

Seeing over your circumstances

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Date: 01 December 2024

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[0 : 00] Hello again, everybody. If you've been with us, then you will know that we've been working through Philippians. We've been thinking about joy in Jesus. John Ross helped us to start that process last week.

We're going to carry it on, picking up where he left off, from Philippians 1, chapter 12. But before we do that, let's pray. Lord God, we come to you with our hands outstretched.

We come to you hungry. Lord, we know that our souls need the food that you provide. Our hearts need the love that only you can give.

Lord, would you help us, as we open your word, to feel your presence, to grow in you, to have the joy that you have always planned for us to have.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. This morning we're thinking about seeing over our circumstances.

[1 : 11] Seeing over our circumstances. I don't know whether you've been reading your papers, or whether you saw this come up. So it turns out that Elton is busy with a new album.

And the problem is, that although he's put all this work into this album, he can't finish it. Do you know why? The answer's staring you in the face. He can't see.

I don't know whether the thought of another album has you dancing to the crocodile rock, or whether you're reaching for the sick bucket. You can guess which count I'll probably be in.

Either way, I think it's probably pretty tough on Elton. Not so much the bit where he's a multimillionaire, and has a wildly successful career, and lives in LA. That bit's not so hard, I expect. The bit that's hard, is if you've devoted your life to music, and your fans are expecting one more uplifting album, and you're probably coming towards the end of your life, and it's taken away from you, and you can't complete it, because you can't see.

And while that's happening, you have to watch small-time singers like Taylor Swift, you know, take up your airtime, right?

[2 : 33] That's the hard bit. So here's the question. How can we see past something that we can't see past? How can we see past our circumstances and keep our joy, even when we can't do this?

That's what we're talking about here. Seeing over our sorrow to joy in Jesus. So we're going to split it into the traditional three parts. Starting at verse 12.

Here we go. Paul can see past his current difficulties. Look at verse 12 with me. Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.

And as a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace garden to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. So Paul is thinking about two things here. Well, more than two, but at least two. He's thinking about the things that have happened to him, verse 12, and he's thinking about what's happening to him now.

His present, isn't he? If you want to know more about what's happened to Paul, read Acts from about chapter 13. There's an awful lot that happens to him. And what's happening now, he talks about, doesn't he?

[3 : 46] He's in chains. So he's talking basically about his past, which boils down to an awful lot of persecution and difficulty. And he's talking about his present, which is prison. He's in prison.

He cannot physically see past his cell walls where he is. He cannot do what God has built him to do. He can't even get alone time to process all of this, because he's chained to a guard 24 hours a day. New mums, you know what I'm talking about, right? Feeling slightly miserable, perhaps. When you think about our past, think about Paul's past, it sometimes hangs around us, doesn't it?

Like a weight around our neck. Things that we did that we regret. Things that people did to us that we can't forget. Pain, problems, just aren't getting any better.

It can feel like Paul's prison. It can stop us from doing the things that we want, the things that have always energized and excited us. It's just taken away. And like Paul's chains, it feels like a trap that we can't get out of.

[5 : 02] It gets worse for Paul. Verse 15. 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'm 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.

It gets worse. His life's work hasn't just been taken away from him, it's actually been hijacked by people he thought were his friends from inside the church.

So just think for a minute, what is the thing that you've given most of yourself to so far in your life? What is your life's work?

The thing that you've invested the most heavily in so far. Now what would it feel like to just have that taken away? Can you imagine if the people who took it were friends?

[6 : 06] And then those friends start asking, well, was he really qualified? Was she really qualified to do that at all in the first place? Because that's what his rivals were saying. That's Paul. Now Paul was unmarried and childless, but you get from the language in the New Testament that the people in the church were like his children.

He thinks of himself as a father and a mother to these children. Can you just imagine for a moment that somebody takes away your child and then they start poisoning them against you?

That is a little bit what this is like. Do you think you could see past that? All of that? The pain, the prison, the loss of purpose.

Paul can. Verse 18. But what does it matter? He says. Paul says, it's fine.

And this isn't stiff upper lip. This isn't just pretend it isn't like that. That's not what's going on with Paul. Paul knows what it feels like and he's not diminishing the difficulty of that.

[7 : 25] but he can see over it. Do you remember what he writes in Romans 8, 28? God works for good in all things for those who love him.

He's living that. He's living that right here. How can he do that? How can he see over his current difficulties and all of that past as well?

How can he do that? Let's keep reading. The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached and because of this I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.

