

Read Co 1:24-29

Illustration: (750 Engaging Illustrations, from Craig Brian Larson – Joy, p. 362)

In Discipleship Journal Paul Thighpen writes (adapted): I remember coming home one afternoon to discover that the kitchen I had worked so hard to clean only a few hours earlier was now a terrible wreck. My young daughter had obviously been busy “baking.” Ingredients were scattered everywhere ... over the counters and on the floor. Dirty bowls and utensils littered the sink. Needless to say, I wasn’t happy with the situation. As I studied the mess, I spotted a tiny note on the table, clumsily written and smeared with chocolate finger prints. The message was short – “I’m makin sumthin 4 you, Dad” – and it was signed, “Your Angel.”

In the midst of the disarray, and despite my irritation, joy welled up in my heart, sweet and pure. My attention had been reflected from the problem to the little girl whom I loved. As I encountered her in that brief note, I delighted in her. With her simple goodness in view, I could take pleasure in seeing her hand at work in a situation that seemed otherwise disastrous.

The same is true of my joy in the Lord. And, quite frankly, my joy in others. Many times life looks rather messy; I can’t find much to be happy about in my circumstances. Nevertheless, if I look hard enough, I can usually see the Lord’s hand in it, working through it all, “makin sumthin” for me.

Our world is in disarray. It’s a messy place to live in. When we take stock of all the things that are going on around the globe, it can cause us to become downhearted and pretty discouraged. How about closer to home - within your family or your own personal life? You’ve worked hard to get things in order and then without warning disaster strikes and you’re left shaking your head in disbelief. Take heart. There is reason for joy. The temple and the walls of the city of Jerusalem were completely destroyed by the Babylonians and although the temple was restored in 516 BC, the city was unprotected because the walls were in shambles. In spite of the mess the people found themselves in, Nehemiah encouraged them with these words in Neh 8:10 “The joy of the Lord is your strength.” The Lord’s hand is at work in His creation and in the nitty-gritty of life “makin sumthin” happen for his children that on the surface doesn’t always seem that clear.

It may seem like the temple of your life has been demolished, your walls are broken down and you’re feeling raw, unprotected, vulnerable? Your mind is in a dark cloud filled with gray “nothing matters anymore!” thoughts. “Things couldn’t be any worse.” If you can relate to this in any way, and I suspect many of you can, then stay with me this morning because God has something to say to us and it’s the heart of the passage we’re going to be exploring this morning – it’s **Christ in you, the hope of glory.**

What made it possible for Paul to rejoice even though he found himself in a Roman prison? It was hope, v23, the hope that believing the Gospel brought about in his life. This was the same hope that empowered the love the Colossian believers had for all the saints that Paul commended them for at the beginning of his letter in v5.

What makes the messiness of life worth living? I believe it’s the deeper purpose of God in our suffering. We cannot avoid pain in this life. Beneath the surface of everyone’s life is a nagging ache that simply will not go away. It can be ignored, disguised, mislabeled, or submerged by a flurry of activity, but it will not disappear. God allows suffering in our lives to draw us closer to Himself. We think just the opposite. When God allows it, we despise Him for it, not seek His help in it. He could have prevented it and He didn’t. Excruciating pain, deep disappointment, and devastatingly debilitating tragedies are realities of life this side of heaven. There’s no escaping them.

Jesus experienced tremendous suffering at the hands of His own people – the nation of Israel, the religious leaders, government officials, and the world at large and yet all the while He was offering them in Himself what was they so desperately needed – hope. Hope that offers a reason to keep going even when life deals us a death blow. Hope that

provides the courage to step out in faith in spite of circumstances that dash any vestige of a promising tomorrow. If only they had believed in Him and trusted in His words. **He** is the Gospel, the Good News of salvation from sin's spiritual death grip and the hope of a life of purpose now and the promise of heaven later.

We would not have the letter of Colossians today (or Ephesians, Philippians, or Philemon for that matter) if it weren't for Paul's imprisonment which resulted in the writing of these books of the Bible. They were written for the sake of the people of Paul's day and for the people of our day as well. Having just encouraged the Colossian believers about the stability and steadfastness of their continuing faith in the hope of the Gospel in v23 Paul wrote in v24 "Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you." What Paul was going through was for the sake of the believers in Colosse and all believers in Jesus who make up the body of Christ – the Church. There is no possible way that Deb or I could identify with those who have lost a child or offer any depth of encouragement or hope the way we now can if we had not gone through this same experience ourselves. It's in the crucible of suffering that God refines our understanding of what matters most in life.

