

## **JOY: IT'S PERSPECTIVE ON LIFE'S CHALLENGES PHILIPPIANS 1:12-30**

Do you believe that God can turn a prison into a possibility? He'd been one of Washington D.C.'s most powerful figures: proud, profane, ambitious, ruthless and utterly committed to his boss' welfare – the President of the United States. But now a prison door slammed shut behind him with a clang of finality. Prison is a tremendous leveler. All the privileges, perks and position of power were gone in this place. This man felt deeply the humiliation of having to work in the prison laundry during his months of incarceration. All seemed to be lost: his influence, good name, family, friends, career – down the tubes forever. He was a convicted felon. But something had happened to that man shortly before he was sent to prison. As his world crashed down around him, he surrendered his life completely and sincerely to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

That didn't stop the prison door from slamming shut behind him, but it did change what happened in prison. While he was there he had the opportunity to speak with other inmates about Jesus. He started a Bible study with other prisoners. Most importantly, he began to get a burden for ministry for all those incarcerated people locked away in the prisons of our country. When he was released from prison, he began a ministry known as Prison Fellowship that even today still seeks to evangelize and encourage prisoners here and around the world. That man was Charles Colson – special counsel to President Richard Nixon, convicted of conspiracy during the Watergate scandal in the 1970s, and one of the most remarkable converts to the Christian faith in the last half of the 20th century. Charles Colson passed away unexpectedly at the age of 80 this spring – an internationally respected Christian leader and a trophy of God's grace. God most definitely turned Charles Colson's prison into a possibility.

Do you know from where Paul, the apostle, wrote his New Testament letter to the Philippian Christians? From a prison in Rome. He was incarcerated for the "crime" of telling people everywhere about Jesus and implying that Jesus was the true Lord over everything rather than the Roman Emperor. As we'll see today, God turned Paul's prison into a possibility as well. Last week, we began a study of this letter to the followers of Jesus living in and around Philippi, a city in what is now the country of Greece. The letter is really all about Jesus. But one of the important sub-themes of this wonderful little letter is joy. The word "joy" or other words about joy turn up no less than 15 times in this brief letter. Jesus and joy somehow go together. Joy, because of Jesus, results in life in excess which is the title of this message series: "Joy: Life in Excess." Somehow the man Jesus and the experience of joy fit together like a hand and glove. We're going to try and discover why over the next three months. Now, today, I want us to read and think about Philippians 1:12-30 where we get some incredible personal insights into some profound real life challenges facing this man Paul. You could say that through Paul's experience we learn that joy is the result of a very unique, God-given perspective on life's challenges. Let's read those verses now and then think about them together.

In this passage Paul implies that when Jesus is the center and meaning of your life, nothing ever happens to you that's meaningless or out of God's will and plan. There's a divine purpose in and to everything; therefore, joy is the result of a God-given perspective. Someone has observed that Paul discovered that the difficult things happening to him were making a profound change in him and God was using all of it to glorify Jesus through him. Let's break that thought down in this way. First, of all...

## **REAL JOY IS NOT DETERMINED BY WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU.**

What was happening to Paul? What challenges was he facing? First and foremost, he was in prison. From one perspective, prison prevented him from preaching the good news about Jesus to those who had never heard. It looked like Satan was defeating God's efforts to get the message about Jesus out to everyone. Paul was probably in prison for some two years chained to a Roman soldier 24 hours a day. Additionally, being in prison was humiliating and embarrassing. It inevitably raised questions about you in the minds of people. It made you controversial. Here was Paul, one of the key leaders of this new group of people called Christians, and he was in jail possibly facing execution.