So Paul knows that if people are praying for him and the Spirit of Jesus Christ is with him, helping him, then he will be okay.

[8 : 26] He will be safe. Yes, but how? How does that work? Well, if you're going to see over something, then there's two ways you can do that, I think.

One is that you try and make yourself taller than whatever it is that you're looking over. But that's hard for us, isn't it? The whole point is that we can't do that. That's why we can't see over it because we're human beings.

We are what we are. Or, you've got to look at something bigger than the thing that you're trying to look over, right? And that's what's happening.

See, Paul can see Jesus over everything that's happened, everything that's happening, where he is now. Paul can see Jesus. The Jesus who died to save him.

The Jesus who could walk through walls. Prison isn't a barrier for Jesus. The Jesus who is with him by his Holy Spirit. The Jesus who listens to the prayers of Paul's brothers and sisters.

[9 : 28] That's what Paul looks at. Paul looks over his circumstances to Jesus. And he knows that Jesus will set him free. That's what he means here, isn't it? This will turn out for my deliverance.

Jesus will set me free one way or another. And he knows that nothing can change the fact that he is saved, that he is held by Jesus. So he looks over what he's experiencing to Jesus and the good news about Jesus.

So Paul can see over his current difficulties. Secondly, even more amazingly, Paul can see over his own death. Let's keep reading. Verse 20.

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.

And then we come to one of the most shocking statements that the Bible has. One of the most striking statements of personal faith ever written. Verse 21.

[10:31] Now how can someone say this?

To me to live is Christ and to die is gain. That's a ridiculous thing to say out loud, isn't it? I once had that on a t-shirt that I wore at university when I was younger and braver.

And I was just sitting in the university canteen and someone came over to me and they said, is that a joke on your t-shirt? It was a great opportunity to tell them about the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But that's it, isn't it? When people read it and they're like, is that a joke? What does Paul mean?

What Paul means is that he can see over his death.

Life is knowing Jesus and seeing him at work for Paul. Death is knowing Jesus perfectly and seeing him face to face. So for Paul, that's win-win.

[11:39] Doesn't matter how many times he flips the coin, it's always going to be heads. How does that work? Well, if you're going to see over death, you know where I'm going with this.

You've got to be looking at something bigger than death, haven't you? And that's Jesus. Because Jesus beat death. Because Jesus rose again.

Because Jesus has offered to share with us that resurrection life. That's how. So if you put your faith in Jesus, you're with Paul. You're win-win. You just can't lose.

If you live, you have joy in Jesus. If you die, you will see Jesus. And so you can see over your death too. Paul spends some time working that through in verses 22 and 23.

Let's read. 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.

[12:47] I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far. Do you know what Paul's doing? He's wondering whether it might be better to die now.

Paul's in pain here. He's not just in prison, but he's been in physical and emotional and spiritual pain of some kind for years by this point.

Is this chiming? It's pretty relevant, isn't it? In the context of the law that just took its first steps towards being passed in parliament.

Death is nothing to fear as far as Paul is concerned. But you know what? What Paul sees beyond death gives him a cast-iron, nailed-on reason to live.

What is it? Why not die? Why not die? Verse 21, because to live is Christ. To live is Christ.

[13:56] Verse 22, it's not pointless existence, it's fruitful labor, walking alongside Jesus, working together with him. Because, verse 24, it's looking to the needs of others.

that's why he doesn't want to die. Because, verse 25, he wants to continue with them for their progress and joy in the faith. In other words, because living, having Christ, is sharing joy with other people.

Why not die? Because, verse 26, through my being with you, again, your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

In other words, he wants to stay because that will enable other people to see over their difficulties and over their deaths and share in the joy that Jesus brings to all of us. Paul wants to die and he chooses to live and wait for God's timing.

Or as my son put it this morning, he chooses to let God choose. to live. So, at some future time, when the slow process of old age has dimmed your sight and you cannot see the way forward, and when the prison walls close in and you cannot get a moment alone, and when the mountain of pain looks so large that you just cannot see over it, don't give up hope.

[15:36] Don't choose death. Choose Jesus. Choose Christ. Because to live is Christ.

I wanted to just take a moment for us to reflect on that amazing statement that Paul makes, to live is Christ, to die is gain. I just want to invite you to fill in the blanks for yourself.

Fill this in for yourself. What is it for you to live? And then secondly, what is it for you to die?

Let's take a moment. So Paul can see over his circumstances, and he can see over his own death. Why? Well, I hope you've begun to see the answer already. It's because Paul's joy is in Jesus and in the growth of the good news.

