

SERENDIPITY #5
THE JOY OF SUFFERING
Philippians

I. Good Grief?

A. The Problem of Pain.

The problem of pain is the believer's **hardest question**. The question is difficult for all humans but especially for Christians because of two fundamental presuppositions of the faith.

Presupposition #1. God is **good**... all the time.

Presupposition #2. God is **all-powerful**... omnipotent in strength.

Thus, when suffering comes, the believer is caught on the horns of a dilemma. Either God doesn't care (then he isn't good) or he can't do anything about it (then he isn't powerful). In other words, God **could** do something if only he **would**. Or God **would** do something if he **could**. It seems our only conclusion is that God is less than he claims to be. Or perhaps, he doesn't exist at all. (Suffering: the rock of atheism.)

Peter Kreeft puts it this way: "How can a mother trust and love a God who let her baby die?" (*Making Sense Out of Suffering*: 1986. p. 10.)

B. The Gospel Proclamation.

Jesus does not "explain" suffering. He teaches us that pain is not a riddle to be solved, but a **mystery** to be **embraced**. He conquers suffering... by suffering. Like a blotter, or a sponge, Jesus absorbs the pain of the world into himself. Consequently, the New Testament has a radically new perspective on suffering and pain.

- *Consider it pure **joy**, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds... (James 1:2).*
- *...but we also **rejoice** in our sufferings... (Roman 5:3).*
- *You sympathized with those in prison and **joyfully** accepted the confiscation of your property... (Hebrews 10:34).*
- *They called the apostles in and had them flogged... The apostles left the Sanhedrin, **rejoicing** because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. (Acts 5:40-41).*
- *Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. **Rejoice** and be glad... (Matthew 5:11-12).*

What is going on here? Is the Gospel sadistic?

C. Redefining Terms.

If the Gospel is indeed calling us to be **joyful** in **suffering**, we should carefully verify that we are defining these two terms correctly.

1. Understanding Suffering.

We tend to assume that all suffering is "bad." We expend vast amounts of time and energy on pain relief, pain management. We want to live **pain-free**. The shallowness of this assumption is seen in the case of leprosy. Lepers have no pain sensors. They feel no pain. Yet we do not envy their condition! Why? Because pain warns us and reminds us of other realities we tend to forget. In this sense, pain is a **blessing**.

*It was **good for me** to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees... In **faithfulness** you have afflicted me...(Psalm 119:71, 75).*

2. Understanding Joy.

Most Americans tend to confuse joy with **happiness**. The Bible never calls us to be happy in suffering. Happiness is based on **circumstances**. The root "hap" originally meant chance, luck or fortune (hapless, haphazard, happen). Happiness depends on outward circumstances.

Christians who confuse joy with happiness, may try to face suffering by resorting to immature and dysfunctional patterns of behavior..

- **Pretending**... put a smiley face on... and act like all is well.
- **Denial**... "I'm not in pain... This doesn't hurt."

Joy is not something that hap-pens. It is a **gift** of grace not the achievement of reaching happy circumstances. It refers to the deep and lasting **peace** that comes from knowing God, who loves me, is in control. Joy is the result of choices we make. Therefore, **choose joy!** This poem by Ella Wheeler says it well.

*One ship drives east and another drives west
With the self-same winds that blow.
Tis the set of the sails
And not the gales
Which tell us the way to go.*

TABLE TALK

1. Have you ever struggled with the "hardest question" (p. 1)? What provoked the question for you? Did you find an "answer"? What was it?
2. What is the difference between happiness and joy?
3. What are some of the things that rob you of joy? Describe them.
4. Have you known Christians who manifest joy in the midst of suffering? Did you feel it was authentic? Why or why not?
5. What does it mean to "choose joy"?
6. How does one go about setting his sails so that the winds of adversity blow you to your desired destination?

II. Philippians: Introduction.

- A. The letter to the Philippians is all about **joy**. At least 19 times in these four chapters Paul mentions joy, rejoicing or gladness.

