

Philippians 1:12-30

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[0:00] There's a book that I love and it's called Amusing Ourselves to Death. And it's basic point is that modern people have learned to turn everything into entertainment.

! Politics has become sound bites for our entertainment. News has become drama. And what goes on in the classroom must entertain as well. And so too must things like religion.

Why? We like amusement. We love flippant TV shows that just fill up the time, scrolling through social media feeds. And we don't like sitting too long with serious things.

The question is why? And I think the Christian answer is this. Because when it comes to serious questions, why am I suffering? How do I deal with death?

Our society just doesn't know the answers. Our joy is found in our work, in our leisure, our family. And those are good things.

[1:04] But if it's only found in those, then how can we see suffering and old age and death as anything else, other than thieves which have come to rob us of our joy?

If that's the case, then distraction is our only prescription, isn't it? We just don't talk about death. Whenever anyone brings it up, we kind of laugh it off. Because how can we hold on to our joy in the face of it?

The reason I love the letter to the Philippians is it seems kind of like Paul has cracked the code. Here in this letter, we see Paul, the servant of Jesus Christ, who's planted so many churches, spread the gospel throughout the world, writing a letter bound in chains and with his life's work on hold, as he sits in a Roman prison.

He's preached Jesus Christ and he's suffering for that now. And he even sits under the threat of punishment. He may be executed if he's found guilty.

But as he stares his own death in the face, he writes to a divided and discouraged church the most joyful letter in the whole of the New Testament. How can he do that is a paradox that I've been struggling with this week.

[2:15] My hope, my task this evening is, with the Holy Spirit's help, to reveal the cause of Paul's joy. So that whether you are doing just fine tonight, or whether you're downcast, we can share something of this joy.

And not just looking forward to it in heaven, but starting tonight. So, how does he do it? How does he do it? How has Paul discovered the secret of joy in the face of death?

Put simply, to begin with, he's stopped aiming for joy. He's ceased to pursue simply his own personal happiness. Instead, he's put the purposes of Christ above his own.

This is my first point. If you want a joy that doesn't vanish, number one, may seem like a paradox, but put the purposes of Christ above your personal goals.

Now, I should say, setting goals is not wrong. It's a good thing. We should seek to serve our families well, and to work diligently, to care for our bodies, and to use our time wisely. Goals that help us achieve those things are a good thing.

[3:18] It's good to set them. But one purpose must govern every other. And it's this. This is the purpose that governs Paul's life. Christ's kingdom and his will.

We pray each week in the morning, Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. It's telling us, each week, that our plans are not ultimate.

Christ's glory, the advance of his gospel and kingdom, and the growth of his people are ultimate. It's easy to say that.

But I suppose the test of whether we're living out that prayer is ultimately what we do, how we react when our own good plans are frustrated. Paul here has good plans.

He probably had a full missionary schedule and had places he wanted to go, churches that he wanted to encourage, but he's now imprisoned. He can just write some letters.

[4:23] And other preachers are out there as well in the later verses, and they're trying to damage his reputation. If Paul made his own plans ultimate, they were above all, he would say this.

He'd say, Lord, why am I in chains? While these other envious and ineffective preachers go free. His prayer would be, let me out so I can keep going.

And it would only be that. But Paul has in mind something greater than his own frustrated aims. So to the Philippian church who have been praying for his release, he writes and he tells them this, verse 12 to 13.

I want you all to know that this imprisonment, it's better than I'm in here. Because it's really served to advance the gospel. He finds his joy in his chains because his imprisonment has actually advanced the purposes of Christ.

What does that mean? How has that happened? He writes, it's become widely known among the Imperial Guard and all the rest. I'm not sure what all the rest means.

[5:31] It may mean everyone who's involved in the whole prison, cooks, cleaners, whomever else is involved. Everyone in this prison, everyone around has heard that his chains are for Christ.

And verse 14 as well, the believers, the brothers, that means the believers in Rome, or the city that he's in, have become more confident in the Lord. And they've become bolder to speak the word of God without fear.

This is what he rejoices in. Now, there's a beautiful paradox here that I want us to notice. And it's repeated throughout church history. That when the servants of God are bound up, God's word is set loose.

Paul's prison cell, how can he rejoice? The joyful prisoners, the paradox in front of us, how can he do that? It's because he sees that his prison cell has become a pulpit. And his chains testify to the Savior who suffered for his people.

There's something about your leader selflessly putting everything on the line that is inspiring, isn't there? It's just innately inspiring. In the recent World Cup, there was, I was watching an interview with an Argentine player after England had lost.