Secondly, not all of Paul's fellow Christians in Rome liked or appreciated him. We have to read between the lines here a bit, but here's my take on what was happening. One of the great, divisive issues in the first several decades of the spread of Christianity and the founding of churches in different communities was how Jewish you had to be in order to be a Christian. The first Christians were ethnic Jews. Most of them continued to observe the marks of Jewish identity – circumcision and observance of special, holy days, for example. Then, lots of non-Jews (the Bible calls them Gentiles) began to put their faith in Jesus. Paul, an ethnic Jew himself, insisted that these Gentile believers did not have to take on all the marks of Jewish identity in order to be Christian, but it took several decades for that to become the consensus point of view. It's likely that there were many Jewish Christians in Rome and some of them probably thought Paul was a dangerous renegade. They disagreed with his theology. They saw him as a traitor to what it meant to be a Jew. They resented Paul's influence and saw his being in prison as an answer to prayer. Now that Paul was silenced, they saw an opportunity to have the stage to themselves.

The Philippians were facing serious challenges as well, because Paul alludes to those in v. 27-30. Philippi was a Roman colony which meant all the citizens of Philippi were automatically Roman citizens – something they were very proud of. That meant they were devoted to the Roman Emperor and recognized him as a god-like leader. Roman citizens confessed that the Roman Emperor was "lord." Think of an American military base in Iraq or Afghanistan where everyone is American and where everyone recognizes the President as the Commander in Chief and you start to get a little understanding of what it meant to be a Philippian. The Philippian Christians were starting to suffer persecution from

their fellow citizens, neighbors and friends because they dared to imply with their lips and their lives that Jesus was Lord not the Roman Emperor. Paul reminds them that they had a kind of citizenship that was more important than being a citizen of Rome. “Above all, you must live as citizens of heaven, conducting yourselves in a manner worthy of the Good News about Christ.” (Ph 1:27 NLT) So Paul and the Philippians were facing some very big challenges in their lives.

And yet, Paul was discovering that he could still have joy in the midst of these challenges. Real joy wasn't determined by what was happening to him. “... 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.” (Ph 1:18-19 NIV) Real joy wasn't determined by what was happening to the Philippians either. Everyone here today is going to face struggles, problems and challenges of one sort or another. Many are minor irritations that get resolved quickly. Other challenges are far more serious lasting for weeks and months. Still other challenges shake you down to the very foundations of your lives – a terminal disease, losing a job, divorce, the death of a loved one, or a terrible decision by one of your kids. Stuff just happens to you. If joy depends on always having positive things happen to you, you will not experience joy very often. The challenges you and I face in life can be spiritual prisons or possibilities. It's your relationship to Jesus that makes the difference. That's a second perspective that Paul learned and shares here. Secondly, ...

### **REAL JOY IS BASED ON WHAT HAPPENS IN YOU.**

The experience of being in prison undoubtedly had many negatives for Paul – the boredom, the limitations, the humiliation – but it also allowed him the opportunity to get a whole new perspective on the meaning of life and on God's sovereignty over the events in our lives. You and I tend to go in one of two directions when it comes to life's problems. You can worship your challenges – they dominate your life, you complain about them, your life revolves around them. Or, you can ignore your challenges and just hope or pretend they go away. Paul neither worshiped nor ignored his challenges. Instead, he faced them in Jesus and began to see in them a divine purpose and meaning. Being in prison? “For I fully expect and hope that I will never be ashamed, but that I will continue to be bold for Christ, as I have been in the past. And I trust that my life will bring honor to Christ, whether I live or die.” (Ph 1:20 NLT) Fellow Christians who didn't like him? “But that doesn't matter. Whether their motives are false or genuine, the message about Christ is being preached either way, so I rejoice. And I will continue to rejoice.” (Ph 1:18 NLT) How about the challenges the Philippian Christians were facing – the beginnings of persecution? “For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him.” (Ph 1:29 NLT)

What happened to Paul was used by God to do something in Paul. The challenge of prison and being disliked by fellow Christians compelled Paul to articulate one of the greatest statements in the Bible. “For to me, living means

living for Christ, and dying is even better.” (Ph 1:21 NLT) Paul is not saying here that he hates this life or this life is terrible. Quite the contrary! His life is great and wonderful, because it’s all about Jesus! Jesus is the beginning of life, the meaning of life, the purpose of life and the goal of life for Paul. And death is transformed from something to be dreaded into something to be anticipated because it meant being with Jesus in a way you can’t be with Him in this life.