- *In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with **joy**... (1:4).*
- *The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I **rejoice**. Yes, and I will continue to **rejoice**... (1:18).*
- *Finally, my brothers, **rejoice** in the Lord! (3:1).*
- ***Rejoice** in the Lord always. I will say it again: **Rejoice!** (4:4).*

- B. But the book is about more than joy. It is about joy in the midst of **suffering!**

- *For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to **suffer** for him... (Phil. 1:29).*
- *But even if I am being **poured out** like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and **rejoice** with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me. (Phil. 2:17-18).*

- *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his **sufferings**, becoming like him in his death... (Phil. 3:10).*

C. Blessed Prison?

Philippians was written from prison! The joy Paul is describing is not some pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by sentimentalism. No. Paul lived in the "real world" of suffering and pain. And the joy he describes is equally real. Prisons in the first century were very different from prisons in 21st century America! These were **miserable circumstances**.

Roman imprisonment was preceded by being stripped naked and then flogged, a humiliating, painful, and bloody ordeal. The bleeding wounds went untreated; prisoners sat in painful leg or wrist chains. Mutilated, blood-stained clothing was not replaced, even in the cold of winter. In his final imprisonment, Paul asked for a cloak, presumably because of the cold.

Most cells were dark, especially the inner cells of a prison, like the one Paul and Silas inhabited in Philippi. Unbearable cold, lack of water, cramped quarters, and sickening stench from few toilets made sleeping difficult and waking hours miserable...

Prison food, when available, was poor. Most prisoners had to provide their own food from outside sources... Because of the miserable conditions, many prisoners begged for a speedy death. Others simply committed suicide. (John McRay, Christian History, Issue 47, p. 14.)

D. Outline of the Book.

THE MIND OF CHRIST			
Joy in Ministry	Joy in Conforming to the Image of Christ	Joy in the Journey	The Secret of Joy
Gospel Friendships	The Mind of Christ (self-giving love)	Press on toward the goal – knowing Christ	Learning Contentment
Chapter 1	Chapter 2	Chapter 3	Chapter 4

III. Philippians: A Survey of the Mind of Christ.

A. Joy in Ministry (chapter 1).

1. The joy of Gospel friendships (vv. 3-11).

- I thank my God every time I remember you... (v. 3).
- We are partners in the Gospel... (v. 5).
- You share in God's grace with me... (v. 7).
- I long for you with the affection of Christ Jesus... (v. 8).

One of the greatest joys in all of life, a joy that cannot be extinguished by suffering, is friendships in Christ. Think about the men in your small group. One way to find joy is to stop dwelling on your own circumstances and begin to pray for one another. Here is a model prayer.

*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. (vv. 9-11).*

2. The joy of a win-win situation (vv. 12-30).

Paul sits in prison, awaiting trial. The outcome is unknown. Will he be found guilty and be executed? Or will he be found innocent and released? Paul reflects deeply on his circumstances and arrives at a very joyful conclusion: either way, I win! If I am released, I'll continue to spread the Gospel all over the world. Joy! If I'm killed, I'll go straight to heaven. And my death for the Gospel will inspire others to boldness. Double joy!

Paul mentions four reasons why his circumstances are cause for joy.

a) My imprisonment has served to advance the Gospel (vv. 12-14).

- All the palace guards know why I am here: for Christ's sake (v. 13).
- My imprisonment has caused others to be more courageous in their witness (v. 14).

b) Christ is being preached and talked about (vv. 15-18).

Some who "preach Christ" do so from impure motives (envy, rivalry, selfish ambition).

But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice (v. 18).

c) Whether I **live** or **die**... Christ will be exalted (vv. 19-26).

- If I am released from prison, this means fruitful labor for me (v. 22) and progress and joy in the faith for the Philippians (v. 25).
- If I am killed, I'll go to heaven to be with Christ, which is better by far (v. 23).

*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is **gain** (v. 21).*

d) My situation **inspires others** to courageous witness and joyful suffering (vv. 27-30).

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have (vv. 29-30).

B. Joy in Conforming to the Image of Christ (chapter 2).

1. Develop the ability **to think** like Christ thought (vv. 1-18).

a. This makes my joy perfect (vv. 1-4).

Don't let selfish ambition and vain conceit characterize your lives! Rather be humble, like-minded, and one in spirit. Stop looking out for **your own interests** and start looking out for the interests of others! This will make my joy complete.

b. The mind of Christ (vv. 5-11).

We will never learn to think of others as better than ourselves and to look out for others' interests more than our own, until our minds are transformed. We need a brain transplant. We need the mind of Christ.

Learn to think the way Jesus thought!

