

Joy in the Midst of Adversity 1:1-30

Philippians Unplugged

Today we are going to begin a study on the book of Philippians. The book itself is a personal book that reveals a side of the apostle Paul you don't see consistently. We tend to think of Paul as this bold missionary who writes letters that are filled with doctrine and instruction, and probably someone who would come across as pushy for his faith. In this book there are traces of doctrine and instruction but there is much more that Paul reveals about himself personally, intrinsically. This book allows us to explore how he feels about the church as well as his deep desire to glorify Jesus in all circumstances. In Philippians we see a man who is suffering for Jesus, yet rejoicing at the very work of his savior. Keep in mind, when Paul penned this letter he was in jail, under house arrest, most likely chained to a Roman officer (Acts 1:20). But although he experienced physical adversity—intrinsically we see Paul's love for Jesus simply overflow, spilling out and impact others. He uses his loneliest moments of uncertainty to encourage others, which shows us how much the Gospel affected him. As we study this book you will see how precious the gospel of Jesus Christ is to him.

Since this book is very personal, I decided to study it without the helps of commentaries or other books. Instead, each sermon will involve hours upon hours of prayer and meditation. Reading it over and over and over again and asking God to give me insight through the discipline of silence. God has impressed on me that I should use illustrations from my own life to keep this personal in nature.

Okay, let's begin....

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,
To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:
2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The first thing I am captured by is how Paul identifies himself. I tend to think of Paul as the greatest apostle of them all; a revolutionary leader who this amazing masculine general and godly leader. One who was focused like a laser when it came to evangelizing for Christ. I have even imagined him as obnoxious, someone who would make you feel guilty for being a slacker Christian. But that is not how Paul saw himself. He saw himself first and foremost as a servant. That is what we are supposed to be as Christians, servants of Jesus Christ. I don't know about you...but I rarely think of myself as a servant because I am so consumed with the things in my life. I'm not a servant, I am selfish. But God calls us to be servants. Paul's desire was to model the kind of life Jesus had. Later in Philippians 2 Paul will write though Jesus was in very nature God—he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped—but humbled himself and came down to serve.

This next section shows Paul's heart for the church.

3 I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, 4 always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. 7 It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. 8 For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. 9 And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, 10 so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Now to keep this in perspective, Paul started many churches and was a busy man. But he was not to busy to pray for this church in Philippi or the others—some he planted—others he did not like the one in Rome (Romans 1:8). The very fact that other congregations knew Jesus caused Paul to have joy in his heart (vs. 4). He looked at Christians as “partners” in the gospel. As I prayed over this section I was convicted because sometimes I am so focused on Northside that I forget to pray for the other churches. But it gets even uglier than that. Many times I am envious of other churches, especially if they have more people and resources. Sometimes I am consumed with the thought of “How can I get more people to come to my church like them.” I can also be critical of other churches for the most part because of my insecurity as a leader. But Paul sets the example of how God's people should view other churches. We should

rejoice!! We should be overwhelmed with joy that we are not alone in this journey but have fellow partakers of God's grace all over the valley. They are all partners with us! Notice verse 7. Paul says it is right for me to feel this way. We do a great disservice to the kingdom of heaven when we fail to pray and thank God for all the churches we have here in the valley. Paul says he yearns for the Philippian church with the affection of Christ Jesus. Finally notice how Paul prays for the churches. He prays their love would abound more and more, along with knowledge and discernment so they can approve of what is excellent, pure, and blameless. Now that my friends is how we should be praying for others. Most of the time we pray for the wrong things. We pray for the things of this world instead of the kind of prayers that are life-changing to the soul and person. How many times have we prayed that another's love would abound more and more in Christ Jesus? How many times have we prayed for someone to grow and grow in their knowledge of Christ? These are life changing, impactful and sanctifying prayers that are meant to help us grow in Christ.

Illustration: One thing I have noticed about Korban is that I love him more and more with each passing day. One reason is because as the days, months, and years go by I have more knowledge of him. When it comes to relationships, before we marry someone we have to go through the process of getting to know them—building a knowledge of them. Ultimately, this knowledge will lead us to make a decision on how far the relationship will go. Inevitably, knowledge of people leads us to like them, appreciate them, and love them. Paul's prayer is that the Philippians will abound more and more in love in the knowledge of who Christ is. The more you know about Jesus, the more you ponder him...the more you pray to him, the more you study him,, the more you reflect on yourself, the more you will love Jesus. We cannot allow the familiarity of the Jesus to dictate how we love him tomorrow. Let us pray that we all grow in the knowledge of Jesus. Let us pray we will be more discerning so that we can be pure. That should be our prayer...that definitely was Paul's. We need more spiritual prayers...less physical ones. Ultimately they are the ones that change our lives. One of the major reasons we pray physical prayers is to protect people from experiencing adversity. We don't want others to experience suffering, whether financial, physical, or emotional. But the reality is that God uses adversity as perhaps the greatest vehicle to leading other people to Jesus.

