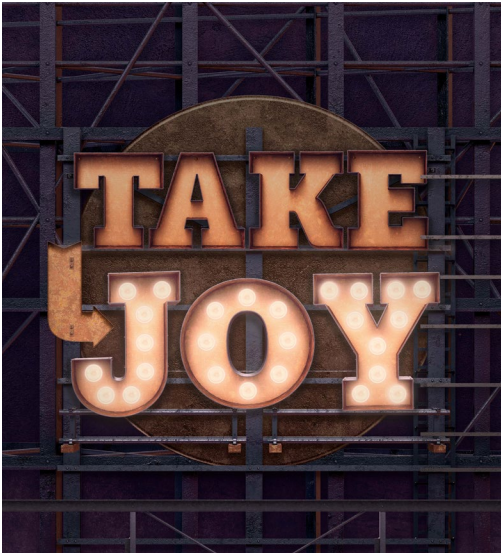




Sermon Growth Guide

January 22, 2023

Bigger than Life



Sermon Growth Guide

January 22, 2023

Take Joy - Bigger Than Life

Philippians 1:15-30

Key Verse: Philippians 1:21

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

Big Idea: Since in life or in death, we belong to Christ, we can live in joy.

Foundations

As you know, Paul wrote this letter in severe circumstances. He was imprisoned, awaiting trial for what amounted to crimes of treason. He faced the death penalty. Yet he writes powerfully and personally about the life of joy in Jesus Christ. This was not wishful thinking. Paul based his understanding of joy on the providence of God that he had experienced throughout his ministry. He had survived expulsion, stoning and shipwreck.

Paul was very clear about the toll those experiences took on him. 2 Corinthians 4:8-9 says: “*We are hard pressed, but never cornered; be wildered but never at our wits’ end; hunted but never abandoned to our fate; struck down but never killed.*” Paul simultaneously holds two thoughts in balance: (1) life is hard to the point of death, and (2) God’s grace is sufficient.

He says that because he is convinced that the life of Christ in him overrides any perilous situation. He affirms that whether he lives or dies, God’s purposes will be fulfilled. So, he can say: “*for me to love is Christ and to die is gain.*”

Paul’s whole life was consumed by Jesus. Thus, he wanted to do everything to advance the gospel; he wanted his life to demonstrate the saving work of Jesus. Christ meant everything to him—so much so that Paul welcomed the thought of death so that he could be fully in the presence of the Lord.

Understanding God’s Word

Read Philippians 1:15-30.

In verses 15-18, Paul addresses the issue of those who preach the gospel out of selfish motives. In what ways does Paul’s instruction inform how we conduct our ministries? (See also verses 27-30.)

In verses 19-26, Paul talks about how he is torn between living and dying. This has led many commentators to say that this was a morbid desire for death. How would you describe Paul’s understanding of death?

Applying God’s Word

In the 2017 movie *Hostiles*, one of the characters says, “*Sometimes I envy the finality of death. The certainty. And I have to drive those thoughts away when I am weak.*”

Compare this attitude toward death with Paul’s. (Refer also to 2 Corinthians 4:13 through 5:10.)

Where on the spectrum of *Hostiles* to Paul would you fall? How could you move closer to Paul’s understanding?

Witnessing God’s Word

The world needs light and joy instead of darkness and despair. What do you need to do so that you can **Take Joy**, bearing witness to God’s care, purpose and love?

Do you know where you are going after you die? That's a pretty direct question, isn't it? I have a friend who spent time on staff with an evangelistic ministry that used a clipboard survey as a way to begin a conversation about Jesus. "Can I ask you a few questions for our survey?" "Sure." "Do you know where you're going after you die?" My buddy said he could do it in a college dormitory, or on the street, but one summer he was assigned duty on the beach in Hilton Head. It's pretty tough to walk up to somebody sunbathing in warm sand next to rolling waves—"Hey, do you know where you're going when you die?" I guess it just didn't prompt the kind of conversation that was intended! In defense of this strategy—and I know a few of you who know this well and worked this ministry—it is a way to get down to brass tacks pretty quickly! It is a valid question. See, here's the thing, if you know what happens when you die, everything that happens up till then reads differently.

