

Sunday 12 March 2017

Otumoetai Baptist Church

Philippians: Unshackled Joy: A life in Christ

Joy in a life lived for Christ and Others

Philippians 1

Imagine yourself sitting opposite a man in a Roman prison.

(SLIDE 1)

This man has done nothing to deserve this punishment. He hasn't stolen anything, hurt or killed anyone, or stirred up riots to overthrow the Roman government. He's in prison because of his beliefs and living out those beliefs. He's been teaching and preaching in the name of a man called Jesus.

This man is an interesting phenomenon. His backstory is that he used to go door to door dragging out those people who claim to live under this man Jesus. Christians, they call themselves. He would order them beaten, tortured or put to death. He was very thorough in this role.

Then all of a sudden, dramatically, he changed gears in his life and he went to following this man Jesus and preaching that Jesus died and rose again.

Some commented that Jesus himself met him and revealed the

truth to his eyes and this was a real transformation. Others said this wouldn't last, you wait a few years and we'll have the old man back. It's just a game he's playing. He's not the real deal.

But it's been more than a few years and it seems like this is the real deal. The man is stuck in a Roman prison. Sure, some people come and visit him, and most he talks to about this man Jesus. He even manages to get out letters to different churches every now and then. But whoever encounters this man, they all note the same thing. There's something different about him. Not everyone can put their finger on it, but it's like he knows something that they don't know. Or that he's aware of something that others are not.

Some would even go as far as to say that there is a true 'Joy' that this man displays in his life, 'Unshackled Joy' if you like

(SLIDE 2)

– even though he is locked up in prison awaiting his fate he lives with joy in his life. His joy is free and not subject to the physical conditions he finds himself in. It's not like happiness, which is fleeting and temporary. This is true joy, peace despite how his circumstances look.

This man's name is Paul. Jewish by birth and a Roman citizen. He's an honest worker, like you and I.

His occupation is that of a tentmaker. He works hard at it too. Doesn't like to let people down. He's passionate about people. Truly cares for their well-being and their eternal destiny.

But Paul's days are marked. I wonder, what motivates this man, what gives him this unshackled joy?

If we look at his background quickly we see that:
When it comes to family, Paul has none.

Regarding his health, his body is beaten and tired.

He doesn't own much, he has his parchments, a pen, a cloak.
And not much else

He has friends, but even some of them have turned away from him.

He's viewed as a heretic to some, a maverick to others.

Does he have any awards? Well, not on earth.

Then what does Paul have? No belongings. No family. Criticized by some. Mocked by others. What do you have, Paul? What do you have that matters?

As you sit back quietly and watch him behind the bars, Paul rolls his hand into a fist. He looks at it. You look at it. What's he

holding? What does he have? He extends his hand so you can see. As you lean forward, he opens his fingers. You peer at his palm. It's empty.

Paul opens his mouth, "I have my faith. It's all I have. But it's all I need. I have kept the faith."

Paul leans back against the wall of his cell and smiles. And as you stare into the face of the man, you see someone who has learned that there is more to life than meets the eye.

That is a dramatic retelling of the latter part of Paul's life, with some help from author Max Lucado. On the surface it seems like Paul is in no man's land. He's in prison in Rome awaiting his fate; some people have deserted him; others have condemned him; it doesn't look like things are going his way.

That's on the surface. Under the surface we have the picture of a man who knows what it is to be content. A man who does not look at life's circumstances to determine his attitude. A man who has found joy, true joy, unshackled joy.

And it begs the questions, how did he find this joy? What is this joy? And can we live with this kind of joy in our lives?

Over the next four weeks we're going to journey with Paul a little bit through a short letter he wrote called Philippians. This was to the church in Philippi and was one of Paul's four letters that he wrote while in prison – the others being Philemon, Colossians and Ephesians.

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The title of this series is 'Unshackled Joy: A Life in Christ' and this morning I'm going to set the scene and have a quick look at chapter one; next week Rory Birkbeck is going to take us through chapter two; the following week David McChesney will lead us through chapter three; and in week four Declan Smith will charter us through the final chapter and wrap up the series.

As we read this letter we see that Paul cared dearly for this church and they also cared dearly for him. The church was founded by Paul during his second missionary journey in about 49 AD. To give you some indication of the timeline, this was about fifteen years after Paul's dramatic encounter with the risen Jesus on the Damascus road, which shifted and flipped his passion, perspective and purpose in life.

He went from being a murderer to a minister; an executioner to an encourager; the hunter to the hunted.

