

I want to speak about how we can find “Joy in the Journey” we’re going through together - by that I mean the weird trip we’re taking through a global pandemic and social and political unrest in our nation. It’s not a journey we signed up for (did you?!), it’s not one we’re eager to take, but it’s what we’re doing. I need the Lord’s help to find joy in the midst of this crazy trip.

The coronavirus has affected all of our lives in so many ways: from the way we interact with one another, to the way we work, to the way we learn, to the way we worship, to the way we spend time with family, just to name a few. I’m sure you can think of other ways as well. I read a study that reported that more than **45 percent of Americans** feel the coronavirus has severely and negatively affected their emotional and mental well-being. Many people are feeling overwhelmed and anxious, which is absolutely normal in such a time of uncertainty.

The critical question is: What can we do about it? The study suggested that some people may be “broken” by a crisis, while others emerge from stressful experiences even stronger than before. Their conclusion - the secret ingredient is **resilience**. Resilience is the capacity or ability of a substance or object or person to spring back into shape after being put under intense pressure. Resiliency enables people to actually “grow” through adversity and find a way to prosper. **I would agree but with this qualification** - I’ve found that my resiliency has a very specific source - it comes out of my faith, it is borne out of my relationship with Christ, who overcame all the pressures of sin, and death, and hell, and came through it all in joyful victory. One measure for the level of resilience in our lives is found in how much **joy** we can maintain.

Whenever I think about joy in the midst of hardship, I am drawn to Philippians. The word “joy” is found in one form or another 15 times in the 104 verses of this short letter. When Paul writes about joy, he is not writing dry theory or from a place of ease and comfort. Paul didn’t write from an office lined with bookshelves (like mine). He wrote about joy from a place of imprisonment. I want us to slowly mine, or dig out, some of the treasure in Philippians over this summer - all the way through August (so read and reread this good book as we go along).

Most scholars believe Paul was writing from Rome around 61 AD. Paul was writing while imprisoned - once again. The book of Acts tells us that Paul was falsely accused and held without trial in Caesarea Maritima - a place in Northern Israel by the Mediterranean sea. I’ve been there to see the probable site of his jail several times (Drew and Chad saw it last year). When an assassination plot was discovered, Paul exercised his right as a Roman citizen and appealed his case to Caesar. On the way to Rome he survived a storm and a shipwreck. When he arrived in Rome he was placed in a kind of house arrest (I’ve also visited his probable place of captivity there). He was able to meet with friends, and to write letters, but house arrest under a threat of death, was no picnic. On top of that he was continually criticized and attacked for his teaching by the Roman pagans, by Jewish leaders, and sometimes by fellow Christians.

Even in these difficult circumstances Paul continued to rejoice.

It was not the first time he was in a difficult situation. When Paul and Silas visited Philippi to start the church (to which would later write this letter) they were thrown in jail. While they were in jail they chose to spend their time reading the Scriptures, having a jail house hymn sing, leading people to faith in Christ and baptizing them. Out of a time of hardship came joy. Joy was a companion of Paul every step of the journey - good and bad. How was that possible?

Listen again to the first two verses of our text to hear one of the prerequisites for joy.

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

First - we experience joy in Christ because we disciples are Saints in His church. Paul writes to the “Saints in Christ” in Philippi. The title “saint” is a title we don’t use very often. When we think of a “saint” we generally think of a person who is 1) extraordinary in their commitment to Christ and a worker of miracles and 2) dead. We don’t feel that we measure up to the first qualification and we don’t aspire to measure up the second - at least not right now!

But the word “Saint” here simply means, a “set-apart one.” If you’re a true follower of Christ, you are a person set-apart for His purposes and to accomplish His will. You are also set apart to be joined to a community of faith that is a vanguard for the Kingdom of God on earth.

What I want us to see, is that this is a position of honor and responsibility. We are “set-apart” to be a community that witnesses to the world, by living in contrast to the world’s values as we represent Kingdom values. We are also set apart and chosen to serve the Lord.

Notice this text, and others like it, says we’re “Saints in Christ.” Look for all the references in the Bible about being “in Christ.” In fact references to being “In Christ” occur 19 times in the first chapter of Philippians alone! Paul saw Himself as a servant of Christ who lived “in Christ” for the purpose of glorifying Christ.

Bible Scholar Marvin Vincent once wrote.

When Paul spoke of the Christian being in Christ, he meant that the Christian lives in Christ as a bird in the air, or a fish in the water, or the roots of a tree in the soil. What makes the Christian different is that he is always and everywhere conscious of the encircling presence of Jesus Christ.

Or as Acts 17:28 says, “In Him (God) we live and move and have our being.” In other words, our relationship with God in Christ is the source and foundation and goal of our existence. It defines who we are, and how we live, and what we do in this life.

If we want to know joy, we must maintain an attitude of dependence on God and we must never forget our honored calling. Joy comes from having a lifestyle where we remain aware of our position and our status with God. We lose our joy when we become distracted by the world, not just in sinful ways, but also in the simple orientation of our misplaced attention.