It stands to reason that there will be significant cost involved for believers in sharing the Good News with the people of this world. Jesus makes this clear in Jn 15:18,19 "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world ... that is why the world hates you." He says in vv20, 21 "...If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also...; they will treat you this way because of My name..."; and in Jn 16:33 Jesus said, "... in this world you will have trouble ..."; in 2 Ti 3:12 Paul says, "... everyone who wants to live a godly life in Jesus Christ will be persecuted."

It is not the norm for people to embrace God by faith, to claim His Word as the absolute truth and as the on reliable and trustworthy standard for how life is to be lived. It's foreign to our culture. People set their own standard and live by it.

There is, however, no greater joy in spite of whatever suffering may come for believers in Jesus Christ than seeing people's lives transformed by the grace of God and to have the confident assurance that their lives are eternally secure in His care. This is what Paul meant in v 24 by "I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake of His Body, which is the church."

There was nothing lacking in what Jesus suffered for us. The writer to the Hebrews says in He 10:12 that when Jesus "offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God." because His work in providing for our salvation was complete. What Paul was going through as he penned this letter was necessary for the very words being written to come about and for the lives of those who took them to heart to be supernaturally changed for the glory of God. It was for the sake of the Church – the body of believers in Jesus Christ that God's greater purpose was being worked out in Paul's life through his imprisonment.

Paul goes on to say in v25 "I have become its (*the Church's*) servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness."

Paul had been commissioned by the Lord Jesus Christ who announced to Ananias in Ac 9:15, "This man is my chosen instrument to carry My name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

In 1 Pe 4:16 we are told, "...if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name."

1 Pe 2:20-23 "... If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps."

Take heart, "... the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast." (1 Pe 5:10).

I'm going to be stretching our comfort zones this morning. So, be prepared to be challenged in your understanding of God's purpose for suffering in your life.

Dr. Larry Crabb puts it like this, "Our hope has switched from a steadfast faith in the nailed-scarred hands of Christ in the midst of our groaning to a responsive Christ who satisfies His hurting people. Unless it serves His greater purpose, God will not satisfy hurting people by quickly granting them the relief they demand. To demand that our groaning end before heaven keeps us from experiencing all that's available in Christ now. If our pain remains, it is serving God's greater purpose than if He relieved it."

People who have the notion that those on the right path with God can expect to experience all the rich blessings of the abundant life now need to be sure they've defined what the abundant life is in God's terms and not their own. The abundant life could not have been more clearly explained than in the very statement in which it is proclaimed in Jn 10:10 "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. The central truth of these words is found in the very first one "I" – Jesus. **He** is what having life to the full is all about. When God said, "This is My Son in whom I am well pleased." in Mt 3:17, He was saying in effect, "When people watch the way My Son loves and suffers, they will see a perfect picture of My heart."

Jesus served the greater purpose of God in suffering in His ministry as well as on the cross than if God had spared Him from it. Because God is good and everything that flows from his hand is good, and because what He does or allows to happen in our lives serves His good purpose for us, we can accept in humble belief what happens as what is best for us.

As human beings with physical bodies, emotions, etc., we are going to experience deep pain and hurt. We don't stop being human when we become Christians. To expect that we are going to have a pain and hurt free existence as children of God is totally unrealistic.

Christ offers us hope, not relief, in the midst of our suffering, and He commands us to pursue Him with relentless determination even when we'd rather ignore Him in our attempts to preserve our own well-being.

There is a very real sense in which Christians who rejoice in the deeper purposes of God in their sufferings edify and encourage other believers within the body of Christ. The times of suffering each of us go through that result in spiritual growth become a catalyst for a deeper trust in God's working in the lives of fellow believers in Jesus Christ.

Joy is the result of humble faith in God's intrinsic goodness. People lose their joy when they become self-centered, thinking they deserve better circumstances or treatment from God than they are getting. I don't think arrogance is too strong a word for this kind of attitude toward God. In Php 2:17 Paul wrote, "But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering (a reference to martyrdom) on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you."

Some rather startling words are recorded for us in Php 1:29, "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on Him but to suffer for Him."

God controls the circumstances of life according to His purposes. This includes catastrophes, tragic accidents, terminal illnesses, murder, disease, abusive situations, or anything else that happens. If God chose to right every wrong, prevent any injustice, crime, suffering, whatever is inconsistent with heaven, earth would not be a real place. It's because God allows what He does that we are moved to want something better that only He can make happen.

Paul's commissioning as a servant of the body of Christ, the Church, involved presenting the word of God in its fullness." This is underscored by Paul's words to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:27, "... I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God."

Part of the whole will of God was the fact that Christ would live within Gentile believers not just Jewish believers in Jesus. This was not revealed previously in the OT Scriptures – it was a mysterious reality yet to be revealed by God.

