

Sermon for Sunday, October 13, 2013
Rev. Eric Stiller
Joy in Suffering
Phil 1:12-30

We're in a series on Paul's letter to the Philippian church. And one of the things we noticed last week is that this letter only has power in our lives if we read it in the light of its original setting. Because the things Paul says to us here are amazing, but only if we realize that these are the words of a man who's sitting in a jail cell, someone who's not even sure if he's going to be alive in a week. And yet he's just overflowing with joy. But how? How could he? Have you ever had one of those "Ladies-and-gentlemen-God-has-left-the-building" kind of moments? One of those times in life when your belief in God – or at least your belief in a kind, loving God – goes completely out the window? Have you ever had something happen to you that caused you to say, "God, where are you?" "What are you doing?" "God, how could you let this happen?" We were talking about this last week. What do you do when the heat is turned up in your life, and God feels far away?

It could be something that happens to you personally. Maybe something goes horribly wrong with your work or your finances or your health. And then it just keeps getting worse. God feels so far away. Or maybe something goes wrong with your marriage. Someone betrays you, or you get a divorce. Or maybe it's the fact that you want to get married and haven't been able to find someone. And it's been a really, really long time. God feels so far away. Or it could be something that happens in your community or your country, some tragedy or catastrophe. I still talk to people who think about 9-11 and the first thing out of their mouth is "God was sleeping that day." Or it could even be something that happens in the church. Central Pres has been through a lot over the years. And yet here we are, once again, losing a senior pastor. "God, where are you in all of this? What are you doing?" I was reading recently about a church – back before the Civil War – and this church had only been in existence for a few years when an epidemic swept through the city, killing close to 10% of the entire population, including their pastor, who was only thirty-two years old at the time. They had been growing, they had been doing well, and right in the midst of all that growth and all those good things, God took their pastor, a young man who hadn't even reached the height of his potential yet. Sometimes God feels so far away.

It's one thing to rejoice in what God is doing in the world. We were looking at that last week. But it's a much different thing to rejoice in the way he does it. And what do you do, what do you think, how do you respond, when you go through one of those God-has-left-the-building times in life? What do you do when God feels so far away? This passage we read shows us.

And look at how Paul starts. **Verse 12**: "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me..." And before we go any further we have to ask the question, what happened to Paul? There are a few theories out there about exactly where Paul was when he wrote this letter. Some say Rome. Some say Ephesus. But wherever he was, the fact is that he had been arrested, thrown into jail, and was now in danger of execution by the Roman government. And it had all happened right in the middle of huge success. Paul was one of the most influential and powerful people who ever lived. It seems like everywhere he went, people's lives were changed by the gospel, churches were planted, whole societies were being transformed. And right in the middle of that – boom, he gets arrested. It must have felt like a huge defeat to the cause of the gospel.

And so the church back in Philippi was full of people who heard what had happened, and were really worried about him. "Did you hear what happened to Paul? How could God let this happen? What in the world is God doing?" So Paul knows they've heard and that they're worried, and he writes to help

them make sense of what's happened. And notice he doesn't say, "OK, guys, we've had a little setback. Things have taken a little detour, but God is going to get them back on track." He doesn't say that. He says in **verse 12**, "I want you to know that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel." And if there's one concept I want us to get today, if there's one big point I want you to carry home with you today so that it's radioactive in your heart, it's all wrapped up in this one little word "really." "I want you to know that what has happened to me has *really* served to advance the gospel."

You see, in God's economy, things are never what they seem. Far from being hamstrung by difficult circumstances, God seems to prefer to work through them. The Philippians thought that Paul's arrest and imprisonment was the worst thing that could possibly happen. It's as if Paul was a NASCAR driver, and this was like him being way out in the lead of a race, but all of a sudden he blows a tire, skids out of control, hits the wall, flips over and comes crashing and burning to the side of the track. Total wreck. Out of the race. But that's not what *really* happened. What *really* happened was that, instead of wrecking his ministry, his imprisonment put it into turbo-drive. This didn't sidetrack the gospel. This was advancing the gospel. And in two remarkable ways.