[6:48] And he started crying. This wasn't after they had lost. So it kind of made me sit up. I thought, why is that guy crying? Because he was in Spanish.

But the translator said this. He was crying about his captain. He said, my captain, Lionel Messi, is 39 years old, and he's won everything that he could possibly want.

But he keeps on fighting and he gives everything. So that leaves us with only one thing to do, to give everything that we have. Paul here is in his late 50s. He's gained a reputation and influence. He could just kind of give it up now. And in the next section, he thinks about that. But he doesn't. Because he puts Christ's purposes above his own. By putting the service of the church, even above his own hopes, he can rejoice when God's plans go through, even when his don't.

If I can address pastors, those who lead worship services, those who are visible within the church for a moment, I'll say this. The sacrifices and the sufferings that you undergo for the sake of Christ are not wasted.

[7:59] If you show selfish ambition, or if you show selfless service, they are seen by more than you know.

The one can discourage, but the other can embolden and inspire, precisely because it is a picture of Christ in whose sufferings you share. Actually, the most amazing thing about this passage is that Paul can rejoice even in the attempted destruction of his own reputation by envious rival preachers. Verse 15, have a look at this one. Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. The latter from love. The former do it out of rivalry.

They want to hurt me, he says. They want to take the big-name preacher down for their own profits. They're out there doing whatever they do, making videos, saying, this guy's actually a fraud.

But, verse 18, he says, what then? He's kind of saying, what about it? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

[9:09] On a human level, this is quite an astounding thing. Preaching is Paul's whole life work. When you're in the line of work, you get a view of how it should be done, don't you?

You do it this way and not that way. You sort of get embedded in your field, and you look at other people, you go, I bet you're doing it like this. I bet they're doing it all kinds of wrong. And for me, I

find it frustrating when I look back throughout church history, and sometimes it seems like God is using all of the wrong people to grow his kingdom.

I think, Lord, if you let this man and that person's ministry grow, then this kind of pattern will grow from that, and that's got to be bad. And also, look at this person. I look at his life.

I think he's just conceited. He's just a terrible person. Maybe you see people in the church in today's age like that, and you lament.

But Paul's example calls us first and foremost to rejoice. He's not calling us to lay down our discernment or disagreements in some areas. He does call them envious as well.

[10:14] He thinks that they're bad morally, but they are preaching Christ. And the first thing he does is he says, I rejoice in that. Whoever it is, whatever aim they have, even if it's to take me down, yet I rejoice in Christ's purposes that they are being accomplished even through them.

It doesn't matter whether it's through me, through them, but I'm glad to see the purposes of Christ go forth. He's not just content for his influence to decrease, but he's joyful, so long as Christ's name is made known.

I'm going to pause here and try and apply this to ourselves. We're not Paul. We're not engaged in this conflict at the heart of empire and under threat of death.

But I want us to notice that it's such a testimony to the truth that the risen Christ is reigning even now, when people see that Christians can rest secure, knowing that even if our own plans fail utterly, but his purposes are achieved, we can rejoice.

When you're working long, hard days, or in the midst of motherhood, if your plans are just being frustrated in small ways that happen every day, again and again and again, what does putting Christ's purposes above your own look like?

[11:40] I think there are a few things that this means. I think one of them is this. I think it means receiving disrupted plans under God's providence.

It means receiving disrupted plans under God's providence rather than responding with resentment or even panic. In verse 12, Paul has every reason for resentment and panic.

It's not just a temporary delay for him, is it? It's not just a minor frustration. It could mean the end of all of his plans. And I'm sure he has missionary trips in mind and a calendar full of events. But he doesn't respond with resentment.

As I was preparing this sermon, I was looking forward to doing it on the train, and I missed my train this week. And I got on the wrong circle. So I got on the wrong circle line at Paddington, which there's two entrances.

Did you know this? I went to the wrong one. Got on the wrong one. And I went to Bayswater or whatever. And then I realized and got back. Now, if I'd met someone and got chatting and told them about church and they were here tonight, then that would be a great story.

[12:47] But that didn't happen. It would be wonderful. I was just late to the meeting. That's what happened. But this is when it's useful to remember that it's not Christ's one purpose to proclaim his name and to see sinners saved, but also to see sinners transformed.

Paul actually prays this early in the letter, verses 9 and 10. He says, So one of the things I can suggest that it means to put Christ's purposes above our own in everyday life is that we ought to see tough moments, misadventures, children crying, houses a mess but we've got people coming around, as opportunities to cultivate the character fitting for one who belongs to Christ.

Receiving disruptive plans under God's providence is something that we can do by the Spirit and with prayer. I want you to notice as well, actually, that the Philippians' prayers here are lifted up by Paul.

