

JOY In Suffering

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[0 : 00] Do you ever feel disappointed by the amount of joy that is in your life, specifically in your Christian life? Or maybe you're not a Christian.

Maybe you're still thinking about whether or not that's something for you. And I wonder if you look at Christians and think they don't seem that joyful. They kind of just seem like everyone else, somber, serious, everyone else minus the fun stuff.

If you're a Christian, do you hear Jesus' words in the Bible, places like John 10 where he says, I've come that you might have life and have it to the full? Do you hear that and think, yep, that's me. My life is full. Or do you hear it and think it sounds really nice, but it's not really how my life feels? Why the disconnect?

Why being told life can be full and joyful and satisfying and amazing and then a different experience in our day-to-day or week-to-week? I mean, have we misunderstood God?

[1 : 09] I mean, are we reading him wrong? Do we have a wrong idea of what he means by joy? When he said life to the full, did he actually mean it'll be horrible, but hey, it won't last forever?

Instead of kind of joy the way we normally think about it, was he talking about some kind of steely resolve, you know, some kind of grit your teeth and persevere version of joy?

Maybe some kind of abstract version of joy that's a bit more intangible and harder to pin down, so it's harder to say if you do or don't have it.

But we know what joy is. You know what joy is. Even if you want to distinguish it out from being something more substantial than, you know, just plain, simple happiness, you know what joy is. It's that feeling you get when what you desire becomes yours, when the thing that you want becomes yours.

[2 : 07] It's that feeling you have when you get down on one knee and ask her to marry you and she says yes. It's that feeling you have when you desperately need a job and a letter of offer arrives.

It's that feeling you have when you share the gospel with somebody who's been resisting it and even opposed to it and they say yes. It's when your desires get fulfilled.

That's joy. You know what it feels like. It's that deep, overflowing bubblyness. The dictionary describes it as a feeling of deep pleasure or happiness.

It's all those good feelings just kind of turned up a bit with that higher degree of intensity and substance. I mean, joy is great. We know what joy is. Joy is desirable.

But is it a word that you would use to describe your life as a Christian? Is it the main word you would use to describe your life as a Christian?

[3 : 06] Now, we can still get out of this one because you might say, hey, I know that some people are like those overtly joyful people, but that's just not me. And I can testify on this one because I'm what I like to refer to as emotional.

I struggle to express emotions whether they're up or down. I only have one tone of voice, whether I'm happy or sad or anywhere in between. And you might be sitting there going, yeah, that's me too. I don't really express myself.

So I'm joyful, but I'm just, I'm doing my back flips on the inside. You know, I'm cheering and clapping and everything, but it's internal. You just can't see it. I just express it differently. I don't like to be annoyingly happy like some people are.

You know, you don't want to be that person who's standing at the bus stop in the rain when the bus comes, hits the puddle, sprays everyone. People are swearing, cursing, sending abusive emails to Sydney buses.

But there's just that one person smiling and, you know, just, you know, it's nice to be refreshed with water. And you're just thinking you're a fraud or an idiot and I want to punch you in the face. And you don't want to be that annoying people.

[4 : 04] And just before we go on, if you are one of those people who has that punch reflex at that moment, sit on your hand because for the rest of tonight, Paul's probably going to annoy you. Paul's going to be one of those annoyingly joyful people in a ridiculous situation.

This letter, Philippians, in the New Testament is a letter between Paul and the Philippians and it's written in response to a visit. So Paul's in prison and the Philippians send a guy named Epaphroditus to visit him to see how he's doing because they've heard he's in prison.

They've heard he's doing it tough and they want to know what's going on for him. And so from this verse, verse 12 through to the end of chapter 3, is kind of the bit where Paul starts giving them details. Well, sort of.

Have a 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. Now, before we get too far into this, we're going to slow down in this verse.

Paul doesn't really give any detail about his situation. Even as we read the rest of this section, even as we get through the whole book, we know he's in chains, we know he's shackled. But what we know from other parts of the Bible is that Paul is most likely writing this while he's a prisoner under Roman guard.

[5 : 17] Literally shackled. Literally chains on his hands and feet. Constantly with a soldier guarding him with him. Never alone. Not comfortable. He's not in a minimum security day spa.

However, the Roman Empire prided itself on its ability to be brutal. Paul's not in a pleasant place when he writes this letter. He doesn't know whether this imprisonment will end in him being executed or him being released.

He doesn't know how long he's going to be stuck as a prisoner. And he's there because he did what God told him to in the first place.

He preached Jesus. Now, if this was me, I would have been sending you status updates every 10 minutes about just how tough it all was. I would have been letting you know every detail about every sore and scar and wound and beating and terrible food and all that I could.

Because I would want you to comprehend just how tough it was for me. I'd want you to appreciate what I was going through, to have empathy for it. And no one would think any less of me for that self-indulgence.

