

EVEN SO JOY - part one (Series: Joy for the Journey)

Philippians 1:12-18 - June 21, 2020 - Immanuel - Senior Pastor: Dr. Kelly McClendon

As you probably know, an “oxymoron” is the joining of words that don’t seem to go together or appear to be a contradiction. They’re not usually laugh out loud funny, but they are usually worth a chuckle or two (or maybe a groan or two). Here are some of my favorites:

Rolling Stop

Found Missing

Good Grief

Seriously Funny

Jumbo Shrimp

Pretty Ugly

Genuine Imitation

Exact Estimate

Alone Together

United Methodist

Short Sermon

Well, when you put the idea of hardship and joy together it sounds like an oxymoron.

Right? We tend to think that joy accompanies good times, but not difficult times.

Most of the time, we have a narrow view of joy. That is one reason I want us to study Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Paul introduces us to a joy that is deeper than happiness and more sustainable. I read a report this week that claimed Americans now have the highest level of unhappiness in almost 50 years (only 14% report feeling happy). That’s not good. However, when we struggle to find reasons to “feel” happiness, we can still “choose” joyfulness. Hard times come and go, and some are harder than others, but even so we can choose joy.

This morning we’re going to start looking more closely at some of the specific trials Paul was facing when the Holy Spirit inspired him to write this letter, and how he faced them with joy.

As we discussed last week, Paul wrote this letter while imprisoned in Rome. Everyone who knew about his arrest, including the Philippians, wondered how he was “holding up.”

It is hard to imagine what it was like to be in Paul’s situation. He was isolated from friends and family (wait maybe we can imagine what that’s like). In his case, some friends made the effort to stay in touch, while many others pulled back. It must have been a very lonely time.

He was unable to do what he most loved doing. (Again - we can imagine some of that with our pandemic restrictions!) In his case, for more than two years he was prevented from preaching in the synagogue and teaching in churches. He was unable to debate the learned men of the city. This was Paul’s passion and where he really seemed to “shine.” It would be like a musician who couldn’t sing or couldn’t play their instrument. It was like an artist who could no longer paint. It was a frustrating time, but he adapted and spent more time writing letters.

He had lost any sense of personal freedom. Most scholars believe Paul was bound to a Roman guard by a short chain at all times (probably on his wrist). That meant he had absolutely no privacy - so even his most private acts were witnessed by the guard (use your imagination). Every private word was also heard by the guard. It was humiliating and had to feel smothering. It’s hard not to feel sorry for Paul. He was a magnet for all kinds of hardship.

In 2 Corinthians Paul told some of his story,

I have been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. [2 Cor. 11:23-29]

Can you imagine if Paul tried to get life or health insurance? Talk about preexisting conditions and high risk factors! In light of all that, one might think that it would be tough for Paul to remain positive and joyful, but in spite of all that happened, Paul continued to rejoice.

Don't miss an important point here. Paul is a clear example that things aren't always easy just because one is a follower of Christ. Circumstances are sometimes very hard even for blessed children of God. Difficult times come even to those who live with faithfulness. This is important to hear because sometimes we believe (and sometimes we're taught) that truly godly people will be spared from any difficult times. If that is true, when hard things happen, it must be a sign that something is wrong with our spiritual life or we're being punished. So on top of the hard time, we also get an extra load of guilt and shame like salt in a wound, but it's not true.

Things may be going well for you. You may be healthy, wealthy, and wise with nothing but smooth sailing on the horizon. If so, I rejoice in your good fortune. But please don't conclude that your good fortune means that God loves you more than others. If for no other reason, because when storms come you might make the mistake of concluding that God no longer loves you. If that is the truth of hard times, then Paul and the rest of the apostles were often abandoned by God, because they were often swept up in terrible storms. Again - it's not true.

Sometimes we suffer because of our sinful choices, actions or attitudes. In those cases you could say that God was allowing you to face the consequences of your action, but even then God desires for that suffering to lead you to repentance and back to Him for grace and help.

Much of the time, we suffer though no fault of our own. Paul was in chains, but the chains he wore did not mean that God had turned away from him or that he had done anything wrong. He suffered because people yielded to the influence of their sinful natures to cause him harm. He also suffered because he lived in a world that has been corrupted by the sinful choices of people over eons which have created a cascading chain reaction of brokenness in the world.

Paul, and the other apostles, as well as countless others, are proof that faithful people sometimes are asked to endure hardships. In such times, we need to hang onto the promise of Romans 8 which reminds us that God works in all things the good of those who love Him.

I know this is a subject of debate among Christians, but I don't believe God specifically causes all things to happen. A sovereign God must allow all things - including some truly bad things, but they are only allowed to happen (as opposed to being caused to happen) as the price God is willing to pay to give us real freedom which enables a real relationship with God. Even so, the Bible makes it clear, that God uses all things - even the bad things' people choose to do - to be the raw material out of which He creates new possibilities for good in the world.