In his book Reaching (p. 189), Philip Yancey writes,

An accumulation of distractions — a malfunctioning computer, bills to pay, an upcoming trip, a friend's wedding, the general busyness of life — gradually edges God away from the center of my life. Some days I meet people, eat, work, make decisions, all without giving God a single thought.

Whenever that happens - and it happens to me - it causes our joy to leak out - to dissipate.

We need to remind ourselves every moment that we are children of God. How can we?

- Every once in a while address your Christian friends as “saint” (and even yourself in the mirror)
- Remind yourself each day that you serve a higher purpose. When you're losing your cool and tempted to add to the hateful ranting that is so common today - remind yourself that you are supposed to represent Jesus in this world. Your words and actions are supposed to point to Him.
- When life gets too hectic or too stressful and you're about to explode, slow down to a full stop and find a quiet corner to make contact with the Lord in prayer. Ask God to give you His perspective on: other people, circumstances, the things we crave, our time, our money, our hopes - all of it.
- When you feel down, cast aside, insignificant, remind yourself that - in Christ - you're specially chosen, you are child of the King, you are a saint of Christ's church who is called to join with other believers in God's redemptive work of sharing grace and salvation with all people of the world.

Next I want to lift up some characteristics of Christian joy I see in our text.

Before we talk more about joy, let me define it a bit more. Christian joy is something that is unaffected by circumstances. It's a state of mind and an orientation of the heart. Joy is a deep settled state of contentment, confidence, hope, grace, and peace that we can claim in Christ.

CHRISTIAN JOY IS ALWAYS A SHARED JOY.

In the opening words following the salutation Paul writes,

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, . . . It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:3-5, 7-8)

Those verses are what first came to mind when I started thinking about a sermon series for this summer. *“I thank my God every time I remember you.”* I've so missed being with all my brothers and sisters in Christ at Immanuel. I hope sometime soon, we can ALL gather together again and we can see each others faces and hug each other and share signs of love and affection. I confess that I have always been too insecure to be a big hugger. I'm too afraid people will clinch up or turn away - but when this is over (Come Lord Jesus!) I want to hug everyone in this church every time I see them. I love this church family, and I thank God every time I remember you, and when I remember you I always pray with joy because of you.

Paul told the Philippians that he was praying for them, and as he prayed, he prayed with joy. He said his joy came *“because of your partnership in the gospel.”* Paul’s joy was based on the many things he shared with this church family. Their partnership was more than just spending time together - there was a common grace, passion, and hope that bound them together.

Think about a great experience you’ve had? Perhaps it was your marriage or the birth of a child. Maybe it was accomplishment like graduating from High School or college. Whatever the experience I would venture to say that your joy was made more complete as you shared it with others - people you love that love you right back. A shared joy is always a deeper joy.

So what is it that Christians share? Let me give you three (of many) things we share.

First, we share a common grace. There are many things that divide us. We divide over politics, ethnic issues, gender differences, and personal tastes and interests. But when we come to Christ there is a bond with others that transcends differences. That bond is God’s grace.

The Bible makes it clear that we are accepted into God’s presence not because of the good we do but because of the grace God extends. Consequently, we’re all on an equal footing. No one gets an “edge” when it comes to grace, no one deserves it, but is offered freely to all in Christ.

I think this is one reason you can go into a gathering of true Christians and quickly feel a sense of belonging and oneness. Even before you get to know them well you are inclined to open to your heart to them and you feel at home with them. How does it happen? It happens because of our common grace. As the old song says, *“We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord.”* It is God’s Grace that makes this oneness possible. It is the glue that holds us together.

Second, we share a common passion. Jesus has called us all to do the same thing: glorify Him in our lives, and testify of Him to our friends and neighbors. We may disagree on any number of social or political issues, but we ought to agree that Jesus Christ is only one hope for the world. When Christ called us to be one with Him, it also brought us together with all other disciples of Christ in a shared mission. We are people working together to get the message out that Jesus is, as He said, *“the way, the truth, and the life - the only way to the Father.”* We work together in this privileged and joyful task of sharing the good news of God’s grace.

Finally, we share a common hope. We are all looking forward to meeting Jesus face to face and to being with Christ forever. As we will see in this letter, it is this hope that enables us to have joy in the midst of trials. This hope makes us content in whatever circumstance we find ourselves. We have hope because we trust in Christ to share his victory of life over death, and love over hate, and faith over fear, and justice over oppression, of joy over despair.

As we worship we praise our God who is guiding the course of history.

The free will God allows, coupled with human sinfulness, means things in the world will get worse before they get better most of the time, but there is a day coming, when God will draw all things and people to their appropriate and intended conclusion. In the midst of hard times, we live with hope instead of despair because we know that God will bring us through it all.

Our joy in Christ is also a CONFIDENT JOY.