He says in 2, where was it? Sorry, in 1 verse, I think, 18. 19, For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.

The Philippians' prayers are actually effective. It's the prayers of ordinary believers. And he says, I trust that through those in the Holy Spirit's help that this will turn out for my deliverance. We can pray, when we are faced with setbacks, that we would put Christ's purposes above our own.

[14:28] Grow in patience and kindness and self-control. I think if we do that, the world will catch a little glimpse in our conduct of our risen and reigning Lord.

Now on to verse 18 and 19. How can Paul put Christ's purposes above his own? How has he managed to do this?

If this leads to joy, how can we do that regularly? I think it's because he trusts that they are better than his own. Because ultimately, whether he lives or dies, Christ is leading him to himself. And he's doing that for every one of us who belong to him. So my second point is this. His purpose is your deliverance. Put his purposes above your own, because his purpose is your deliverance. Have a look at verse 18. Paul says resoundingly, Yes, and I will rejoice. And I've wondered, why is that so emphatic?

[15 : 35] Why did you say that again? I think that Paul is answering a kind of implicit question that any reader, any hearer will have. The obvious question that will come his way because he's a joyful prisoner.

Paul's gone mad. This kind of living is not for the everyday Christian. It's just not normal to keep cheering when you're in chains. But I think he's aware of this.

And he says, he reveals the chief reason behind his joy. And it's this. That this earthly suffering is the very means by which he will not only honor his savior in life, but prepare, be prepared to meet him in death.

We could read verse 19. Have a look at it. It's simply saying that Paul knows he'll be released. It says, I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance.

We could say he's got a kind of word of knowledge and he will be released and that's what he knows. But actually, I don't think that's the case. The word translated deliverance here actually means salvation.

[16 : 41] And in fact, this whole sentence is borrowed from the book of Job. What Paul's saying here is he sees himself as suffering like Job.

But Job in the Bible, if you don't know, was the man whom God allowed to be afflicted with suffering, whilst his friends crowded around him and said he's cursed, he's sinned. And his wife even says, curse God and die.

But Job says, no, God will vindicate me. I know that this suffering will turn out for my deliverance, for my salvation. And he says, even that he knows he won't be put to shame.

Verse 20, Paul echoes that language. This doesn't mean he won't feel embarrassed. It's Old Testament language. It means he won't be shown to have trusted God in vain.

That's what it means. To not be put to shame means he won't be shown to have trusted God in vain. Job's suffering makes it seem like God has turned against him.

[17 : 43] And sometimes you may feel, when you're in a bout of suffering, that God has turned against you. But if you trust in Christ, he has not.

Job is being made to feel that his godliness was worthless. And that's the feeling that Paul could have too. Job's unjust suffering though, anticipates a greater righteousness.

And a greater righteous sufferer, Jesus Christ. This man would bear the curse for his people. And he would be publicly treated as one rejected and condemned. But he was vindicated by the Father. Delivered by him and raised from the dead. But by echoing this, this passage in Job, Paul's saying that these sufferings he's experienced are God's way of working out his salvation.

So that either they turn out for his good in this life, and that means the shape and the pattern of his service is transformed more and more into the image of his Saviour.

[18 : 48] Or else, he will die a death which echoes Christ's. Killed by Rome, but raised by God. But in either case, verse 20, With full courage, now as always, Christ will be honoured in my body, whether by life or by death.

There's a verse in Romans that kind of echoes this. Romans chapter 8, verse 28. It's a very famous verse. And it says, For those who love God, all things work together for good.

I should say, trainee pastors, I think, are discouraged from rushing to the bedside of someone who's sick or suffering and reading this verse. Don't worry, everything turns out for good. And I understand that.

I think one of the problems actually is that we don't go beyond that verse. Because that passage carries on. For those whom God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.

What that means is the same as in this passage. We'll be glorified like him. But what was the way that Christ got glory? Is it not the same suffering that Paul now shares?

[20:05] Undergoing suffering, albeit to a greater extent. Paul shares in this, if only a little. In Paul's life, every prison meal and every shipwreck, every lash that's laid on Paul's back, was to drive him to Christ and to conform him to the image of a suffering saviour.

A man of sorrows and acquainted with much grief. We can't expect to avoid suffering if we follow him. But we can also know that whatever afflictions we're under, every trial at work, every frustration in motherhood, every woe of old age, that in his fatherly providence, he can use painful trials, and he uses them to conform us to the image of our saviour.

The Puritan Thomas Watson is one of my favourites. He compares the pain that Christians suffer to the point of a pencil. He says, it is sharp.