Listen to what Paul writes to the Philippians as he faces his difficult circumstances.

Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really 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. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. [Phil. 1:12-14]

Paul could have grumbled. He could have pled his case. He could have been bitter, or discouraged. He could have been angry with God. Instead, Paul declared his faith that God was using his circumstances for good. He pointed to two positive results of his circumstances.

First, the Imperial guard heard the Gospel. The Imperial Guard was a group of elite soldiers, stationed in Rome. They were there primarily to protect the Emperor and were trusted and honored (like our special forces). At times there were between 10,000 and 16,000 of these troops stationed in Rome. Apparently these men also served as guards over special prisoners.

Paul was bound to one of these men with a short length of chain. Every four hours the guard would change. I'm sure some of the guards were harsh, and some were friendly, but each of them was very close! Instead of being bitter about this invasion of his personal "space" Paul saw this as an opportunity. Paul realized that he was not only chained to soldiers . . . they were chained to him! Paul had what you might call a "captive audience."

For four hours at a time Paul could talk to these men about Jesus Christ. Six different shifts each day! Apparently, his witness was very effective. Paul remarked that because of his imprisonment, the gospel of Jesus Christ was known throughout the whole Praetorian Guard. In other words, the guards were talking with others in their ranks about what they heard from Paul. Later on we read how Paul sent "Christian greetings" from those in Caesar's own household - so he had established a link even there. (Phil 4:22) In other words, from Paul's mouth to his guards ears, and from them it spread even to the household of the Emperor where people came to trust in Jesus Christ. Of course, not everyone who heard his witness became a believer . . . but some of them did come to faith, and now, all these centuries later, Rome is a kind of spiritual home or center for millions of Christians all around the world.

There was also a second benefit to his situation. It inspired others to speak up about Christ more courageously and fearlessly. God used Paul's situation to "light a fire" under some of the other believers. Maybe people quit making excuses, when they saw what he overcame.

Maybe people were encouraged to make the most of their situations like Paul. Maybe they wanted to do the parts of Paul's work that he was unable to do himself - so they went to new places to share the gospel. Whatever the reason, we know Christ was being proclaimed more boldly because of Paul's situation. Hardship often refines like fire so that faith shines brighter.

I want to lift up some other principles we learn from Paul about finding joy in hardship.

First, we learn that though we cannot control our circumstances, we can control our response to them. We don't have to despair or withdraw when tough times come. Those are choices we can make, or not. Paul reminds us that whether a difficult circumstance defeats us or deepens us depends on how we choose to respond to it. Dr. Paul Tournier wrote,

Good and evil, in the moral sense, do not reside in things, but always in persons. Things and events, whether fortunate or unfortunate, are simply what they are, morally neutral. What matters is the way we react to them. Only rarely are we the masters of events, but (along with those who help us) we are responsible for our reactions. . . [our] growth is determined by our personal response to [the good and bad events in our lives]. (Yancey, Searching for the Invisible)

In hard times, it's natural to feel sorry for ourselves and to wonder, "Why me?" But . . .

- We can choose to be joyful.
- We can choose to trust the Sovereign hand of God even when we don't see clearly.
- We can choose to believe that God is still working for good.
- We can choose to believe God is planting seeds of grace which will later come to harvest

It won't remove all the pain . . . but it will enable us to live more joyfully in spite of it.

Second, we need to look for opportunities rather than wallow in our liabilities. Paul saw an opportunity to share with people he could not reach any other way. He used his chains as a teaching tool that would strengthen others. He chose to dig deeper rather than to be swept away. It seems trite, but we are called to make the most of bad situations, by creatively seeing them as opportunities to grow and to do good.

When times are hard, we may whine or moan for a while (give yourself some moments), but remember this - the sooner we stop feeling sorry for ourselves, and start looking around for opportunities to serve God the sooner we will see our joy returning and increasing.

There is a second trial Paul had to endure (which you have certainly faced or that you will surely face at some point.) **That is the trial of dealing with difficult people.** Paul was being attacked by other Christians. In the military we would say he was being threatened by "*friendly fire.*" There's another oxymoron for you because there is nothing friendly about that kind of fire. Paul said they were "preaching Christ" but they were doing it with a contentious spirit and impure motives and he implies they also intended to diminish him. Listen to how Paul describes the situation,

It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in 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. 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. (1:15-18)

Paul says that these people were preaching out of “selfish ambition, not sincerely, seeking to stir up trouble for him.” They were not motivated by a desire to reach others for Christ . . . their motive was to one up the competition! In some way, they saw Paul’s imprisonment as a chance for them to outshine Paul. To be overly generous, they may have sincerely thought they had a better interpretation of Christ to share than what they saw Paul sharing - but it is more likely they were being self-serving more than Christ serving and sought some personal gain.

How did Paul respond to these people in Philippi who were being so difficult?

