

## Joyful Suffering

Philippians 1:12-26

Our series this fall is called ***Rejoice in the Lord***. This is our North Star – our fixed point of reference. If we will all orient ourselves toward this goal and journey together in this direction it will draw us together and energize us for our common mission, to spread the joy we have in the Lord to others.

The image we chose for the series probably reminds you of **the wise men**, following the star over Bethlehem that led them to Jesus, the newborn King of Israel. Our purpose is the same as those wise men. We are following a fixed star. ***We are travelling together in the same direction.*** We are bowing down to worship the King of heaven who came to save us. And then we are sharing the good news that the King has come! Just like the wise men, ***we have found the greatest joy there is in Jesus.*** And now we want to share that joy with everyone we possibly can.

I realize that this is a simple idea – to rejoice in the Lord – and that fourteen weeks is a long time to devote to such a simple idea. But it is such a **central and foundational idea** that is bound up, for me, in everything it means to worship, to glorify God and to follow Jesus that I think it is well worth reflecting at some length on what it means to fix our joy in Christ alone.

***This is not a teaching we can ever master or move on from.*** This is the essence of what it means to love God – to enjoy Him, to delight in Him, to make Him the supreme treasure of our hearts, the central focus of our thoughts and the desire to glorify Him the motive behind everything we do. And every day our hearts drift off course, we stray from our fixed point and begin to seek our joy and fulfillment in everything but Jesus. So we need these reminders to come back to our North Star – and we need each other as we travel along the way!

This morning I want to focus on Philippians 1:21 ***“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”*** Philippians 1:21 Just look at those words and let their profound simplicity sink in. “For to me... to live is Christ... and to die is gain.”

***“For to me.”*** This is personal. This is essential to who I am. This is defining.

***“To live is Christ.”*** My life is all about Jesus. He IS my life. My life is His. I can just as easily say that I am in Christ as I can say that Christ is in me. It’s not just that my life belongs to Jesus, though that is true. More than that, my life IS Christ. Each moment I live and breath is another moment given over to worship and serve the risen Christ, my Lord, my Savior, my joy, my one thing.

***“And to die is gain.”*** Death is not the end for the believer. In fact, death is the beginning of the life we were truly made for – free from sin, free from sadness and pain – forever in the presence of our loving God, ***perfectly united with Him in the perfect world He will remake from the ashes of this one.***

“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” Let’s dig into this life-changing verse and invite the Lord to deepen our joy in Him.

Here is the big idea for the message: **If our greatest joy is being one with Jesus then we can rejoice in suffering and even death. “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”**  
**Philippians 1:21**

If you can honestly say, “for to me to live is Christ” then it naturally follows for you to say, “and to die is gain.” ***But that is one gigantic IF.*** IF our greatest joy is being one with Jesus THEN we can rejoice in suffering and even death. THEN nothing can shake us in this life. THEN we will have deep and abiding joy and peace and endurance and love. But it all hinges on that IF.

**Is your greatest joy being one with Jesus?** *Can you honestly say, “For to me to live is Christ”?* Here are ***three expressions of that kind of union with Jesus.*** To be one with Jesus it means we must be of one heart, one mind and one body with Him. We’ll take each of those in turn and then see how being one with Jesus can preserve our joy in suffering and even in the face of death.

### **“For to me to live is Christ”**

Being one with Christ is central to all the writings of Paul. As a teenager it was very formative for me to meditate on all of the “in Christ” verses in the New Testament. I was very insecure in my appearance and with my reputation, attending large public schools all the way through. But by regularly reminding myself of the Gospel in these “In Christ” statements, I developed a confidence that was not rooted as much in myself and was much more secure in Christ.

“For he chose us in Him to be adopted as his sons.” “If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation.” “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” There are dozens of these.

Listen to the ones that are right here in Philippians 1:

- **I am a servant of Christ v.1**
- **I am a saint in Christ v. 1**
- **I have grace and peace from Christ v. 2**
- **I have confidence in Christ v. 6**
- **I have the affection of Christ v. 8**
- **I am becoming pure and blameless for the day of Christ v.10**
- **I am bearing fruit through Christ v.11**
- **I am helped by the Spirit of Christ v. 19**
- **I am secure in Christ v. 23**

Think about what it means to be IN CHRIST. I am so bound to my Savior that I am not just near him or with him but I am IN Him. He covers and encloses me. He encompasses my very being.

To be one with Jesus means having **one heart** – His heart. **“For to me to live is Christ...” One Heart: the spiritual center of my being**

This becomes my identity. In the Bible ***the heart is much more than the seat of emotion*** which we usually limit “heart” language to today. The heart is the center of who you are – the seat of your thoughts, your feelings, your desires – the essence of you. That is why Proverbs exhorts us to guard our hearts above all things. That is why Jesus says our words are the overflow of our hearts. That is why God looks at the heart not the outer appearance. That is why worshiping God with our words when our hearts are far from Him is detestable to Him.