Paul started many churches and wrote many letters to these

churches strengthening them in their faith, being a pastor to them, visiting them when he could.

Paul faced much opposition in his work. He was beaten within an inch of his life; he was shipwrecked numerous times; he was threatened by individuals and communities; he was the target of the Roman Empire; and he was imprisoned twice before being martyred under the Roman emperor Nero.

So Paul definitely had enemies; yet he maintained his joy, his peace, his contentment throughout his life.

I don't know about you, but I would love to be more like Paul. See, Paul was not one to focus on his own circumstances; instead he focused on others. He was not one to try get ahead of everyone else; he was content to be a servant. A servant of the gospel. Paul modelled his life on that of Jesus.

So how did Paul do this? I mean if you look at his life, the chips are down and it seems very bleak. He doesn't know what will come of his life, what the Romans will do to him, he really is at their mercy and yet he lives with this joy. Is Paul that caught up in his spiritual life that his physical life does not matter? Is he in denial that actually Houston we have a problem, in that the Romans want him confined to a cell or better still, dead?

How can this man mention 'Joy' or 'rejoice' sixteen times in this short letter to the Philippians when it seems like joy is the furthest thing from his circumstances?

Well, we need to take the journey with Paul through Philippians and see what we can find out for him and for ourselves too.

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If you have your Bible let's start at Philippians chapter 1 verse 1: *Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all God's holy people 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.

*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,*

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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.

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, 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.

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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 for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

You can be forgiven for thinking this does not sound like a man in prison falsely accused awaiting his fate. This sounds more like a man sitting comfortably around a fire at night, toasting marshmallows, eating smores, relaxing in luxury, and writing a nice pleasant letter to his friends.

Paul starts with a warm greeting to the Christians – his brothers and sisters – at Philippi. Hi guys, I hope you are well. May God give you all that you need. I'm praying for you. In fact whenever I pray for you I have joy because of the relationship we have together and I know that God will complete the good work that he started in you.

Regardless of my circumstances, you, dear people, are on my heart and you all share in God's goodness with me.

I long to see you and be with you all again, and while I can't be with you in body, I pray for you constantly.

My prayer for you is that you know and experience the love of God in Christ Jesus and that you share this love with one another. I also want you to be able to discern the times and even though times might be tough, God is good and will help you in your time of need.

Paul is showing the Philippians by his letter what love looks like. And that love looks like the person of Jesus Christ. If you want to know what love looks like, look at his life. Don't look at me, Paul wants his audience to focus on Christ. The entire chapter and letter is about our life in Christ.

Paul realised that some of the people in Philippi were going through hard times, and he wanted to encourage them to remain steadfast in their faith in Christ. Don't throw it away when times become tough. Sure, ask questions, plead with God if you like, but don't become bitter and twisted.

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God is at work in you. God is completing the work he started in you. I don't know about you, but sometimes I wonder 'God are you really at work in this person's life?' Or more personally, 'God are you working in my life?'

Are you changing me into the likeness of your son Jesus? Are you teaching me more about humility, about being a servant of yours, about like Paul, being the real deal?

There are a few areas in my life I've noticed lately that it would be good if God could change a little bit quicker or work harder in me. One is comparing myself to others.

I don't think I'm alone when I say I compare myself to others. I'm not going to embarrass anyone else here this morning (just myself!) but I'm sure this is a struggle for lots of us, maybe most of us.

When I was younger I'd often watch movies, TV and sport, and think "Yeah I'd like to be like that." To have movie star looks like Brad Pitt, to be an action star like the Terminator Arnie, to be a warrior like Stacey Jones, or a rugby star like Dan or Richie.

I compare myself to what others can do that I can't. Like I really wish I was more practical – so does my wife! I wish I could do more things to the house and car. But I'm really not wired that way and when I do try get things done, I just end up making things worse.

Any other diy no-hopers out there???

I joke about it, but in all seriousness, comparison to others in any way is a sin and robs us of how God has made us. He is the perfect creator and he made each of us perfectly in His image. If we're not happy with ourselves, that's like saying to him "we're not happy how you decided to make us in your infinite knowledge and wisdom."

And that's a fight I don't think we want to have and are not going to win.

Comparing ourselves to others does no one any good. God has made me to be me and you to be you, so just get on and be the best you that you can be and I'll try be the best me I can be. God will continue to work in us.

Paul wasn't into comparing himself with anyone. He knew the call that God had placed on his life; he knew what it was going to cost him; and he knew that there was no-one else to do what he could do. Paul was called to pastor the Philippian church, even if that was from a jail cell.