He says simply, *“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.”*

What are we to make of this? When faced with difficult people should we always back off? Not always. That’s not what Paul did most of the time. He often confronted people and held them to strict accountability. Paul told Titus that he should warn a divisive person once, and then have nothing to do with them. Paul pleaded with two women in the church at Philippi to agree with each other because it was hurting the church. Paul told the church in Corinth that cliques were stupid and destructive. Paul confronted false teachers forcefully and often not nicely (as we will see in chapter 3). In Galatians he told the “circumcise party” to just go on and emasculate themselves. He even stood up to Peter and challenged his inconsistency. To be honest, I would have expected Paul to come after these difficult people with great energy.

What is different here? Here’s what I notice: Paul was fierce when the gospel was perverted, or when the unity of the church was threatened . . . but he was passive when the attacks were personal. Paul didn’t think of himself. His priority was helping people learn of Christ.

You probably see, as I do, that his approach is the opposite of how we often handle things. We’re immediately stirred to anger when personally attacked, but we’re less willing to respond when the gospel is distorted, and we want to “stay out of it” when the unity of the church is at stake. Sometimes when we fiercely defend the faith, it is really a front for avenging ourselves.

Paul understood that HE was not the issue. Did he want to be liked? I’m sure he did. Did it hurt when these men sought to use his problems for their advantage . . . you bet. But Paul overlooked the personal affront and celebrated the fact that Christ was still being proclaimed.

I think Paul knew that God would hold these men accountable for their methods and motives, so he turned all that over to God. In other words - that was between them and God.

I think Paul recognized they were planting the gospel in some wrong ways, but the seed they scattered was good and God could still use it. Besides, only God could see their full motivations, and that wasn't Paul's job. God told us to leave judgment to Him. God tells us to love even our enemies, and when we do what God says we will have more joy.

Joy comes when we approach difficult people this way for several reasons.

- Sometimes the best way to diffuse a situation with a difficult person is to simply walk away. Maybe that was what Paul meant when he told Titus to warn a divisive person once and then separate yourself from that person. The point is this - if a person is not teachable (willing to listen and learn) then you're wasting your time and theirs to go over an issue again and again which only escalates the conflict and feeds their stubbornness. I think it would be interesting to make a list of all the times Jesus essentially walked away from people who were obviously unwilling or unable at that moment to accept what He was offering. He continued to love them, but He knew that until they were open and seeking truth His words wouldn't penetrate.
- We need to be humble when people are difficult or unkind toward us. The worst thing anyone says about us probably has some grain of truth in it, and it doesn't even cover all of our sin and failures. I had a person so angry with me one time they were almost spitting in my face. I said, *"You're partly right. I am often a terrible person, and that is why I am so grateful that God loves me and forgives me. I hope you can forgive me too."* I didn't think I deserved the anger they directed toward me, but I also don't deserve any of the grace that God gives me, and so I focused on that. The person deflated like air being let out of a balloon and couldn't even form any words, until he finally took a breath, and calmed down. We ended up hugging when moments before I thought we might have to fight. (I haven't always reacted like that)
- We need to remember that our sense of self, or our sense of self-worth is not anchored to the opinion of the crowd or any other person . . . but the opinion of the Lord. When we remember who we are in Christ, it makes what other people think of us less important.
- When we seek to love rather than strike back sometimes enemies can become our friends.

Let me give you three final principles we learn here about dealing with difficult people.

First, we must always look at the big picture. Like Paul, our hope is in the Kingdom of God . . . not a kingdom to ourselves. How people respond to us, or what they say about us is less important than how they respond to Christ and what they say about the Lord. We should be willing for God to use us in any way He deems appropriate if it will get the message out. Even if that is the expense of our own reputation. Our joy is anchored in His glory - not our own.

Second, we must remember that sometimes we have been the difficult people. I don't think Paul ever forgot that at one time he was once zealous for all the wrong reasons. At one time he persecuted Christians and actively sought to put them to death.

He was sure he was righteous, until Christ finally showed him he was wrong. Sometimes well meaning people do hurtful things and don't realize what they are doing is wrong. Sometimes angry people do hurtful things out emotional rage or poor judgement. We must choose grace, and remember that we have done the same things ourselves. We must share grace with others as we would hope they might share it with us when we are being difficult.

Finally, we must remember that even though other people will disappoint us, or desire to hurt us, God will not. If we anchor our joy to the behavior of others, we will ride a roller coaster all our life. People are inconsistent. They are often oblivious to our needs or disinterested in helping to meet them. Only God is willing and able to always want what is best for us, and to always work toward that goal - our good. God may come against sinful things we say and do, but only because God is for us - and wants us to do better. Joy comes from trusting in God above all others because only God is always for us and never against us.

Next week we'll finish up part two of this message, as we continue talking about how to be joyful, even in the midst of hardship, including one of the most challenging realities of life - which is death. We'll consider how to face that challenge with courage, confidence and joy.