To be one with Jesus means that ***his heart is mine and my heart is his*** – we have one heart. Look back at verse 7 – “It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart.” Verse 8 – “For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.” The believers at Philippi were in Paul’s heart because **his heart was filled up with the affections of Christ**. What Jesus loved, Paul loved. What was important to Jesus was important to Paul. Jesus was IN his heart.

Are you one in heart with Jesus? Are you filled up with his affections? Do you love what he loves? Is Jesus central to your very being? Do you define yourself according to Christ? Is your greatest joy being one with Jesus?

Listen again to how Paul prays in 1:9-11 – *“And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.”* Philippians 1:9-11

With the very heart of Jesus beating inside of us, our love will abound more and more. It will be a knowledgeable and discerning love that will conform our desires increasingly to match those of Jesus so that we approve what is excellent and grow in holiness, filled with the fruit of the Holy Spirit, the fruit of righteousness.

It’s clear from this prayer that being of one heart with Jesus is very closely related to being of one mind with him. Not only is Jesus the spiritual center of your being as a believer, but Jesus is also the purposeful focus of our thoughts. What Jesus thinks about, we think about. His focus becomes our focus.

What did Jesus think about? What was on his mind? Three things: the glory of God, the advance of the gospel and the growth of the church. Paul’s prayer culminates with the result he desires – the glory and praise of God. Jesus’ prayer in John 17 expresses his central purpose and prayer – to bring glory to the Father.

If you are of one mind with Jesus then ***the glory of God*** will often be on your mind. As we saw last week, the key to joyful prayer is ***turning prayer from work into worship*** by focusing on the glory, the greatness and goodness of God; by reflecting on Jesus – all that He is and all He has done.

Jesus’ mind was eternally filled up and overflowing with the glory of God. Because of that, his mind was also directed toward ***the advance of the Gospel*** and ***the growth of the church***. He came so that the good news – that the glorious King of heaven had come to earth to save sinners – could be proclaimed in all the earth. Evangelism and church planting go hand in hand. As the good news is proclaimed and sinners repent and believe in Jesus, churches are needed where these believers can worship and grow in fellowship with one another.

It is clear in Philippians 1 that Paul’s mind is filled up with these three priorities. V. 12 “What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.”

Not only had more people heard the gospel through his time in jail but also “most of the brothers, having become more confident in the lord by my imprisonment are much more bold to speak the word without fear.” (v. 14)

So the church was growing both in numbers and maturity. More people were hearing and responding to the gospel and the believers were growing in boldness.

Even when Paul was faced with rival preachers who were criticizing him and just trying to promote themselves, he did not let his mind dwell on the offense of this but instead was able to rejoice in v. 18 “In every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.”

While sitting in prison and awaiting a verdict, Paul’s focus was not on his material comforts or even whether he might be executed but in v. 20 – “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.”

Do you see the point illustrated here? **If our greatest joy is being one with Jesus then we can rejoice in suffering and even death.** Paul had so filled his mind with Christ that he knew he could honor Christ either in life or in death. His heart was bound to Jesus as his central identity and his mind was focused on the purposes of Christ.

The inevitable result was that Paul was also **one body with Jesus – in the energetic investment of his life.** Being one with Jesus in heart and mind is what led Paul to v. 21 and the statement, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” V. 22 “If I am to live in the flesh that means fruitful labor for me.”

Either way Paul would honor Christ. If I die as a martyr for Jesus, I honor him. If I live as a preacher for Jesus, I honor him. Either way, I honor Christ. We should share this confidence even in the face of suffering, danger and death. To live is Christ and means fruitful labor as we proclaim Him. To die is gain – to enter His presence forevermore.

The martyrs have experienced this.

“People rejected the old gods because of the cruelties perpetrated in their names. ***People inquired what was so good that it seemed preferable to life itself,*** “so that neither loss of goods, nor of the light, nor bodily pain or tortures deter them.” In Egypt in 311–312, Eusebius of Caesarea was an eyewitness of the final horrors of Maximinus’s persecution. He writes that “we ourselves beheld, when we were at these places, many [Copts] all at once in a single day, some of whom suffered beheading, others punishment by fire, so that the murderous axe was dulled, and worn out, was broken in pieces, and the executioners grew utterly weary.... It was then that we observed a most marvelous eagerness and a truly divine power and zeal in those who placed their faith in the Christ of God. Thus, as soon as sentence was given against the first, some from one quarter and others from another would leap up to the tribunal before the judge and confess themselves Christians.... ”

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-27/persecution-in-early-church-did-you-know.html>

The early church grew exponentially because it was clear that the Christians had found something that was worth more to them even than life. When plagues came through villages, most people would flee, abandoning even their immediate family members. But the Christians would stay, and many of them died as a result. But the survivors of the plague remembered these brave, sacrificial heroes and their courage illustrated the fact that their BODIES belonged to Jesus, along with their hearts and minds.