In the midst of his adversity, Paul prays for the churches to emulate what they saw in him—that is someone who used every opportunity and setback in his life to live for Jesus. In the end, we need the knowledge of Christ to get us through the tough times. When we face adversity there is no better time for us to shine for Jesus.

12 I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, 13 so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. 14 And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. 15 Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. 16 The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. 18 What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

There are several things in this passage that speak to my heart; one being the perspective Paul provides in the midst of his imprisonment. It would seem he had every right to be angry because his zeal for Christ had landed him in jail. I would have understood if he quit preaching, he quit following Jesus—heck I could even understand him beating his fists in the air and saying, "I hate you God" because of my present circumstances in life. He had been in jail for several years in Caesaria and Rome. Yet he uses his predicament as an opportunity to evangelize the "enemy" and strengthen the churches.

As I was meditating on Paul's imprisonment in Rome, the Holy Spirit impressed this on my heart. He reminded me of the time I was mistaken for a drug dealer and thrown in jail.

My car had been stolen a week earlier and the thief ripped out the key entry in the ignition. Once I finally got the car back I had to use the end of a spoon handle to start my car because of the damage. Well one of these "spoon keys" happened to be in my sink when it was plugged up with grease a couple days earlier. I had bought some draino and poured it into the drain and the potency of it discolored that particular spoon. Wouldn't you know it, one day I was parked on the wrong side of the road and a cop stopped me to give me *the lecture*. As he rebuked me, he happened to notice the spoon in the passenger seat had some noticeable discoloration. Instantly, he flared up and told me to get out the car immediately. I had no idea what was going on and believe it or not I thought I was on Candid Camera. I don't know why...but I was actually looking for the hidden cameras.

Well that just made the officer more irate and he ordered me in a stern obstreperous tone "To get out of the car now" as he gently tapped his hand on his Billy club, symbolizing to me the seriousness of the situation. In disbelief I complied and was immediately ordered to lay down on the ground in front of my apartment; as he briskly placed his knee on my back and proceeded to handcuff me and read my Miranda rights. Then as he helped me up and began to affectionately call me "druggy boy." "Where are the drugs druggy boy?" I tried to explain I had absolutely no idea what he was talking; but he did not believe me and proceeded to call two backup units. As the two officers approached he raised my spoon in victory into the air and loudly proclaimed "I got another one." Again, I tried to pridefully explain my dilemma....but he kept calling me druggy boy and told me to save my story for downtown.

So they gave me a police escort, handcuffed me to a bench, and locked me in a 9x9 cell. The best way to describe what was happening intrinsically was that I was highly irate because I couldn't believe these "idiots" could make such a stupid mistake. After being interrogated for about an hour, the captain told me my story checked and he apologized for the inconvenience. I was free to go pending the lab results of my spoon.

Anyhow, the experience made infuriated me so mad that I heeded some advice and hired a lawyer to file a lawsuit against the city of Portland. The reason of course was because I was humiliated; but also because I had been told I could get some money. Anyhow, when all was said and done, yes, I received a check, but it did not bring me the satisfaction I had hoped. Looking back at the whole situation, I realize that I did not take this opportunity to be a good witness for Jesus, not to mention advancing the gospel for his kingdom. I was utterly completely focused on my circumstances....my injustice....my humiliation....that I could not see the bigger and more important picture. Unlike Paul, I wanted to advance my own agenda; not Christ's agenda for that particular trial. I did not see this as an opportunity hand delivered to me by God.

I realized the hardest thing to do during adversity—during those dark periods in our lives—during those times when the weight of the world is on our shoulders.... is to see beyond our earthly predicament and look at it through the lenses of God's providential hand. God uses suffering as a powerful tool to advance the gospel because when you experience those bleak times in life; usually you have the attention of others, in some cases unbelieving acquaintances, friends, and or relatives. That is the best time to shine your light for Jesus. For me, it was the best time to share the gospel with the officer that called me druggy boy, along with his captain. It is also the best time for you to shine when the bill collector calls to collect, when a relationship becomes bitter, or when you are in the hospital facing the possibility of death. In the end, God uses suffering as an opportunity to seize the moment and advance the gospel in the same fashion that Paul the apostle did in a Roman prison. So as you go through the various trials in your life, may you emulate Paul and not prideful people like me. May you have eyes to see those opportunities in the midst of the dark clouds of the life. May you always realize your predicament can be the rainbow for God's glory.

As we continue through this chapter Paul reveals to us how solid his belief is in Jesus and the kind of spiritual legacy he wants to leave as a man of God.