[6 : 27] You would think it's reasonable if I'm in that situation to claim it, to put my hand up and say, this is tough. But all Paul gives, and remember, this is a letter to some people who are his close friends.

His dear, precious brothers and sisters, who he loves. And all he gives them, by the way of detail, he says, dear brothers and sisters, I really want you to know, what he's about to say is important, that all that has happened to me, that's it.

That's the detail. All. I mean, the Philippians sent Epaphroditus traveling across the world because they wanted to know what was going on for Paul.

They wanted to know how he was. They sent him with provisions. They sent him with well wishes, with money. In fact, Epaphroditus nearly died on this journey to go and see how Paul is going. And all the Philippians get back is, hey, I want you to know that all that has happened to me, it's like all that has happened from Paul's perspective is just incidental.

It's not important. I'm not going to go into these details. I've got something important to say, but apparently his own personal situation and suffering don't rather mention.

[7 : 52] They're not worth bringing up except as kind of background to what he actually wants to talk about. Now, it's not to say that his situation is not real and painful and difficult.

It's not to say he wasn't hurting or sad. It's not to say that it's bad to be any of those things. But for him, it's just not the most important thing.

If he's just got one letter to these people that he loves, he wants to tell them something that matters most to him. And so, verse 12. As a result, it's become clear throughout the whole palace garden to everyone else that I'm in chains for Christ.

See, all that stuff which Paul can't even be bothered writing about, his suffering, his isolation, his potential impending death and execution, all that has served to advance the gospel.

The gospel is what he wants to talk about. Jesus is what matters to him. His deepest concern, even in his horrible circumstance, is that people keep hearing about Jesus.

[9 : 04] That the message of Jesus who died on the cross and rose again continues to be proclaimed. What he cares about is that other people get a chance to know what he knows. That God is a loving God.

That God is a forgiving God. Paul's life is consumed with this gospel agenda. With a Jesus agenda. Self-preservation, comfort, doesn't matter.

Not important. Reputation, doesn't matter. Have a look at verse 14. 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.

It's true, 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'm in change. He's excited because while his ministry is limited, he's only got one person at a time that he can talk to. And even them he's been talking to about Jesus. He's excited that while he can't be out on the street corners preaching, while he can't be in the synagogue talking to people about how amazing Jesus is, other people are doing it.

[10 : 20] Other people are taking on the job. His reputation as the gun speaker, as the amazing evangelist, as the celebrity pastor, is probably shrinking because these new people are stepping up and taking on all the roles that he used to have.

And what's his response? Great. It's not about me. Even when people are preaching with mixed motives. Did you catch that? Some people are preaching Jesus, hoping that somehow it's going to cause trouble for Paul.

And how does he respond? 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. What does it matter? He's in prison. These guys are preaching Jesus with some weird mixed motive, hoping it's going to make his life more difficult.

And he's like, this is amazing. Because people are hearing about Jesus. His life is so consumed with a desire to see the gospel go forward that he just wants people to meet Jesus.

[11 : 33] He doesn't care if he's the one who gets to tell them. He doesn't care if him being in prison is the means by which that happens. Because the deepest desire of his heart, the thing that matters most to him, is that Jesus is preached.

And because that is happening, even in shackles, he rejoices. He's still joyful even as he suffers.

And he goes on, verse 18, second half. It says, He wants more than anything else for his life to adequately point to Jesus as his saviour, as his treasure, as his joy.

And his only fear is that he would fail at that. He's not scared of prison. He's not scared of physical pain, of emotional pain, of struggle in life.

His fear is that he would fail to adequately point to the one that is his source of joy. Jesus. And yet even in that fear, he eagerly expects and hopes that he'll be strengthened by the Spirit, that he'll be able to stand firm.

[13 : 15] Whether that's in his death or in his release and further ministry. He's confident God will sustain him and satisfy him, regardless of his situation.

So that Jesus is exalted. And so he keeps rejoicing. In his arrest, in his struggle, in his limitation.

I mean, his life is so full of joy, it seems illogical. I mean, he's the quintessential, annoying, joyful person. In your moment of deepest anguish, he would be smiling, ready for a hug or a high five.

I sometimes wonder if the Philippians who knew him well would have received this letter, opened it up and been reading it and started to ask the question whether or not Paul had lost his grip on reality.

Or whether they were wondering if, you know, maybe he's lost a few marbles and, you know, he doesn't know what's going on. And so he's sitting in prison singing out of blissful ignorance. He doesn't actually understand the intensity of what's going on.

[14 : 26] He doesn't understand that he's potentially about to die. He doesn't understand how serious this is. But that's not his issue. Because there's plenty of places in the New Testament where we get a glimpse into the suffering that Paul experienced and the personal anguish that he went through.