Can we say the same? Do your bodies and lives belong to Jesus? The test of this is when things go wrong – when you get a bad health diagnosis, when you lose your job or get passed by for that promotion, when you are under financial pressure – say, because your house in Chicago has been on the market for two months and still hasn't sold... Just to choose an arbitrary example... We don't need to stress about it. As my Dad has often said, "It's only money."

It is essential that we be **eternity-minded Christians here, not earthly-minded materialists.** Many of us will gladly give lip service to this verse, "to die is gain." (Yay for heaven!) But practically speaking we invest our hearts, minds and bodies in THIS LIFE and THIS WORLD as much and as long as we can. Truthfully, many of us fear death almost as much as our non-Christian neighbors who have no hope at all. Many American Christians are terrible at grieving and one of the reasons for this is that we don't REALLY believe in heaven. We aren't really eternity minded and we don't really believe that to die is gain. We are in danger of being earthly-minded materialists – functional atheists.

If we were honest we would say that to live is gain and to die is the end. Life is everything. Health is everything. I CANNOT handle it if I lose my health. I would totally lose it if my loved one dies. I could not go on without this person.

Brothers and sisters, **death is a defeated enemy.** The sting of death is sin and that sting has been removed by Jesus' death and resurrection. So we need not fear death. In fact we can mock death and say, "Where is your sting?" "Whattaya got, there death? Not such a big play-uh anymore, eh? Without your big stick there called sin..."

Paul writes in v. 19 "for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus this will turn out for my deliverance."

That word ***deliverance is the same word for "salvation"*** that appears just a few verses later in v. 28. And since Paul is uncertain whether he will live or die it can't be that what he knows in v. 19 is that he will be set free from prison. No, on that point he is uncertain. But his whole point here is that whether by life or by death Christ will be honored and Paul will be saved – this will work out for my deliverance. About that he was certain.

And the reason for this certainty is that he was **one with Jesus in heart, mind and body.** His body belonged to Jesus and he saw his body as an extension of Jesus' own body. Isn't it fascinating that the church is called "the body of Christ"? He is our head and we are His body? This is so humbling and amazing all at once. The way God works in the world is through Christians doing the work of Christ our head. We are his hands and feet, his eyes and mouth.

Paul saw this clearly in his own life and in his teachings on the church. And so he invested all of his energies in the work of Christ. That's what it means to be one body with Jesus – ***to be living extensions of Him***. It means that we devote our time and energy to Him. We commit our schedules to Him. **We don't just give him a few minutes of our day, we give him all of our minutes and all of our days.** Your body is not your own. You were bought with a price. So honor God with your body.

***Are you yoked to Jesus?*** Are you bound to Him? Does the heart of Jesus beat inside of you? Do you define yourself according to all that you are IN CHRIST? Does the mind of Jesus fill your thoughts? Are you purposefully focused on the things that matter to Jesus – the glory of God, the advance of the Gospel and the growth of the church? Are you one body with Jesus, pouring your life out as a living sacrifice of praise to the One who made you and saved you?

If our greatest joy is being one with Jesus then we can rejoice in suffering and even death. Then we can say, "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain." Three quick applications of this related to our suffering and to death.

#### **"And to die is gain"**

First, **my difficulties can advance Jesus' mission**. We saw this back in v. 12 with how God used Paul's imprisonment to let many Roman soldiers hear the gospel and to increase the boldness of the believers. So our suffering can advance Jesus' mission in the world.

And we also know that pain, suffering and loss can advance Jesus' mission in our own hearts and lives. Often it is suffering that refines us and grows us most as believers because it chisels away our attachments to the things of this world – our health, our jobs, our things...

Jesus' purpose in our lives and in all of history is ***to spread the gospel of the glory of God***. Can you see how God uses even the hardest losses and the greatest struggles to prove the point that HE IS ENOUGH. God is worth more to me than my health. He is worth more to me than my wife and children. He is worth more to me than my house or car or job. God is enough. More than that, God is my supreme joy. So I am not just content with Christ alone, I rejoice in Him, no matter what I'm going through.

So my difficulties can advance Jesus' mission in my life and in the world. Second, **my death can bring glory to Jesus' name**.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego knew this when they refused to bow down to Nebuchednezzar's statue even when faced with the fiery furnace. Their friend, Daniel, knew this when he continued to pray to God and not to the earthly king even when threatened with a den full of hungry lions. Elijah knew this as he was confronted by hundreds of prophets of Ba'al. All of the prophets knew this as they were ridiculed, beaten and many were killed. The death of the godly can be one of the most powerful testimonies to the glory of God – that faithfulness to Him matters more to us even than life.