Faith in Christ is a faith that is bigger than life. If you don't believe that, or don't understand that, you will continually measure Christianity by how it is doing for you, how it is working for you. How is Jesus doing at helping you achieve your goals and comforts and hopes in this life? That's how you will see your faith, in utilitarian and consumeristic mindset. You must come to a deeper conclusion. Eternity is in question. Eternal life and eternal death are in scope. Do you put your faith in Christ, or do you run your life on your terms? The question isn't how you use Jesus to enhance your life. The question is whether you will hand your life over to Jesus, trusting fully that to give him your life is to find eternal life, the life that is truly life. Faith in Christ is bigger than life. Once you trust and believe that, you find the release of joy. Come what may, my life is in His hands.

We are studying Philippians under this rubric of **Take Joy**—which is just another way to say "Rejoice." We are commanded in Scripture over and over to "rejoice," which sounds like we are supposed to

join the choir or play the trumpet with the angels or something. Rejoice is the translation of the verb associated with the noun joy. But we don't use joy as a verb. I can't order you to "joy." So we say "rejoice." "Take Joy" helps us understand what we are being told to do. Take joy. Today, **Take Joy** because faith in Christ is **Bigger than Life**.

Paul didn't Take Joy lightly. Paul was not practicing religious escapism from the realities of his world, his life, his situation. Paul spoke of joy with chains around his wrists, imprisoned in Rome awaiting trial under charges that would, as it turned out, take his life. But his perspective allowed him to see more than his own comfort. He saw his whole life as part of God's plan for God's glory. That allowed him to find joy. Look back to last week's text: "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" (Philippians 1:12-14). His own imprisonment, his own chains, have a purpose bigger than life.

So also with the conversations about Jesus his situation has prompted. Some preached the gospel to help Paul. "Hey, Paul's stuck in prison. Let's keep this ministry going. People need to know about Jesus." Others were talking up Paul, and Paul's teaching, to gain a hearing and gain some social standing or reputation of their own. They just wanted to show that they were in the know. "Sure, I'll tell you about Paul. He said this and this about Jesus and God and grace." They shared the message without believing the message. What does Paul say? "Who cares!" "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. Yes, and I will continue

T
A
K
E

J
O
Y

to rejoice” (Philippians 1:18). I find, as I get older and wiser, that one of the most important things to know is knowing when to say, “Who cares?” Knowing what matters, and what just doesn’t matter, is critical in life. Isn’t it?

But it isn’t apathy that makes him say that. No. It’s confidence. It’s faith. It isn’t escapism that prompts him to take joy; it is a deeper reality, a truth. The truth that causes him to say, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). Can you understand what he is saying there? Paul is honest about his situation. He isn’t unclear about how real this all is. His life is hanging in the balance, and he doesn’t know what is going to happen. “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” (Philippians 1:18-20). I might live. I might die. Either way, my prayer, my purpose, is glory to Christ.

Paul is open with his own feelings about all of this. It’s very personal here. “If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor 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” (Philippians 1:22-24). I honestly don’t know, he says. “If you ask me, how do I hope it turns out, I honestly don’t know. Maybe it’s time to die.” How can you say that? Is this a man losing hope? Is this a man losing his confidence and his will to live? Is Paul losing his grasp on the value and meaning of human life? No. Paul knows where he is going. “Maybe it’s time to go and be with Jesus. Or maybe not. Maybe I have more work to do to glorify his name here.” That’s what it means, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

It is common for people to critique our faith as escapism. People in our times are taught to be self-sufficient. “What are these Christians gathering up downtown to drum up some spiritual escape from this world? Why don’t they just see things for what they are and try to make it better instead of trying to escape to heaven?” Of course, that’s not what we’re doing. We do see things as they are. We also see them as they ought to be in Christ. Paul saw things as they were. “I am in chains,” he says. He admits he is in the middle of struggle. Life and death press in on him from either side. He does not know what the future holds. Whatever happens, he hopes for God to be glorified. That’s not detachment from reality. But under the surface of the situation, there is a deeper reality also. A truer true. “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**” (Philippians 1:18-19). Paul feels the prayers of the church, “through your prayers.” Paul feels the “Spirit of Jesus Christ,” a very real presence with him in his pain. So, he knows, whatever comes, he has deliverance headed his way. Deliverance could also be translated as “salvation.” When you know you are saved in the end, life reads differently. You can take joy.

