

JOY through hope

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[0 : 0 0] any journey that you go on will always require three pieces of information. You need to know where you are. You need to know your starting point. You need to know where you're going. You need to know the goal, the destination that you're heading to. And lastly, you need to know which road to tack between those two points. The Christian life is very much a journey. Christians have not arrived yet. There is more to learn. There is more to come, more to discover. There's room to grow.

And navigating life well as a Christian, navigating the life of following Jesus joyfully, requires those same three pieces of information. First off, we need to know our starting point.

Paul's call in the first half of chapter three, which is what Jimmy opened up for us last week, to forsake all else, to consider all else in our lives garbage compared to the treasure of knowing Jesus, is not just a call, it's a testimony. Paul is sharing his own story of what it was like for him to begin the journey of following Jesus. It's a description of how his life shifted drastically when he became a Christian and for the very first time put his trust in the death of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus as a means by which he could know God. When somebody becomes a Christian, what they do is they have their life radically reoriented. This is what Jimmy was talking about.

What used to be really important, what used to take priority, what used to consume energy and imagination and time is reassessed in the light of the fact that they discover Jesus.

They begin to, for the first time, recognise the majesty and wonder of what Jesus does in giving his life for people. Paul talks about being found in verse nine that Steve just read out for us, about gaining Jesus and in him getting a righteousness that is by faith and not from the law.

[2 : 0 7] See, what happens when somebody puts their faith in Jesus, the starting point when someone becomes a Christian is they discover that God loves them in spite of who they are.

God loves them even though they don't deserve it. That, in fact, what they discover is that the only possible means for them to be loved by God is Jesus.

It's his death so that they might be approved by God, that they might find forgiveness and be washed clean in the cross. And it's not just that they discover the idea that this is the only way they can be loved.

What happens when somebody becomes a Christian is they actually experience and encounter that love for the very first time. They experience what it is to be loved and adopted while they're at their worst, while they are completely undeserving.

And because they're loved even at their worst, they experience what it is to be securely loved. Because they've already put forward the most unlovable parts of themselves and found God to love them anyway.

[3 : 1 2] They have a deep security and stability. God's love for Christians has nothing to do with how good or bad they are. How good or bad they were, how good or bad they will be.

What the Christian discovers is that God loves because God chooses to love. God looks at people and makes the decision to love them in spite of their worthiness or otherwise. It's love that stretches further than people could run.

And so it's a love that gives security and peace. Because it's not going anywhere. I remember the night that I decided to become a Christian. It was almost 20 years ago.

It was late January 1996. I was on a camp. And even though I'd heard about Jesus before, I'd been in churches before, I'd been around Christians before, I'd heard the stories before, I knew how Easter worked.

It was the first time that I looked at Jesus and the cross and his death and understood that that was God loving me unconditionally. That was God offering to accept me regardless of what I had done or even what I would do in the future.

[4 : 25] It was the first time that I felt unconditionally loved. And I remember sobbing. Those of you who know me know that I'm not a big crier.

But I remember that night sobbing in a way that I never had before. Tears of joy because for the first time, I felt absolutely securely loved.

Like there was nothing I could have done to convince God to stop loving me. And not only was I secure in the love, the love was bigger and deeper and wider and more costly than anything I had ever encountered.

I felt no pressure to do or be anything. I just felt loved. I desperately wanted other people to know what I was feeling at that point, but it was what I wanted.

It wasn't something that I had to do. I remember that night I felt joy unlike anything I'd ever known. It was a life-defining, life-altering joy.

[5 : 33] It's the same kind of joy that Paul has been talking about here in Philippians. It's the same kind of joy that leads him to look at his whole life before meeting Jesus and joyfully say, none of that is worth anything anymore.

In fact, it's garbage compared to what I've discovered in Jesus. He doesn't give up his old life begrudgingly. Joyfully, he says, this is so much better. This is so satisfying that is garbage by comparison.