Yes, and I will rejoice, 19 for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, 20 as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. 23 I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. 24 But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

This is simply a profound section that inspires me to want to grow in my relationship with Jesus. Here, Paul believes that he will be released from jail. According to church tradition this proved true and he continued to minister for several more years until he was arrested and jailed again—this time leading to his martyrdom at the hands of Nero in 67 AD. But at this point in his life—though Paul was confident he would be freed—he recognized there was still a chance he

could be put to death. One thing that dominated his mind was that he did not want to be ashamed of his faith—whether that meant living or dying. If you have ever faced shame in your life you know what Paul is talking about.

Illustration: I remember a time in high school that I had a reputation as a good dresser—and I liked the attention. My obsession got so bad that I began to steal clothes on a regular basis just to look good and appear like I had money. I stole for half a year before I got caught stealing of all things, a pair of underwear. After being interrogated the officer drove me home. I was ashamed, pulling up in my driveway in front of the neighbors with the officer escorting me to my front door. My family was eating dinner and the hardest thing was to make eye contact. There just aren't enough descriptive words to explain how ashamed I felt on that February evening. I never wanted to experience that kind of shame ever again.

Paul did not want his life to be filled with shame because he loved Jesus. He never wanted to recant his faith or keep quiet out of respect for others. No he wanted to live his life for Jesus or die glorifying him. He wanted to be courageous for Jesus no matter what happened. Paul was at that point of his life where it did not matter what happened to him. He was going to go out as a witness for Jesus.

For him to live meant to devote his life to Christ. What did this look like practically for him? He mentions three things. First, it meant more fruitful labor for Christ. Now Paul was probably in his sixties by this time and he still wanted to press on for Jesus and make his life a testimony. Secondly, he wanted to continue to minister and disciple the church at Philippi so they could progress in the gospel. Paul knew that before he departed his earthly life he needed to make disciples that were grounded and fruit-bearing for Jesus. As a pastor I recognize the importance of this and make it my aim to find ways where you all can progress in the faith. Thirdly, his fruit for Jesus was intended to produce joyfilled Christians. Again, as a pastor I resonate with this line of thought. I don't want to produce people that are stagnant and uninterested in spiritual things. I don't want to produce Christians that are hardened or legalistic and no fun to be around. I want to produce Christians that are filled with Joy because they have come to a deeper appreciation regarding what Jesus Christ has done for them on the cross at Calvary. The Christians who are truly going to make an impact for the kingdom of God are those who are filled with joy and deep gratitude for Jesus. Those are the folks others will see and want to be around because there is something different about them. Those are the Christians you ask "Why are you always in such a good mood? In the end, the goal is not to just produce disciples—it is to produce joy-filled ones.

Paul also comments on another issue that causes fear, death itself. He says to die is to make a significant gain in his life. He goes further and states to die is *far better* than living on earth. That is a very confident statement and one that can only come from someone who knows Christ deeply. When I think of my life there are a lot of things I value such as Machele and son Korban. I value my mother, my brothers, Machele's side of the family. As valuable as those folks are in my life Paul is saying being with Christ is not just a little better—it is *far better*. He would know because he was taken up to heaven in his spirit according to 2 Corinthians 11:2-3 and experienced the reality of it first hand. As Christians, the more we mature in Christ—the more we get to know Christ—the more we see him change lives—the more we will desire to be with him. Experiencing the joy of heaven will be far better than anything you can imagine. God in his common grace provides traces of heaven while we live out our days in this sin-filled world. He provides us with children, achievements, relationships, clothing and food—you name it. But all that we have this side of heaven are merely appetizers of what life will look like in heaven, the ultimate main course. May we come to the point where we recognize that heaven is something to look forward to that is far greater than anything we have in our present physical life. That was Paul's heart and should be ours as well. Now we will come to the last section; this is the one where Paul ties things together and encourages his church to demonstrate the kind of lives they see in Paul. This is the practical application section.

27 Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, 28 and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. 29 For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, 30 engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Paul concludes by reminding the Philippians and us—that our lives should be worthy of the gospel of Christ and that we should strive together as a church to glorify Jesus. The gospel is a precious reality that has changed our lives and we

should live in such a way that we show others that our lives have been transformed. Furthermore, there is no better time to show someone what Christ has changed our lives than by glorifying Jesus in the midst of adversity. Here's the reality. If you step out in faith and make it your mission to preach Christ to others you will experience persecution. Ultimately, the way you handle this adversity will put others to shame (a reference to their destruction vs. 28b). It will also show them the certainty you have regarding your salvation. Paul makes it pretty clear we have been regenerated by God not only to believe—but to suffer for him. In the end, that is when we experience the joy-filled, victorious life, that we have heard is available to us. We are not here just to believe in Jesus—we are here to work and labor for him to the point we are persecuted. Are you ready to take this journey with me? Are you ready to glorify Jesus in all circumstances? I believe you are—even if you are fearful to some degree. I believe you long for the adventure of knowing Jesus and you just need someone to have your back and stand beside you. My heart is for Northside to reach new heights because we have been faithful in our labor for Christ. So come on Christian army, let's begin the battle for people's souls.