He knows what's going on. Even here in verse 20, he knows that he requires a degree of courage if he's going to stand firm. He asks the Philippians to pray for him so that he can remain joyful in Jesus, so that he can continue to point to Jesus and celebrate the gospel being proclaimed, even when he doesn't get to be a part of it, even when he's stuck in chains himself.

See, his joy in this passage is not a denial of his situation. It's a perspective that's so transformed by the gospel that his circumstances are no longer the main thing.

They're no longer the starting point for him when he measures whether or not his life is satisfying or fulfilling or what he hoped it would be. Having met Jesus in the gospel, having discovered a God who loves him unconditionally, a God who guarantees his eternal future, that is now all that matters. Gospel joy is not a denial of the challenges that you face in your life. Gospel joy is not about pretending that things don't hurt when they do. We don't get the kind of joy that Paul has here by pretending that our relationships aren't broken, by ignoring the fact that we don't have the money we need to pay the bills, or just being blissfully ignorant about whatever struggles are in your life.

[16:25] Gospel joy is found in having our priorities so transformed that our joy is no longer tied to our circumstances, it's tied to Jesus.

In our pain, in our sadness, in our struggle in day-to-day life, we can have something more important. The one who died for us and rose again.

The unconditional love of a heavenly father. Paul summarises what it looks like to have your perspective shaped in verse 21. This is his life credo.

He says, For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. It's a great memory verse. I'm sure you've heard it before.

We love it. Amen, we think. For me, to live is Christ. No, it's not.

[17:30] It's just not. I wish it was. But we're just not even close. Even just as a hypothetical, I know that this would not be my response if I was in Paul's situation.

I would be whinging, complaining, yelling at God. I know in my life now how controlled I am by my day-to-day circumstances.

I know that my joy levels fluctuate based on what kind of food I got to eat today, how bad the traffic was on the way to work, how stressful things are, how many things I have going on.

But not for Paul. For him, to live is Christ.

It's all about Jesus. Everything, to die even, is a gain because he would get Jesus. His whole life is consumed with a heart's desire to see Jesus exalted.

[18:38] And so joy and satisfaction and the measure of fulfilment in his life are no longer connected to transient comfort or control or situation or circumstance. Now it's just about Jesus.

Now his joy is attached to a desire that is guaranteed. His deepest desire is that Christ would be exalted.

And God's will in his creation is that Christ would be exalted. What God is doing is revealing Jesus so that one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord and Paul's joy is now wrapped up in that unstoppable direction.

His joy is now inevitable. Because God himself has guaranteed to do what Paul desires most. I mean, how do you even stop joy for someone like this?

How do you make him, you know, less annoyingly joyful? You can imprison them, beat them, they'll just rejoice because nothing's changed.

[20:01] They're still loved by God. They still have Jesus with them in their circumstance. They still know that he's being proclaimed even if they're not the ones who get to do it because God's going to make it happen.

You can kill them but then they see that as a win because then they get to go to heaven and they get Jesus without any distractions, without any of the bad circumstances.

They get all the good stuff and nothing bad so they rejoice even more. His source of joy is immovable. It can't be taken away from him. The killer of joy is disappointment.

It's when what you desire most doesn't happen. You don't get the thing that you care about. And so for the Christian, the only possible joy killer would be if there was some enemy that was powerful enough to stop Jesus being exalted.

Some enemy that was powerful enough to stop people from proclaiming Jesus, stop people from knowing and treasuring him. And suffering can't do it.

[21 : 17] Hardship can't do it. In fact, the church often grows quickest and most dramatically when the church suffers. The ancient historian Tertullian wrote that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

What he was referring to was that basically all of the key extreme growth movements in Christian history were preceded by extreme persecution, by the murdering of Christians, the imprisoning of Christians.

Because what happens then is these annoyingly joyful people continue to be annoyingly joyful, even though everything about their lives says they shouldn't be. And everybody else looks at that and says there's something there.

And that something is Jesus. When we suffer, but continue to rejoice because Jesus is all satisfying, Jesus is exalted and others come in to know and taste and experience the same joy that we have as Christians.

Suffering is not the enemy. In fact, the greatest enemy to your joy as a Christian is comfort.

[22 : 39] The thing that's most likely to distract you from an all-consuming gospel passion is comfort. Self-sufficiency, selfish ambition.

The greatest enemy of your joy is not your circumstance right now, but it's a diluted or a lukewarm affection for Jesus. It's the heart that says, yeah, I love Jesus with everything, but it's also really important to me in my life to look after my kids' future.

It's the heart that says, Jesus is number one and my life is all about him, but I've just got to get through these exams first. It's the heart that says, God, I want to be poured out for your service so long as it's not too painful.

When our hearts wander away from loving Jesus as the centerpiece of all that we are, then all that's left for us for meaning, for purpose, for joy, is the flippant and temporary circumstances that we have to face day to day.