Even the good, best bits of his life don't come close. Paul was so content from the point that he met Jesus that he became an impossible opposition for those who would seek to oppose Christianity.

He was joyful when he suffered. He was joyful in prison. He was joyful in persecution. He was even joyful in death. Happy to face it because he knew what waited him on the other side.

To become a Christian is to have joy unlocked. It's to encounter joy. To discover how much God loves you is to discover joy.

[6 : 49] That's the start of the Christian journey. That's the beginning point. Joy. Joy. Now, just as a side point, I just want to challenge you that you could be sitting in this room and feeling like that is a foreign description for you.

That's not something that you've ever encountered. That deep sense of release and confidence that God loves you even though he knows your deepest, darkest secrets. It could be that this is one of the first times you've ever heard about that kind of love.

And I want to encourage you today might be the day that you encounter that joy for the first time. But it could also be that you've been around church your whole life and still you wouldn't be able to point to this sort of joy in your life.

Gently, I want to challenge you. This is what it looks like to become a Christian. to be filled with joy. To discover that unconditional security and peace that is found in the fact that God's decided to love you and you can't change his mind.

The Christian journey starts with joy. That's the first point. But, it only increases. It gets even better as we look to the end. The second thing we need to know on a journey, having discovered our starting point, is where we're going.

[8 : 15] For all that Christians already have, Christianity is clearly a faith that looks forward. Even as Paul is delighting in all that he has in Jesus, even as he compares his old life as rubbish, he's clearly excited about what's to come.

There's a tangible anticipation. There's almost like a sense of Paul dancing on the spot as he gives you these few verses here because there's something exciting just beyond his reach.

Look at verse 12. Having talked about how amazing it is, his desire, he says, not that I have already obtained all this or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

He doesn't have all of the joy. He doesn't have all that he wants in Christ yet. He's got some. He's got the joy that comes at the beginning. He's got that sense of being loved and forgiven, but he's pressing on towards the destination.

Verse 13. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it, but one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

[9 : 32] Forgetting the past, eyes on the prize, straining forward, pressing on. He just wants to reach the final goal and win his prize, but what's the prize?

It's all very exciting language, but it's kind of vague. Even heaven doesn't seem really clear to kind of wrap it up. Where are Christians going?

Where does the journey finish? What's the goal that Christians aim for? It's there in verse 20. Our citizenship is in heaven.

And we eagerly await a saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Just read that last bit again. will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Transformation.

[10 : 39] That's the final goal. Christlikeness. When we reach the end, we will be fully transformed. We'll be sinless. We'll be perfect. There'll be no sickness.

There'll be no disability. There'll be no sadness. There'll be no loneliness. We will be perfect and whole and complete. We'll be in heaven. That's the goal. That's what we're aiming for. When I visit schools to teach scripture, I often get asked about heaven.

Lots of people have different ideas of what heaven might look like, what it's supposed to be. And I remember that when I was younger, I was convinced that heaven would consist of two main things. An endless supply of free McDonald's and an amazing beach for me to go surfing at.

Now, it sounds ridiculous, but my basic premise was take the things that I enjoy most in life, and I can concede they were slightly shallow joys, take the things that I enjoy most in life and heaven will be that just kind of turned up a little bit, maybe slightly improved.

And I imagine you probably have your own version of what you think heaven will be like or maybe what you want heaven to be like. And I imagine that it might be not that dissimilar to mine, at least in process.

[11 : 50] You take the things that you enjoy most in your life and you imagine a whole bunch more of that. Maybe you think heaven, clouds, halos, whatever.

But in the Bible, heaven's not a location in the way that we sometimes like to think of it. The Bible doesn't set about trying to describe something that's going to be a mental picture of a future physical reality.

heaven is the place where what's fundamentally wrong with our world is fixed. And the core issue is not sickness, it's not injustice, it's not even sin.

They all matter, but they're symptoms of the main issue. They're evidence of the core problem. The main issue with this creation, the main issue with our lives now, the issue that will be fixed when Jesus comes back, the difference between heaven and earth is relational.

in this life now, we live separated from the source of life and life. In this life now, we live kind of cut off from God.

