on your life and your circumstances and your circumstances and your suffering isn't it and so whatever circumstances we find ourselves in even if they aren't ideal quite a lot of the time they aren't well god knows exactly what he's doing and that's why paul viewed every aspect of his life and his circumstances from the right perspective from god's perspective from a christ-centered perspective knowing that god is in charge of everything and he knows what he's doing with my life and so paul trusted in god's providence and so should we and that's really the application of this first point we've got to trust that god has a purpose in the way that he has ordered our circumstances whatever they may be even if we don't see it at the time or in the moment john flavel a 17th century minister wrote a great book called the mystery of providence and in it he says the providence of god is like hebrew words it can only be read backwards you probably know that hebrew is read from right to left so it's the opposite way from english and so if you pick up a book in the hebrew language the front of the book is the back the back of the book is the front and so you read from the back to the front and flavel uses this illustration to show how god works in our lives in his providence and he does so often in a way that can only be seen in retrospect only when we look back can we see why things did turn out in that way only as we look back on what has already happened then we're able to see how god used all of our circumstances to work out his purpose for our lives for our lives and for our ultimate good and so what may have seemed unusual or absolutely random or strange or weird at the time can now be seen as god working his wise and good plan out for our lives and so it's good to be reassured that god doesn't just work when our circumstances are good or ideal or that our circumstances have got to be perfect before god can use us in any way as we shouldn't think that we've got to wait for better days to come like well i'll be more used to god when my suffering ends or when i have more money or when the pace of life just quiets down a bit or when my job is settled when my circumstances are better when my relationships are settled then i'll better be able to serve god and yet surely paul teaches us here we are never in limbo with god god can work and god does use our circumstances to do work not just around us or through us but in us as well and so we've got to get this right perspective to know that god even works through suffering to accomplish his purposes to advance his kingdom to change our lives what was god's greatest work through suffering it was through the suffering and the death of jesus christ so that's the first point get the right perspective and then secondly have the right priority to live as christ and to die is gain so paul was in prison but notice his priority was not to get out of prison that wasn't the most important thing he had a far greater priority one that was even more important than life or death look at verse 20 and 21 i eagerly expect and hope that i will in no way be ashamed but will have sufficient courage so that now as always christ will be exalted in my body whether by life or by death for to me to live is christ and to die is gain and so as paul awaits the outcome of his current circumstances he's less concerned about his own well-being and more concerned that jesus would be honored he didn't [ 19 : 38 ] want to be ashamed of jesus christ i guess he was aware that he may be tempted to deny jesus if the pressure was on him you can imagine his captors saying something like paul just stop going on and on about this guy jesus keep quiet and you'll get out here no harm done and so paul writes to the philippians coveting their prayers for him because he wants their prayers and he knows that through the help of the holy spirit he'd have the courage not to deny jesus in these tough circumstances because paul wants christ to be exalted whether by his life or by his death he knew that what really matters is not personal safety or comfortable circumstances or long life or anything else because if you have all this stuff without jesus christ then you've basically got nothing anyway and so paul's got the right priority in his life in his life jesus christ is his all and so as he sits in prison contemplating the future he realizes there are two possibilities it will either be life or it will be death but whatever it is jesus is his priority because nothing else really matters at the end of the day than knowing jesus whether in life or in death or in eternity that's how paul can say for to me to live is christ and to die is gain jesus christ is absolutely everything for paul and so if he's going to go on

living he'll be living for jesus christ and if he's going to die then he'll go to be with jesus christ he's not thinking if he gets out of prison alive he's won and if he dies he's lost no whatever the outcome released or executed for paul it's a win-win situation living he wins dying he wins how can you hurt somebody like somebody like the apostle paul you can't so you put him in prison what does he do he converts the guards you make him suffer he says to live as christ you say okay paul we're going to kill you he says to die is gain because jesus christ is all to him he's got nothing to fear even death itself because all death does is take him into the presence of jesus christ which is where he longs to go anyway and it's so challenging isn't it for us challenging because i think we love this life so much we can't bear the thought of losing this life even if we're a christian we don't actually see death as gain we see death as loss oh don't die you don't want to die oh it's awful we see it as loss but paul says for to me to live is christ and to die is gain and so the sentence starts for to me to live is dot dot dot how would you finish that sentence what would you say for me to live is is family friends food fitness finance fun times what would it be because if we struggle to say to live is christ and to die is gain it's probably because we just love this life too much and we can't

bear to see it end because we're not thinking death really is gain we don't want to let go of everything we've got everything we've worked for all the people we love we don't want to see it end because we have invested so much in this life that we think that if we were to lose our life it would be an absolute disaster how can that be well is it because what this life has to offer has become more precious to us than jesus christ but here's the thing if you're a christian what is in store for you when you die it's better than everything you have got in life whether right now or everything you could ever obtain death and christ is better than all of that all of those good times everything you've amassed and yet being without christ on the other side of death is far worse than we could ever imagine dying won't be gain it will be ultimate loss for all eternity but for the christian paul's saying to us death is always gain death cannot end our union with christ it brings us into a deeper and more rich experience of that union i love the words of george herbert the poet he said death used to be an executioner but the gospel has made him a gardener and because paul had the certainty about death i think that's how he could face anything in life because in christ we can face the greatest enemy death and because we can face the greatest enemy death and there is no need to fear it means that in christ we've got the resources to face anything else that comes our way in life paul says verse 22 if i am to go on living in the body this will mean fruitful labor for me yet what shall i choose i do not know i am torn between the two i desire to depart and be with christ which is better by far but it is more necessary for you that i remain in the body his desire depart be with christ but he realizes he doesn't get to make that choice and so for the sake of the philippians and for the sake of the gospel he reckons it's better that he's alive and he's able to continue gospel ministry as the missionary and servant and soldier of jesus christ and that's why he seems to conclude here at the end that god will spare his life for future service convinced of this i know that i will remain and i will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith so that through my being with you again your boasting in christ jesus will abound on account of me and so he's convinced he'll stay alive for the philippians progress and joy in the faith and so paul's words basically indicate he wants to do what's best not for himself but for god and for god's people because he's got the right perspective and he's got the right priority his perspective is far bigger than just his narrow circumstances and his priority is far greater than just his self-preservation paul was willing to face the very worst circumstances if it helped to advance the gospel of jesus christ because that's what he lived his life for and so as we close here is the challenge for us will we continue to rejoice whatever our circumstances even in suffering because we want what's best for the sake of jesus for jesus's people and for those who don't know jesus because god can and does use whatever we go through to do to do his work and it's providence god is not just doing work around us he's also doing deeper work in us for our joy just as he was in paul and so paul had the right perspective on his suffering he had the right priority in his living and his words invite the philippians and us too to emulate this attitude by having the same perspective and the same priority because when jesus christ comes first in our lives now we're able to see everything absolutely everything through the lens of the gospel of jesus christ and so how can you live like this well it's only through our union with the suffering dying risen and exalted lord jesus christ you have to be in christ that's paul's term for being a christian because that's where our identity our strength our hope our calling as god's people comes from because when we know jesus died for my sin on the cross to give me life to the full now and eternal life to come we'll know joy even experience joy in the midst of suffering and

we'll be able to say for to me to live is christ and to die is gain can you say that is christ all to you  
because we'll only be able to cope with any and every situation when he is let's pray