Paul doesn't write this lightly. He's not some guy who had a sheltered life in a simple world. He knows what suffering is. He knows what it is to experience anguish and anxiety, grief, but still, he is annoyingly joyful.

[24 : 20] in all of his circumstances, his heart remains consumed with a love for Jesus, with a satisfaction in Jesus. His life stays consumed by a gospel ambition, a desire for Jesus to be the main thing.

And the result of that is joy. joy. That's how he sits in prison and sings. That's how he faces death and he says, it's a tough choice for me because death is a big win.

But you know what? I'm going to put up with this suffering so that you get more joy, so that you learn more of what it is to love and treasure Jesus. Jesus is enough for us to rejoice even as we weep, even as we suffer.

The issue for us isn't that we've tried Jesus and there's just other things that are more appealing. The issue isn't that we've tried Jesus and he's just not as satisfying as we expected.

The issue is that most of us have never really given Jesus everything. The idea of it sounds great, to live as Christ.

[25 : 39] But most of us have never really handed over ambition, handed over our very selves and said, God, do what you want. Stick me in prison, I'll sing.

If you afflict me with physical illness, I'll rejoice. When I was younger, I remember learning to skate. I've told you before, I'm one of three brothers, I've got sisters as well, but three brothers and I was the least coordinated by a country mile. I had a little brother who was five years younger than me and so it shouldn't have been a competition, but five minutes after we tried anything, he was better at it than I was.

And one of the things I learned as a young person was skating. And it resulted in a whole bunch of injuries that I'm still paying for now. But one of the things that you have to learn when you're learning to skate is what it is to drop in on a ramp.

What that means is you stand on the top of a ramp, you put your skateboard on the edge of it, kind of dangling off the side, you put your back foot on and you put your front foot on and at this point there are two options.

[26 : 47] Go all in or hesitate and train wreck. If you hesitate even a little bit, I can guarantee all you'll get is bruises and bumps, grazes, headaches, stitches.

But if you go all in and only when you go all in will you experience the crazy adrenaline and exhilaration of kind of free-falling but on purpose and rolling away, you'll probably still go home at the end of the day with bumps and bruises and grazes, maybe even stitches, but you'll be smiling because it's an amazing feeling.

If you follow Jesus but not with everything, if you make him your almost treasure as long as you can keep a couple of other things in your life, if you make him your life's ambition as long as it doesn't push out this other thing that you really care about, your experience of being a Christian will be just the bumps and bruises and grazes and stitches because following Jesus is hard and that's part of the deal.

but only if you hand your life over completely, if you surrender everything that you are and say it's yours, use it as you wish, will you be able to get those bumps and bruises and grazes and sicknesses and broken relationships and financial stresses and whatever else you face in life and do it with joy because even in all of that you will have Jesus.

You will be loved. You will be seeing that which satisfies you more than anything else exalted in your suffering, in your struggle.

[28 : 59] now I'm not giving you specifics about what this might look like for you because we'll probably all have different things that we're trying to hold on to alongside Jesus. We'll all be using different things to dilute him and ultimately the answer for all of us is to come back to the gospel, to look to the one who died for us while we were still his enemies, look to the one who rose again and sits on the throne over all creation and find that he's worthy of everything or nothing.

Find that he's sufficient in all circumstances or none. Find that he's satisfying above anything else. The issue is not that we have tried him and found him unsatisfying, the issue is that we haven't gone all in.

Psalms 34 verse 7 says, Taste and see that the Lord is good. What are you holding on to in your life that's now a barrier to your joy?

What are you diluting your own satisfaction with? Because Jesus offers immovable joy.

Incomparable joy. Inevitable joy. Imagine if just a few of us were consumed with the gospel like this.

[30 : 30] Imagine the difference that we would make in this community. But also, imagine just how satisfying it would be.

Imagine the joy that God would have for us in our day-to-day life, in the good, in the bad, in the struggle. if we were consumed with the desire that Jesus, our treasure, our saviour, be exalted as the all-satisfying one, the only satisfying one.

That's the joy that God desires for you. That's the joy that God offers to you. So what do you need to let go of so you can grab hold of Him?

Let's pray. Father God, we want to admit that even though it seems so obvious, even though there's a part of us that really does want to say with conviction to live as Christ, that there are so many things in our lives that we hold on to.

There are ambitions that we place before you. We treasure our own comfort. We treasure achievement. God, there are innumerable things that we treasure.

[32 : 08] Give us eyes to see that Jesus is better. Give us eyes to see that we sabotage our own joy by doing it. help us to grasp what it is that you love people like us and enable us to come to you confident that we will not be disappointed, that in you our deepest hearts' desires are met and surpassed.

In you there is joy unmatched. Father, fill us with that annoying joy so that the world around us might know that there is none like you.

Thank you for Jesus. Amen.