[13 : 09] People live in ignorance of the fact that their life is sustained by a God in heaven. In ignorance of the fact that God created them and they owe all their allegiance to him. And even Christians who have been forgiven by Jesus and discovered God's love and have been drawn back into a relationship know that the relationship they have now is not what it should be.

It's not what it will be. Even as they get loved by God, they know they still mistreat God. They know they still fail. They know that the experience of being in a relationship with God now, while more satisfying than anything that this life has to offer, is just the smallest fraction of how good it will be to know him fully.

In another part of the New Testament, Paul describes the version we have now as like looking in a mirror dimly. But then, when we get to heaven, we will know face to face.

Being transformed in these verses, being transformed to be like Christ, is about being restored into full relationship with God. Sin will be removed, sickness will be removed, all those other things will be dealt with, so that we can have that relationship with God.

That intimate closeness. That's the goal. That's the prize. That's the finish line that Paul longs for desperately. That he would get God himself.

[14 : 43] That he would be face to face with the one who loves him more than any other. That he would get access to the author of every good thing he has ever encountered, access to the creator, access to the one who sacrificed his son and showed greater love than any other.

Access to him. Unhindered. Forever. That's the finish line for the Christian. That's the destination. It's almost like we get hold of the goose that lays the golden eggs.

The golden eggs are all the good things that we enjoy in this life, all the great gifts which unquestionably come from God, but heaven will be more than just an endless supply of golden eggs. It'll be access to the source of all those good things we enjoy.

It'll be access to the one who actually in love and in generosity gives those things. We get the golden goose. We get Jesus. Heaven might not be exactly what you envisage.

I have a sneaking suspicion McDonald's won't make the cut. But I'm confident that it will be better than anything that I have experienced so far. I'm confident that it will be better than any of our grandest imaginings.

[16 : 06] Because all we have now is the incredible gifts that we've been given. And a relationship that is just the beginning. But then we will have fully.

Then we will have the one who created the thing that gives us our greatest joys now. The Christian life is a life where every day is Christmas Eve.

It's a life of anticipation and excitement. It's a life where you tolerate the dodgy Christmas Eve dinner because you know that the extra effort is going into tomorrow's feast.

and so you smile and you say thank you for the toasted sandwich. The excitement of gifts and presents. But this time you know exactly what you're getting and it's everything you've ever hoped for.

The Christian life is one of eager anticipation for something incredible that awaits just around the corner. There is joy in this life now in the anticipation of the finish line.

[17 : 15] Joy substantial enough to change even dark situations. Paul says in another letter that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the future glory.

That even our deepest pains now will seem so insignificant when we encounter the full joy of being face to face with the one who made us and loves us.

But if we're honest even with all that joy from the beginning and all that joy to look forward to this bit in the middle can be kind of hard work.

even with the glorious hope of heaven life can be discouraging. Heaven can feel so far away that it makes no difference to what I'm going through right now.

Maybe you started your Christian life with that deep overflowing sense of joy like I did. But now that you have responsibility now that you have the pressures of life now that you've been at this for a while and it's not going exactly the way you wanted it to it's just harder to be joyful.

[18 : 36] It's harder to actively rejoice each day. I remember when I was little I've shared this with you before my mum used to try and bribe me to eat vegetables. She would try every trick in the book she'd coat them in things she'd tell me I couldn't have dessert all the classics there'd be yelling there'd be punishments whatever you needed but when all else failed she would tell me that I needed the vegetables that if I didn't eat them I wouldn't grow big and strong and otherwise I'd be small forever.

She'd play the inadequacy card between me and my two brothers. Now I was given permission at this point to not enjoy the vegetables. I was allowed to scowl gag do whatever else as long as at the end of the day they ended up in my stomach.

She was just hoping that the outcome would be enough to push me through. Now you could be forgiven for feeling like that's the trick I'm trying to pull now.