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But Paul knows that much can be accomplished from that jail cell. As we read in chapter 1, verses 12 to 26:

Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

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It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached.

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*And because of this I **rejoice**. Yes, and I will continue to **rejoice**, for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

(SLIDE 11)

If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

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Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

Here we come to what I believe is the heart of Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul knows that he is in chains for a reason, and that reason is simply to further the gospel.

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You may recall in our series from the book of Acts that God said of Paul, "He must suffer much for my name" (Acts 9:16). This is part of the suffering. Paul is in prison for Christ's sake. Paul is called to suffer, as Christ was called to suffer.

Paul preaches Christ from his chains, and many people believe as a result. Paul also knows that many people preach Christ out of impure motives, such as envy and rivalry (comparison, anyone??!). And there are others who preach out of good will. Paul sees that as long as Christ is preached this is what matters.

Even though he knows that these people who preach out of selfish ambition are trying to stir up trouble for Paul. Paul just wants to see Christ preached and he rejoices in this.

Paul is a bit of an enigma really isn't he? Do you know anyone like Paul? Who really has no thought of himself or the consequences, and is so sold out on Jesus and his vision for his life that it doesn't matter to Paul if he suffers, as long as the message of the gospel continues to spread.

I am inspired by Paul. Truth be told I'm also a little intimidated. Paul is one courageous preacher of the gospel. He does not leave things out and he does not let people off either.

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Paul hits the truth home with the Philippians when he tells them, "I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."

If I live it's for Christ, and if I die then it's my gain.

You don't often see or hear a message like that on a bumper sticker or on television or movies. It's counter-cultural to life itself.

So what is Paul saying here to his Philippian friends???

Well, he's really talking to them about his options, which are one of two: He is to be executed or he is to be released.

If he is executed he goes to be present with Jesus and this is great for Paul. He's ready.

If he is released then he goes to start more and strengthen existing Jesus communities and this is better for others. He's ready for that too.

Paul says: "If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!

(SLIDE 15)

I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me."

This comes to the heart of Paul the man. See, dying for Jesus is not the sacrifice for Paul. Staying alive to serve others and build Jesus communities (churches) is the sacrifice for him.

Paul is ready for death, but he realises that God still has more for him to do on earth. And so yes he is torn between dying to be with Christ, and living to be with others.

This is a unique window into Paul's heart and mind. He sees his life as a re-enactment of Jesus' story if you like. He realises that Jesus came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Paul realises that he is here to serve and to give his life in that service for the benefit of others.

And Paul receives joy in this. Joy that cannot be taken away from him. Joy that does not depend on his circumstances. Joy that cannot contain itself within his prison cell. Unshackled Joy. Joy to give to others. Joy to live for Christ and to die with gain.

How are we going with this joy in our own lives? We all go through hard times. None of us are unscathed. None of us get off lightly on the merry-go-round of life. We all struggle. We are all facing our own prison cells like Paul. Some not our choice like Paul, but others are own doing.

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These can be different though like prison cells of addiction, relationship breakdowns, sinful habits in our lives, lust, jealousy,

wanting what other people have. All these things keep us captive and rob us of this joy that Paul has.

God wants us to live free from these prison cells we find ourselves in. Sometimes God might decide to completely free someone of an addiction or sinful habit immediately; and other times it may require a lot of work, counselling and prayer.

If you find yourself in a prison cell today that is robbing you of joy, let me encourage you to break out of that. Ask for help. God first, and then from someone you trust. Don't stay confined to that cell longer than you have already been there. It wants to steal your joy and get you to focus on your circumstances and how miserable they might be.

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Paul had every reason to be miserable. Falsely imprisoned. Not sure of his fate. People deserting him in his life, claiming him to be a hypocrite. People out to get him. But he got his eyes up over his jail cell and focused on the person of Christ. That's where his joy came from. Not in himself or his circumstances. In his Christ and his calling.

Paul found joy in a life lived in Christ and for others.

(SLIDE 18)

Paul counted this as a worthy life, as we read in verses 27 to 30: *Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.*

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This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in 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.

Paul lays out the way to live to the Philippian church. Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of Christ, stand firm in your faith, because you believe in him you are called to suffer for him too. I know where you're at, because I'm there too.

(SLIDE 20) But these prison cells don't hold me. Guess what? The gospel is being presented still, people are believing in Christ, God is transforming people around me. Don't let your circumstances dictate your joy. Your joy is in Christ. Living for him and for others. And that my friends, is a life worthy of the gospel. A life of love, service and sacrifice.

A life of unshackled joy, a life in Christ.

Amen.