But God uses it to draw Christ's image more clearly upon us. We were hearing this morning about how the church is one body with many members.

Watson says this, he said, Would we be parts of Christ's mystical body? Would we be part of Christ's mystical body and not be like him? There's one way in which I want us to see Paul here.

[21:32] And we see him being conformed to Christ. And it is strange to see in his suffering that he is joyful. But it's only because he can see that image of the ascended Christ reigning.

And as Christ reigned, he's handing out, he's holding out a crown of glory to Paul, that he's prepared for him. And as Paul is kind of contemplating this vision, as we think about this, I want us to think that that is our reality, if we are Christians.

We are seeing this world in its truest dimension. The heavens and the earth. And we ought to see in our daily lives, without every frustration, every temptation, every bit of suffering, that Christ is holding out the crown of glory.

But I also want us to see that there are nail marks on his open hands. And the two are tightly woven together. The one led to the other. And this is somehow is how Paul can write, to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

It's because as he lives, Paul's joy is that he will continue to live a life of service, and it is an increasingly cross-shaped life. That is his joy. He will treasure the ways in which God is conforming him to Christ, even if that means through suffering.

[22:57] It doesn't mean he likes the suffering. It means that he sees his savior and his hand in that. But death is gain for Paul as well.

To live is Christ and to die is gain. And that's because it will bring him to Christ himself. He says later in the passage, I desire to depart and to be with Christ.

And in this passage, it's kind of like Paul is weighing up death, isn't it? It's not his choice to make, but that seems to be what he's thinking about. The weight of glory on one side of the scales, though, is almost sending him to heaven.

He's kind of leaning heavenward. And as he rolls death around in his mouth and on his tongue, he begins to taste it. But because of Christ, the bitterness that was there is now tasting sweet.

And if you don't trust Christ, you're here this evening. And to you, death is just the extinction of all joy. And suffering is death's errand boy, sent out in advance.

[24:01] I want you to see that Paul doesn't just have a morbid fascination here. He's not a guy who just loves to write about death. He doesn't write like this on every page. But he trusts in Jesus.

He believes the good news, which transforms his life. So that even in the midst of suffering and in the jaws of death, we find him in his prison cell rejoicing.

Because whether he lives or dies, either way he's brought closer to the Savior who loves him. Let me finish with a third point. So place Christ's purposes above your own.

Because his purpose is your deliverance. But lastly, rejoice because you get to serve Christ today. So rejoice because you get to serve Christ today.

Paul concludes this section by kind of reasoning with himself. He says, verse 22, If I'm to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose, I cannot tell.

[25:01] I'm hard pressed between the two. His desire is to depart and be with Christ. But he doesn't stop at verse 23. If he did stop at verse 23, we might think that the whole point of the Christian life is is just to escape this world and get to heaven as quickly as possible.

Some people do think that. That it doesn't matter about this world, we've got heaven. But if that's you, I'd just say stop thinking that. I want you to see the pattern of Paul's cross-shaped life.

What he chooses, not that it's ever his choice to begin with, was to remain in the flesh on account of the church. That's his resolve. To remain in the flesh, to be among you, to serve and help the

church.

And in choosing this, he's only reflecting the priorities of his savior. The son of God in heaven saw the faces of the angels who worshipped him.

It was better to be in heaven, and yet he looked down to earth to his people, and which did he prefer? He came down from heaven, and in Philippians 2, Paul will unleash this vision of his joy, that Jesus Christ came down from heaven and took on flesh and took on suffering and even death on a cross, so that he could defeat death and the enemy Satan, so that he could unite those people, this people, with one another.

[26:33] And Paul does the same thing. I want you to see this pattern repeated. In verses 27 to 30, he remains in the flesh to encourage God's people, and the people God's called to stand firm against the enemy, because death has no power, and to encourage their faith and to unite them when they're divided.

Paul is living for Christ, he's living the cross-shaped life, and this is what brings joy to him. And what brings joy to the Philippians? Look in verse 25, I know that I'll remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith.

I want us to notice, just as we finish, that the real-life problems and the spiritual struggles of the Philippians, of the church, they aren't an obstacle to Paul's spirituality.

And that gives us a lesson, that the real-life struggles that you have, with your children, with your work, the sorrows that you have in dating, your complications of old age, whether your life is filled with minor frustrations, or whether you're in a season of suffering.

These things are not sent to you so that you can get around them, so that you can sit only in quietness on your own spiritual quest. This is your calling to be conformed to the image of Christ, to trust his purposes, and to place them above even your own personal goals, safe in the knowledge that in this he's working for your deliverance.

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