- Who emptied himself... and gave up his rights as God.
- He became a servant.
- He humbled himself.
- He poured out his life... for others.

c. Therefore, think new thoughts.... Have the mind of Christ.

1) Work out what God has worked in. (vv. 12-13).

*So then, my beloved... **work out** your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at **work in** you, both to will and to **work for** His good pleasure. (vv. 12-13. NASB).*

- **Work out...** Paul is not promoting works righteousness. Rather he is calling us to become **what we already are!**
- **Work in...** We can do nothing of any worth in this life until God first works in us through his Spirit giving us a **new mind** and a **new heart**.
- **Work for...** As the transforming power of the Spirit begins to change us deep within, then we begin to operate with the mind of Christ and do those **actions** that are pleasing to God.

2) Joyfully accept your circumstances (vv. 14-18).

*Do everything without **complaining** or **arguing**, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe.... (vv. 14-15).*

2. Two illustrations of Christ-likeness (vv. 19-30).

a. Timothy (vv. 19-24).

It seems that only Timothy, among Paul's immediate pastoral contacts, had truly developed the mind of Christ. Only Timothy was characterized by **self-giving love**.

I have no one else like him... For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But... Timothy has proved himself... in the work of the Gospel... (vv. 20-22).

b. Epaphroditus (vv. 25-30).

This pastor also is a model of the mind of Christ. *He almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me. (v. 30).*

C. Joy in the Journey (chapter 3).

1. Paul's destination is clear: **knowing Christ** and being **like Him** (vv. 1-14).

- *...I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord... (v. 8).*
- *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. (v. 10-11).*

Being like Christ is not really about the ability to perform miracles, preach great sermons, or attract the masses. No. Christlikeness is thinking like Jesus thought... laying down his life for others. Practicing **agape-love**.

- *After he said this, he showed them his hands and side... Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." (John 20:20-21).*
- *We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. (II Cor. 4:10-12).*

2. But beware. Not all who follow Christ think this way! (vv. 15-21).

- Imitate those who have the mind of Christ (vv. 15-21).
Follow their example (v. 17).
- Avoid those who don't have the same destination (vv. 18-21). Don't imitate those who:
 - Are enemies of **the cross** (v. 18).
 - Worship their **belly** (v. 19).
 - Glory in their **shame** (v. 19).
 - Keep their mind on **earthly things** (v. 19).
- Remember:
 - Our citizenship is in **heaven** (v. 20).
 - The Lord Jesus is coming again and will **transform** our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body (v. 21).

D. The Secret of Joy (chapter 4).

1. Don't worry, be **prayerful** (vv. 4-9).

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (vv. 6-7).

2. Learn how to be **content** (vv. 10-20).

...for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. (vv. 11-13).

E. Summary of Philippians.

Finding joy in suffering is only possible when:

1. We have godly **friendships**.
2. We realize that for the believer, life is a **win-win** proposition.
3. We have the **mind of Christ**.
 - i. The welfare of others is more important than our own.
 - ii. Humility.
 - iii. Giving up our rights so we can lovingly serve others.
 - iv. No grumbling or complaining.
 - v. We work out what God has worked in.
4. Our greatest aspiration is **knowing Christ** and the fellowship of his suffering.
5. We don't worry... rather, we **pray**.
6. We have learned **contentment** in all circumstances.
7. We can do **all things** through Christ who gives us strength.

IV. Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants.

Dr. Paul Brand worked as a missionary doctor in India among people who never felt pain: lepers. You may think it enviable to never feel pain. But consider:

- Lepers can break a bone and not know it... and walk on a broken bone to the point where amputation is required.
- During the night, lepers may place their hand in the fire and not know it... to the point where the hand is burned beyond repair.
- Lepers may have a grain of sand in their eye and feel nothing... till the loss of sight tells them there is a problem.

Yes, pain is a gift. Life without pain can really **hurt you!**

TABLE TALK

1. What have you learned about joy today? What have you learned about suffering (pain)? What have you learned about how these two realities interact?
2. Is pain a "good" thing or a "bad" thing?
3. Is God the "cause" of pain and suffering? Or does God just "permit" it to happen? Is the answer to this question important? Why or why not?
4. Look at the "Summary" statements on page 9. Describe the areas where you need most to grow.
5. Describe a situation in your life right now that is causing pain. What have you learned in this lesson that you intend to apply in your personal circumstances? Share this with your brothers and ask them to pray for you.