The apostles of Jesus all knew that their deaths could and should honor the name of Jesus. One after another they gave their lives, standing up for the gospel they believed. Paul knew this as he sat tied to a Roman guard and wrote these words to Philippi – "For to me to live is Christ and to

die is gain.” Peter insisted that he be crucified upside down, he was so committed to exalting Christ in his death he didn’t feel worthy of being executed in the same way as Jesus.

The early believers knew their deaths could bring glory to Jesus’ name and when waves of persecution came they refused to recant their faith but were torn to pieces by wild animals, burned at the stake, crucified, beaten or beheaded. But in the midst of that, in story after story, the witnesses saw that the believers died at peace and even with joy on their faces. The blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church.

Your death too can bring glory to Jesus’ name. But it won’t do so automatically. Just living a long life and dying under hospice care does not necessarily bring glory to Jesus. Can we say with Paul in v. 20

***“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”*** Philippians 1:20

Only when we live that way can we truly say, “To live is Christ and to die is gain.”

It is a farce to think that your death will honor Christ if your life has borne no witness to Him at all. If Jesus is not really on your heart, not really part of your identity; if Jesus is not on your mind and his purposes are not your purposes; if Jesus does not direct your body and your life but you really run the show – then don’t kid yourself into thinking this passage applies to you. Your death will simply be an extension of your life.

**If your greatest joy is being one with Jesus then you can rejoice in suffering and even death.**

Your death CAN bring glory to Jesus’ name if you live your life, right up to your final breath, in service to Christ your king. And finally the believer’s death will **complete his union with Jesus.** That is why “to die is gain.”

V. 23, “My desire is to depart and be with Christ for that is far better.” At the moment of death a believer does not “pass away,” or drift into a sleep of the soul. No, at the moment of death, a Christian believer is ushered into the presence of God by Jesus Christ Himself. Paul writes in 2 Cor. 5:8 Paul writes, “we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.”

If we are at home in the body it means we are still away from the Lord. But at the moment that our physical body dies, our eternal and indestructible soul is immediately at home with the Lord. So death – for the believer – will complete our union with Jesus.

Now we only see a dim reflection, like peering at the eclipse through \$2 plastic glasses. In that moment we will see Him face to face, like suddenly standing on the surface of the sun and being impervious to its light and heat because ***you’ve become Kryptonian.*** That’s a pretty good analogy, actually. As humans we cannot endure the light and heat of the sun except at a great distance – just as being sinners we cannot be close with God. But when we die the sanctification process will be complete and we will be fully and finally glorified, basically like being turned into super man. Then just as he can not only fly to the sun but is joyfully nourished by it, so we will fly to Jesus and be filled to overflowing by the glory of His immediate presence.

For the believer, “to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

I’d like to share with you a song by Steven Curtis Chapman. It’s called Glorious Unfolding. If you have followed SC2 like we have over the last 20 years you’ll not only appreciate his music but also his story.

Steven went to China in 2004 with strict instructions from his wife not to visit any orphanages. They already had two beautiful girls they had adopted from China and Mary Beth didn’t think it was time for another one. But Steven DID visit an orphanage and fell in love with Maria – and 7 months later she was a Chapman.

Maria was a precocious bundle of energy and a delight to the whole family. But on May 21, 2008, tragedy struck. Seeing her big brother, Will Franklin, coming slowly up the driveway in his truck 5 year old Maria went running toward him so he could get her up on the monkey bars as he often had before. Because of the narrow drive and Maria’s small height, Will never saw Maria coming and the truck ran right into her. Though they raced her to the hospital, she had already died.

It was the most terrible, unimaginable moment and is frozen in all of their memories to this day. Their grief continues and Steven says, **"It's a completely unfixable, broken-beyond-repair situation until heaven. In heaven, and only in heaven, will this make sense."**

But in that line is the proof that the Chapman family – like all believers – does not grieve like those who have no hope. No, their hope and joy is fixed firmly in Jesus so they can truthfully say, “to us, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” God, the great redeemer, has used Maria’s tragic death to inspire thousands of people to adopt children. But the ultimate hope and comfort they cling to is the knowledge that she is with Jesus – joyful and whole – and they will see her again with Him.

And so in 2013, five years after losing Maria, Steven wrote the song Glorious Unfolding. Here is the chorus:

“There is going to be a glorious unfolding.  
Just you wait and see and you will be amazed.  
You’ve just got to believe the story is so far from over;  
So hold on to every promise God has made to us  
And watch this glorious unfolding.”

- Steven Curtis Chapman

Listen to the words of this great song of hope and let it stir in you the desire to say with Paul and with the Chapmans, “For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.”