Be honest with yourself: how would you finish this sentence? “For to me, living means \_\_\_\_\_.” For to me, living means work? Not good enough. For to me, living means achieving success? Not good enough. For to me, living means having a happy marriage and great kids? Not good enough. For to me, living means meeting my goals? Not good enough. For to me, living means having wealth? Not good enough. For to me, living means a comfortable retirement? Not good enough. For to me, living means maintaining good health? Not good enough. There’s nothing intrinsically wrong with any of those answers. They’re just not good enough. They don’t have the power to produce real and lasting joy.

Football season has started! During the 2007-2008 NFL regular season, New England Patriots' quarterback Tom Brady set the record for most touchdown passes in a regular season, paving the way for his winning the Most Valuable Player award. At the age of 30, he had already won three Super Bowls—an accomplishment that sets him apart as one of the best quarterbacks to ever play the game. In 2005, Tom Brady was interviewed by *60 Minutes*. Despite the fame and career accomplishments he had achieved already, Brady said that it felt like something was still lacking in his life: “Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, 'Hey man, this is what [it's all about].' I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me? I think, 'It's got to be more than this.' I mean this isn't—this can't be—all it's cracked up to be.”

If your reason for life and living is anything less than Jesus – football or something far more noble - you will never have real and lasting joy. Oh, you will be happy from time to time, but you will never know the kind of “life in excess” joy that Paul talks about here. Here’s the irony. It’s the experience of going through challenges – difficult, painful, scary stuff - that brings you to the same place that it brought Paul. You end up coming to this place where you look life in the face and say, “Wow, now I see life for what it is. It’s about Jesus. If Jesus is truly the meaning of my life, life’s challenges have this way of producing more of this incredible joy. But if something else is the real meaning of my life, life’s challenges reveal how passing, unreliable and transient my joy happens to be.”

What happened to Paul revealed what had happened in Paul. The challenges he faced in his life gave him a whole new perspective. Real joy was based on what had happened in Paul despite all the bad stuff that had happened to him. The meaning of his life was Jesus – nothing more and nothing less. But I also

recognize a third perspective emerging from Paul's words here. Thirdly, Paul was discovering that ...

### **REAL JOY IS EXPERIENCED BY WHAT HAPPENS THROUGH YOU.**

Paul was delighted and blessed by the wonderful paradox of his situation. "And I want you to know, ... that everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News." (Ph 1:12 NLT) Who would have "thunk" it!? How was it possible? Paul was chained to a member of the Praetorian guard – the Navy SEALs of the Roman military – in four hour shifts, every day for two years. Paul saw his imprisonment as this marvelous, God-ordained opportunity to do personal evangelism with some very high capacity individuals. One soldier after another had the opportunity to hear about Jesus from one of the greatest evangelists of all time. "For everyone here, including the whole palace guard, knows that I am in chains because of Christ." (Ph 1:13 NLT) Don't you think that many of them discovered the real meaning of life – Jesus – simply because they spent some time literally attached by a chain to this great man of God? They likely would never have met one another if God had not sovereignly brought them together in this unusual but highly effective evangelistic encounter.

My friend, I don't know what challenges you're facing today. What's your perspective on them? Have you ever considered that just maybe God wants to do something in and through you by putting you in the midst of those challenges? Is there a person or a group of people that you can point to Jesus for salvation and life transformation – people who you would never have influenced or even met if it were not for that challenge? When Paul realized God was using his prison experience as a platform to do what he already ached to do – tell people about Jesus – it filled him with such incredible, lasting joy. Real joy is experienced by what happens through you.