Paul describes this in vv26, 27 as “the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is **Christ in you, the hope of glory.**”

Paul’s goal in presenting the word of God in its fullness is stated in v28 “We proclaim Him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect (*or mature*) in Christ.” The truths of God’s word apply to everyone without exception not just a select few as the false teachers the Colossian believers had to contend with were wrongly claiming.

The goal of every preacher and teacher of the Word of God is to spiritually equip believers in Jesus Christ to enable them to mature in the faith both intellectually and behaviorally – not only to know the truth but to live it out in practical Christian service.

Paul writes in v29 “To this end I labor, struggling with all His energy, which so powerfully works within me.” This verse could just as well have preceded vv24-28 because it was the power of Christ in Paul’s life that supplied the energy enabling him to do everything that he did.

I cannot impress this upon us strongly enough. Christians do not make Christianity work ... God does. It is the power of God that is at work within us as believers that provides the energy to live the Christian life (Php 2:13). It cannot be done any other way. God is not glorified by what we do for Him, but only by what He does in and through us.

God is the One who decides what is fair and right and good and just and true, not us. God is not in the business of conforming to our desires but of transforming our minds and hearts and lives to accept His will for us.

God is good even when we suffer. I need to come to God believing that He is good because He says He is no matter what life brings my way and refuse to pursue comfort at the expense of my commitment to honoring Him.

Whenever we place a higher priority on relieving our suffering than on pursuing God we deny His goodness and confirm that He can’t be trusted.

The pain of birth precedes the wonder of new life.

The surest way to short-circuit your joy is to insist that God owes you an explanation for why things aren’t the way you think they should be at any given moment when in reality you deserve something far worse. Paul wasn’t one to unrealistically expect of others what he was unwilling to undergo himself. The text of our passage begins, “Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you,”

How resilient was Paul’s joy? 2 Co 4:8,9 shed some light on this, “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.” Now vv16-18 “... we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen (circumstances), but on what is unseen (Christ in us). For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” In Php 4:4 Paul admonishes us, “Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again: Rejoice; and he exhorts us in Ro 12:12 “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.”

How can this kind of joy be a reality in my life and in your life when we are overwhelmed by what’s happening around us and within us? It seems to me that if Paul was able to have it and you and I have this same disposition in Christ then we can have it too.

Illustration: “In the Morning” – Ruth Harms Calkin, Tell Me Again Lord, I Forget – The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart by Charles R. Swindoll, pp. 547-8.

Ruth Harms Calkin, in her book, *Tell Me Again Lord, I Forget*, shares these penetrating words:

“Today, Lord I have an unshakable conviction, a positive resolute assurance that what you have spoken is unalterably true. But today, Lord my sick body feels stronger and the stomping pain quietly subsides. Tomorrow ... and then tomorrow, If I must struggle again with aching exhaustion, with twisting pain until I am breathless, until I am utterly spent, until fear eclipses the last vestige of hope, Then, Lord – then grant me the enabling grace to believe without feeling, to know without seeing, to clasp Your invisible hand and wait with invincible trust for the morning.”

When a life-crushing event immobilizes me, I must believe that I exist beneath my pain as a free person who can move, and that there really is an infinitely good God who invites me to move toward a joy that He provides.

There is an inexplicable joy that wells up within us when our hearts are set on what God is passionate about. It inevitably involves people and what they desperately need that only He can provide. Our joy in serving the Lord is not determined by circumstances, pleasant or otherwise because joy is not an external thing. It's the internal result of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives as we seek God's purpose in reaching out to those whose hearts that are longing to be touched by His grace through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Illustration: “When your hut is on fire...” (Source unknown)

The only survivor of a shipwreck was washed up on a small, uninhabited island. He prayed feverishly for God to rescue him. Every day he scanned the horizon for help, but none seemed forthcoming. Exhausted, he eventually managed to build a little hut out of driftwood to protect himself from the elements, and to store his few possessions. One day, after scavenging for food, he arrived at his hut only to find it in flames, with smoke rolling up to the sky. He felt the worst had happened, and everything was lost. He was stunned with disbelief, grief, and anger. He cried out, 'God! How could you do this to me?' Early the next day, he was awakened by the sound of a ship approaching the island! It had come to rescue him! 'How did you know I was here?' asked the weary man of his rescuers. 'We saw your smoke signal,' they replied.

It's easy to get discouraged when things are going badly, but we don't need to lose heart, because God is at work in our lives, even in the midst of our pain and suffering. There is reason to hope. Remember that the next time your little hut seems to be burning to the ground. It just may be a smoke signal that summons the Grace of God.

Benediction: May our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who loved us and by His grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.” (2 Th 2:16)