Kind of feels like I'm saying if your life's difficult and painful and you're not enjoying it right now just suck it up and there'll be joy later. Just kind of grin and bear it, it'll all be okay in the end.

And while there's truth to that, Paul just said it's not worth comparing our present sufferings to our future glory, that's not the whole thing.

[20 : 04] The Christian starting point is God's grace in sending Jesus to forgive us, to die in our place, to invite us into a relationship with him. The destination is heaven.

It's a perfect relationship with God himself. self. And the road that we choose in the middle is the hope road. The road that is literally just littered with joy, littered with opportunities to rejoice, is the hope road.

When I was growing up, my dad taught me how to surf. Part of the process was teaching me how to be safe in the ocean. He taught me how to get out of a rip, how to see currents, how to be aware of what was going on, and basically how to look after myself.

With five kids, they didn't have much chance of covering all of us all the time. And one thing that he taught me was how to stay in one place when you're out surfing. This might sound like a really easy thing to do, but when you're sitting on your surfboard bobbing around in the ocean, a fair way out from shore, it's quite difficult to tell if you're in the same place where you started.

You can kind of turn around and look and see your family on the beach or your towel or some marker that you've picked, but currents will sweep you around, and the perspective's different because when I started, I was on the beach, so I had about this much distance to check where I was.

[21 : 32] Now I'm hundreds of metres away from my point of reference, and very quickly I can drift down the beach while still being able to see my point of reference. reference. I could be a hundred metres away from my family and still think I'm in exactly the right spot because I turn around and I can still see the towel, I can still see my mum, I can still see the thing that I'm looking at.

You can drift while still having a clear line of sight to your point of reference. You can be out of position before you even realise it. But there is a surprisingly easy solution.

instead of looking at one point of reference, my dad explained I need two points of reference and all I need to do is make sure that I stay inside those two points of reference.

As long as I keep them on either side of me, I would know exactly where I am. Christian hope needs two points.

By definition, hope is forward-looking. It longs for what it does not yet have. That's why Paul strains forward, it's why he presses on. Christian hope looks forward to heaven.

[22 : 46] It anticipates, it gets excited, but without a second point, it's possible to drift away so that that point becomes more and more distant and has less and less impact on you right now.

It's possible to move in the wrong direction while still being able to see your point of hope, the thing that you're supposed to be looking forward to. Christian hope is future-directed, but it's founded on what is past.

It's based on what has already happened. It's strengthened and possible and concrete because of what God has already done in Jesus on the cross. See, the better we know and experience the benefits of what Jesus has won for us on the cross, the forgiveness, forgiveness, the unconditional love, the adoption into God's family, the relationship with God, the better we encounter those things, the more clearly we will see and long for and anticipate the glorious prize at the end.

See, the desire for that full relationship with God flows out of an experience of the beginning relationship with God that was bought for us with the blood of Jesus on the cross.

Our confidence and our security in what we hope for is based on what God has already done. The two points of Christian hope strengthen each other.

[24 : 14] See, as we look to the cross, our excitement for our future in heaven grows because that incredible love will suddenly be face to face.

As we anticipate heaven, our appreciation of the cross will grow because this incredible future is certain because of what God has already done, because of the love and the irreversible forgiveness.

As both get stronger, our hope gets stronger, our hope gets more stable. You've got to remember who's writing this letter. Remember what life looked like for Paul as he wrote these words.

As he eagerly got excited about heaven and tripped over himself to share the joy that he discovered when he became a Christian. He's in prison. Death is likely.

His life is full of suffering and yet his hope so transforms his circumstances that it's not just a matter for him of suck it up and it's going to be good in the end. Because of those two points, he actually has joy in prison.

[25 : 22] in suffering. I think for a lot of Christians, the bit between what Jesus has done and heaven can drag.

It is full of pain. It is full of failure. It's full of sin and temptation. And we all encounter it differently.