Paul was a sensitive man. I'm sure that it hurt him deeply that fellow followers of Jesus had little use for him, resented him or saw him as some kind of *persona non grata*. But, again, God gave him an incredible perspective. "And because of my imprisonment, most of the believers here have gained confidence and boldly speak God's message without fear.... Whether their motives are false or genuine, the message about Christ is being preached either way, so I rejoice. And I will continue to rejoice." (Ph 1:14, 18 NLT) Because of Paul's prison experience, the Praetorian guards were hearing about Jesus. But, also, new believers there in Rome were getting mobilized and energized to tell others about Jesus. True enough, Paul might be sort of silenced or limited there in prison, but this was only encouraging other Christians to speak out about Jesus more courageously. Likewise, it occurs to me that how you and I face the challenges in our lives can have a tremendous effect on other Christians. If others see how you face life's challenges – not just when everything is going well, but particularly when it's not – they will be encouraged and want to stand for Jesus as well. Real joy is experienced by what happens through you.

Paul offered that some perspective to the challenges facing those Philippian Christians. God was using the challenge of the growing persecution against them by their fellow citizens their in Philippi to do something amazing. They got to live out their true, spiritual and eternal citizenship. "Above all, you must live as citizens of heaven, conducting yourselves in a manner worthy of the Good News about Christ.... " (Ph 1:27 NLT) They got to experience an incredible spiritual unity as they supported and encouraged each other through those dark days. "...I will know that you are standing together with one spirit and one purpose, fighting together for the faith, which is the Good News." (Ph 1:27 NLT) They got to somehow experience the privilege of sharing in the suffering of Jesus' himself by suffering abuse, scorn and ridicule on His behalf. "For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him." (Ph 1:29 NLT) Real joy is experienced by what happens through you.

Back in 1979, a group of Islamist students and militants took over the American embassy in Iran and held 52 Americans hostage for the next 444 days. Gary Lee was one of those hostages. His dad, Earl Lee, was a pastor at the time. Towards the end of that long crisis as rumors spread about the imminent release of all the hostages, Earl's wife was away at a women's retreat. Earl's mother-in-law, who lived with them at the time, called him at church. She said frantically, "Earl, you need to come home. I'm frightened." Earl asked her why. "Well, NBC, ABC and CBS reporters are all here, camera people are all here, newspaper reporters are all here right in our yard and I can't get out of the house!"

On the way back to his home, Earl rehearsed all the choice comments he was going to share with those media folk when he arrived. He planned on telling them in no uncertain terms that they were a colossal nuisance and irritation. But an inner voice, a voice he recognized as that of the Holy Spirit, cut him short. "Earl, that's not the way to do it. Open up to these people." So, when he reached the house, there they were all over his lawn and driveway. He got out, walked in among them and said, "Well, what can I do for you?" They said, "Surely you have a statement you want to make to the press." No, he said, he didn't. He was adamant but friendly. He went inside and calmed down his mother-in-law. Then he went back outside and said to all the assembled news people, "I don't know whether all of you can fit in the house or not, but if you want to come on in, you're welcome." For the next three days, there were news people everywhere inside and outside Earl's home. Some of them slept on Earl's floor. All of them had access to Earl's food.

After a couple of days, one reporter said, "You know, Rev. Lee, I've never seen anything like this: the way you folk have treated all of us has had an effect on the way we treat each other. We're like a family here." Another reporter, a woman said, "Rev. Lee, somebody gave me a copy of a little book you wrote. Can I talk to you? I was intrigued by your book, but what really hooked me is the way you've conducted yourself during this crisis, with so much pressure on everyone." After the crisis was over and his son, Gary, returned home, Earl received a letter

from that same young woman. It told him about the day and hour when she opened her heart to Jesus and how real He had become to her. Can you imagine how joyful Earl Lee was that he'd listened to the Holy Spirit's urging him to get another perspective and treat those news people with kindness instead of anger? Can you imagine the joy that he experienced knowing that God had used him right in the midst of those challenging life experiences and what He had done through him that affected a young woman's eternal destiny?

What happens to you will effect what happens in you. And if Jesus is your life, He will use life's challenges – even the unpleasant, scary stuff – to do something eternal through you. And in that mysterious, hard to explain place, you will discover joy. Real, lasting joy. Real joy is not based on what happens to you. Real joy is based on what happens in you. And real joy is experienced by what happens through you and points people to Jesus.