Sometimes we need a process. Sometimes we are not ready or able to respond to the command to rejoice, to take joy. We can’t just jump to joy from where we sit, we need a path to walk. Christians call that path lament. How do you pray when you can’t pray? How do you trust when you can’t trust? How do you hold on to God through pain and suffering? One-third of the Psalms are called Psalms of Lament. Prayers through pain that lead to trust. I met a pastor named Mark Vroegop last month. He serves a church in Indianapolis, and he has written a few books on lament. Mark and his wife suffered through a season of infertility and painful miscarriages. He said there were times when he had to

T
A
K
E

J
O
Y

say, “God, I know you are good; but right now I have to say, ‘Why are you being so mean?’” Opening up his heart to God like that was not from lack of faith; it was actually because he was full of faith. He knew God was good. He knew God was trustworthy. He knew God wanted a world without suffering, and pain, and injustice, and miscarriages. So he learned to pray through the patterns of lament found in the Psalms, to take time to feel the pain, acknowledge the struggle, be open about the disappointment, and not just jump to joy.

One of the strongest ministries of our church over the last generation has been our Grief Workshop. For years, at times when there was nowhere else a person could turn to process the pain of loss, we have opened our doors to say, “It’s OK. Come and walk through grief with us. Pray honestly. Acknowledge your disappointment and sadness. Process your emotions, don’t dismiss them or pressure yourself to jump past them quickly. God can take it. God will walk with you, and so will we.” “Lament,” Mark Vroegop says, “is a prayer in pain that leads to trust.” Not a cul-de-sac of endless complaint, but an openness to hurt and grieve before God that leads to a deeper reality than the reality of the moment, a truer truth—that this, and all other things, will end in your salvation. Whether things improve, or the struggle continues; whether the marriage turns and thrives, or cracks apart; whether the doctor comes back and says you’re cured, or the fight goes on; whether you live or whether you die... “you will be saved—and that by God” (Philippians 1:28).

To take joy is not to dismiss the realities of life in this world. To take joy is to find that beneath the painful realities of this world, there is something else. Beneath the chains, there is freedom. Beneath the pain, there is wholeness. Beneath and beyond even death, there is eternal life in Jesus Christ. Do you know that this morning?

I once sat with a woman who lived alone as a widow. Her name was Mrs. Geneva McDaniel. This was years ago. I was serving a small church in Crozet, Virginia, as an Interim Pastor while pursuing my PhD at UVA, but my Army Reserve unit was called up to Operation Iraqi Freedom, and I had to go. I never did go to Iraq. I wound up serving stateside, but that’s another story. I sat with this woman, in theory, to raise her spirits as a lonely widow. But I kind of broke down with her under the pressure I was facing. It was easy when I was young to think my life belonged to Jesus and it didn’t matter if I lived or died, but with a wife and kids and church and academics and all...it just felt differently to think about going to Iraq and possibly giving my life away. She leaned over and put her hand on my knee, and said, “Tim, God has a purpose for your life. Just like he had a purpose in bringing you to our church. If you live, it will be for His purpose. If you die, He has a purpose in that. Either way, Jesus will be with you, and He will be with your family.”

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). If you live, it is for Jesus. The purpose of life is to glorify Him. If you die, all the victories of Jesus come home to you—you are saved, forgiven of your sins by His death on the cross, raised to new life by His glorious resurrection, ushered into the eternal family of God by Him who named you brother or sister. Can you say that this morning? Do you know for certain that your life is hidden in Christ? Do you know where you are going when you die? The offer of faith is before you now. I want us to pray together today, and for some of you, maybe this is a time to open your heart to Christ and trust your life to His hands. Follow me in prayer: “Lord my God, thank You for sending Jesus Your Son. I want to trust You, I want to know my life is in Your hands. I believe in You, and I give You my life. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

T
A
K
E

J
O
Y