I believe Paul's next statement is one of the greatest reasons for joy we have. Philippians 1:6 says, "*being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*" What does that mean?

First, it reminds us that it was God who began the work of salvation in us. In other words, God is the one responsible for our salvation and redemption. The Bible says that God's grace comes first and enables our response of faith in Christ. Our salvation is not based on our goodness but on God's grace. It is not anchored in how obedient we are (which is a good thing since we all fall short). Our salvation is based on the work that Christ has done on our behalf.

Listen to the words of Jesus in John 6:65, ". . . no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them." The Bible is clear, unless God first works in us, we will never come to Him, or be saved, but when we respond to His love working in us - we begin to rejoice in God's grace.

Second, God continues the work of salvation. Full salvation - or becoming holy - is a process. We are forgiven and adopted right away when we trust Christ - but we don't become perfect holy believers at the moment of our conversion. As in life, we are born as spiritual infants and we need time to grow up. As we are growing - we're always God's children - even as we stumble, and fall, and make mistakes, God is patient and continually gracious to us.

How quick we are to forget this truth. We can lose our joy when we get frustrated by our own failures. We expect perfection and become discouraged when we don't reach it. While it is true that we should seek to be perfect in love - it is also true that we're not there yet. I love the sentiment in the old saying, "*please be patient with me, God is not finished with me yet.*"

Third, God will finish what He started. This is such an important truth. It is the basis of our confidence, our peace, our joy. God will finish what He has started in us - He won't give up.

In John 10 we read the words of Jesus, who said,

"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand." (John 10:28, 29)

Do you understand what Jesus is telling us? He is saying that once we give our lives to Him He will never let us go or condemn us or offer us anything other than love and grace.

That continual offer of Grace means:

- We can be bold rather than tentative
- We can be confident rather than nervous
- We can be grateful rather than insecure
- We can rejoice rather than being afraid

Our Joy in Christ is also meant to be an ever INCREASING JOY. Phil. 1:9-11 says,

“And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ - to the glory and praise of God.”

Paul is praying that the believers would continue to grow. He reminds them that they ought to be sure of their destiny - because it based on Christ’s work - but they should also be progressing in the faith. The Christian life is not static . . . it meant to be continually growing.

He prays that our love may abound more and more. He is not just asking that we feel more strongly about each other (though that is certainly a part of the process), He wants us to grow more and more in our love for the Father. This love is not just emotional . . . it is based in our knowledge and depth of insight. As we learn more about the Lord, we begin to love Him more completely, and as we know and love the Lord more fully, we can see change in several areas:

- **In wisdom.** As we grow in our understanding and love for the Lord and we are better able to tell the difference between right and wrong and good and evil and we work for good in good and godly ways. For example, we may get angry, but we never use that as an excuse for sin.
- **In character.** We must pursue that which is “best, pure, and blameless.” As we grow in our knowledge and love of Christ, it will make a difference in the kind of people we are. We will be more consistently righteous, more compassionate, more courageous, and more gracious.
- **In service.** As we grow, we make it our aim to bring God glory. We see every moment as an opportunity to honor God and reflect His light and love into an often dark and hateful world.

Sometimes, at least for me, the progress I’m making seems to move along much too slowly. Sometimes I’m so discouraged when I focus on the unfinished parts in my character.

I read somewhere that the work of God is like building a house. At times you see great progress (like when a crew of carpenters is putting up the frame of the structure). It goes from looking like a bundle of sticks to the clear outline of a home. However, at other times progress seems to be slow or even nonexistent (like when you’re doing finish work such as sanding, or staining, or punch lists), but it is all part of the process. There are times when you’ll see rapid growth and dramatic change in your life. Thank God for those times. But at other times you may feel that God has stopped working in your life or that you will never turn out right. But God will never give up on you. Hear me say that again, “*God will never give up on you.*”

God may be doing some slow and hard work on some area of your character right now before He moves onto another part of your life. I must say, our growth can go slower when we work against God with our misplaced loyalties and giving attention to lesser things, but God is still greater than all of that. God has not and will not stop working to make you holy and Christ-like until that glorious day when He calls you home to Himself or at the end of human history.

As we go along in this series, I'll share some ways we can cooperate with God in our growth.

This morning we have seen some of the characteristics of a joyful Christian life.

- It is based on our identity as children of God and saints in Christ's church.
- It is a shared joy - we share a common grace, and passion, and hope - we're the family of God.
- We also share a confident joy - because God is always working to help us grow and to become more and more like Christ. God began the work, God will continue the work, and God will finish the good work He has started in our lives. God never fails.
- Our joy is ever increasing as we experience more of the changes God makes possible in us.

I had planned on visiting some more national parks on my bucket list this summer, but most parks are still closed to camping and the whole thing is just too unpredictable, so instead, I'm just going to take a long and leisurely trip this Summer through Paul's letter to the Philippians.

I hope you will go with me on this journey to find a way to hold on to our joy.