[17:08] Now, we tend to take joy, I think, from how well things are going for us. And it's not surprising, because we're taught that joy is found by following our feelings. So if we feel like things aren't going well, we don't feel happy.

Because we think joy is the same thing as happiness. Happiness is a feeling that comes and goes, isn't it? It's kind of linked to, you know, things going the way I want them to go, getting enough time for myself, earning enough money to have a rest or not worry.

In other words, for a lot of us, joy is linked to our circumstances. All those things aren't bad, are they? In fact, having good circumstances is a blessing from God that we should be grateful for and enjoy.

But those things are in no way big enough to hold our joy. And part of the problem is we've individualized joy. Joy is what makes me happy.

The trouble is that won't do. Because it leaves us forever searching for the next thing that makes us happy. Or for a repeat of the thing that made us happy last week.

[18:17] Except we can't ever quite get that again. And God tells us in his word that joy is not individual but shared. That's the whole point of Philippians 1.

Paul's in prison and he rejoices in the partnership in the gospel of the Philippians with him. And he's convinced that he wants to stay alive so that that joy that God will give, he can share in.

It's not individual. It's shared. And it's not external. It's not out there somewhere and I have to go and find it. It's personal. What do I mean?

I mean it's found in the shape of a person. A person who has had joy, infinite joy, from before the beginning of time. And who shares that joy with us when we share in his life.

That's eternal joy. And that's how Paul has a joy that doesn't depend on his life or his work or his comfort. It doesn't depend on him feeling happy. Ridiculously, it doesn't even depend on him being alive.

[19:18] Because joy depends on Jesus. And if we can see over everything else to Jesus, to that joy, then it frees us.

We don't have to worry so much about fixing our circumstances. We can give ourselves to something else. Something bigger and better. What is it? Do you notice how many times in this passage Paul talks about the good news going out, being shared, being proclaimed?

Here it is in verse 12, verse 14, verse 15, verse 18, verse 20. I could go on. Paul loves the good news growing.

What does he get excited about? The gospel advancing, verse 12. More people seeing over their problems to Jesus as they believe and belong and grow.

What is his leadership about? Verse 25. You're continuing in progress and joy in the faith. In other words, the gospel advancing in people's hearts. People having more joy in Jesus as they believe and belong and grow more.

[20:30] This is where Paul goes with the joy that he has from seeing Jesus. He thinks, what could be better than seeing that joy shared? What could be better? He just sees a good thing growing and it makes him happy.

It's the same as feeling sick as a dog and still being happy that Tottenham beat Man City 4-0. Right, Rich? Exactly. Because you love George Ezra and his single just got to number one.

It doesn't matter that you'll never get VIP tickets and probably never meet him. It doesn't matter. It's like that with the gospel here and Paul. The good news is growing.

It doesn't matter that Paul's in prison. Except, of course, that the glory and the good news of Jesus bring a joy that never fades. And Tottenham will probably never beat Man City 4-0 again.

Sorry, Rich. And do you know what? That's infectious. Did you notice right at the beginning what happens? Because Paul is joyful in prison, other people are now suddenly more happy to share the good news too.

[21:37] It's like a wave that rolls out. And Paul isn't even that bothered about the motives. Isn't that amazing? Probably because he knows that all our motives are mixed, including his own.

He just says, if the good news about Jesus, the joy that that brings is being shared, well then that's all right by me. And then amazing things happen.

Like your prison guards coming to know Jesus for themselves. So when you feel weak and imprisoned by your circumstances, maybe even looking towards the end of your life as Paul was, Jesus can work in your circumstances to spread joy and hope around you.

Isn't that amazing? Isn't that amazing? We can't see the future, can we? But we can see Jesus. How can we see him?

How can we have joy come what may? Let's finish off. I just want to share with you this quote that was written by a favourite lady of mine.

[22 : 53] Faith is like a radar that sees through the fog to the reality of things at a distance that the human eye cannot see. In other words, we see Jesus by faith.

So ask God for that faith day by day. Ask him for the grace to live by that faith. That's how we see over our circumstances to Jesus. That's what we need every day.

That's why we're doing a big carol service in Gostry Meadow, because we want to share that joy.

We want other people to have that faith. Do you hear that good news? Can you see Jesus towering over your circumstances, over your future, sharing his joy with you?

Let's put our trust in him. Amen. Lord God, we thank you. Thank you that you are bigger than anything else. We thank you that your joy is free.

Help us to have joy in sharing your good news and seeing your good news shared. No matter what's going on in our lives, we pray. Amen. I'll see you next time.