It's what Francis Schaeffer calls our particular mix of the fall. Even though we're loved and forgiven, we know we're not perfect yet. And in this bit in the middle, we all experience our own version of what sin looks like.

We have different points of struggle and failure. Some Christians really struggle with pride. For others, that's a non-issue. Some struggle with greed. Others don't.

Some struggle with same-sex attraction. Others don't. Some struggle with judgmentalism. Others don't. Some struggle with lying. Others don't. The point being that even though there's differences in how we struggle, differences in how well or how poorly we go, how many times we fail, how committed we are, the point is that we all struggle to honour God.

[26 : 36] We all struggle to live in a way that reflects the fact that the God of heaven and earth has purchased us with the blood of his Son. And it's easy to get discouraged and frustrated and feel like heaven is just so far away.

None of us is perfect yet. And with that imperfection comes discouragement and frustration, maybe even insecurity. A whole bunch of things that aren't going to help you be joyful.

Hope needs two points. Because both those points feed our joy now. Every step of the journey between them is an opportunity to encounter and engage Jesus as the source of our joy.

Let's just remember that. We've said it a few times this series. The series is joy for everyone, but it's Jesus for everyone because Jesus is where we find the joy. At the first point, what do we encounter?

The forgiveness of Jesus and the chance for a relationship. At the end point, what will we encounter? That Jesus returning to fully transform us to be like him so that we can be face to face enjoying him.

[27 : 45] It's Jesus at both ends and every step in the middle is Jesus as well. Every step is an opportunity to be excited and joyful in anticipation of what is ahead and in thankfulness for what is before, which guarantees what is ahead.

We're literally surrounded by joy in Jesus because of these two hope anchors. Regardless of which direction you look, you have the opportunity to rejoice in how much God is loving you.

Christian hope makes every situation and circumstance you are in an opportunity to encounter Jesus. If you fail as a Christian, if you fall back into that habit of sin again and again, encounter Jesus as your sufficient saviour.

Encounter him as the one who takes your punishment and loves you in spite of who you are and rejoice. When you grow in godliness, when you have the victory over the temptation and struggle, encounter Jesus as the one who is empowering you by his spirit to grow more and more to be like him.

Encounter him as the one who is bringing towards completion the work that he begun when he forgave you at the cross. And be thankful and rejoice. When you doubt, encounter Jesus as the one who guarantees your finish, not because of how strong your faith is, but because he has loved you in the cross.

[29 : 24] And rejoice. In persecution, in suffering, encounter the risen Jesus who stands at the finish line and beckons you home to the room he's prepared for you and rejoice.

In pain and difficulty, encounter Jesus as the one who guarantees to never leave you nor forsake you, but to walk with you in the dark times, to finish the work that he begun and to make sure that you get to the finish line and rejoice that you are not alone.

Rejoice that you cannot be taken away from that goal that God has purchased for you. When our hope is anchored in these two points, every step in the middle is an opportunity to encounter Jesus and rejoice.

It's not about suck it up. There'll be pain. There'll be difficulty. But there we find a sufficient saviour. There we find our Lord on the throne.

And there we are reminded that every step, good, bad or otherwise, is a step closer to the finish line that God's prepared for us. A step closer to heaven.

[30 : 32] Hope motivates. Hope drives us forward. It makes us strain for what's ahead. It enables us to let go of what was behind because it's begun to taste the joy of knowing Jesus.

And hope longs for nothing more than the fullness of that joy when we will see him face to face. And so Paul finishes emphatically, chapter 4, verse 1, Therefore, because of that two-pointed hope, because of the joy that God has built into every day and every situation and every circumstance, therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and my crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way.

Dear friends, stand firm anchored to the cross of Christ and your future hope of heaven. Stand firm anchored in the irreversible, unconditional love that God has shown you in Jesus.

Stand firm with eyes open to encounter Jesus in every situation that God places in front of you. Stand firm knowing that the destination is guaranteed.

And rejoice. Amen.