First, his imprisonment resulted in the gospel advancing in the lives of people outside the Christian community. In **verse 13** he says, "it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ." He was literally chained to these soldiers. They would come in shifts of about four hours. Every moment of his life – waking or sleeping – he was chained to a Roman soldier. He couldn't even go to the bathroom in private. And what really happened is that a huge number of soldiers and other government officials were hearing the gospel and many were possibly being converted. These are people whose lives were devoted to the Roman Empire. In Rome, there was only one lord, and his name was Caesar, but they were seeing that there was another Lord, and his name was Jesus.

But secondly, Paul's imprisonment was resulting in the gospel advancing in the lives of people within the Christian community. **Verse 14**: "And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear." When they heard that Roman soldiers were being converted through Paul's imprisonment, they were filled with courage and boldness to advance the gospel also. And if, as most commentators believe, this was in Rome around 60 AD, then it was really, really dangerous to be a Christian at that time. And yet Paul's imprisonment, far from sidetracking the gospel, put it into turbo-drive. The worst possible thing that could happen for Paul, was actually the best possible thing for the gospel.

You know what this means for us? Things happen to you. Suffering hits. Your life crashes. You're in the dirt. You have one of those "God-has-left-the-building" times in life. And you're saying to yourself, "God, where are you? God, what are you doing? God, how could you let this happen?" And it's so easy in those times to believe that because God feels far away, he really is far away. And he couldn't possibly be working in my life right now. It would have been easy for Paul to look at his life and say the same thing. God has abandoned me. God has left the building. But what happened to Paul was really advancing the gospel. And it wasn't just an advancement of the gospel, it was also an example of the gospel.

Here's what I mean by that. Human society, throughout history but especially in Western culture, has always thought that true value and meaning come through things like power, beauty, prestige, and wealth. And it's always believed that if there's a God, than he works through these things as well. So, in ancient Greek society, if you wanted the favor of the gods, you had to prove yourself by doing some great deed. It was true in the Ancient Near East also. There's a story in 2 Kings 5 about Naaman, who was the commander of the Syrian army. He was one of the most powerful men in the world at that time, but he

had leprosy. And one of his servants told him that if he went to Israel, there was a man of God there who could heal him. So Naaman went, but he found out that all he had to do to get healed was dip himself in the Jordan River. And he was furious, because he believed that in order for God to work in his life, he had to do some great deed. Human society is organized around things like power, beauty, prestige and wealth. And we think that God works through those things as well, that God is impressed with us because of these things. But the gospel is organized around the exact opposite, because here's Paul, in chains, incarcerated, and that's where God is working. The Bible shows us over and over again that God has a strange and perplexing tendency to work not through power, beauty, prestige and wealth, but through the plain, the ordinary, the forgotten, the poor, the marginalized, the weak. Who wants to be any of those things? We're afraid and ashamed of those things. So often, the things of which we're most afraid are the things through which God works in this world. That means it's entirely possible that at this very moment, God could be every bit as much at work in Clayton jail as he is right here. That should be very humbling for us as a church, and also very challenging as we consider the things we look for in a pastor. I'm just going to go out on a limb and say this because I don't have to worry about whether I'm going to be the next senior pastor of this church. I'm not. Would we call someone who has spent a significant part of his life in jail? Because if not, then we wouldn't call the apostle Paul. Would we call someone who doesn't have the right letters behind his name? Because if not, we wouldn't call Peter, a man the world saw as "unlettered."

But let's zoom in even closer and think about how this applies to our own lives. You know what this shows us? When suffering hits, when it feels like God has left the building, when it feels like God is so far away, you know what this shows us? "I want you to know that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel." It is in those times of weakness, despair, difficulty and hardship, it is in those times when God feels farthest, that he's really working the hardest. So often, when God feels farthest, he's really working the hardest.

But if that's true, then what do we do with that information? This is nice to know, but if it's going to make any difference in my life, what do I actually do with it? Because we all have decisions to make about how we're going to respond to suffering. Suffering is inevitable. You don't have to go looking for it. It will find you. And each one of us has to make a decision about how we're going to respond to it. And we've all seen people who respond in very different ways. Why is that? Why do some people respond like Paul, with joy and peace, and other people just seem to spiral down deeper and deeper into bitterness and despair?

Suffering in and of itself doesn't guarantee God's work in your life. It's not automatic. It's not like we can just sit back, fold our arms, and wait for God to turn all our sorrows into sunlight. It's not automatic. And we see that here. The decision you need to make is not, "How am I going to respond to suffering in my life?" That's not the decision. The decision you need to make is, "What am I living for?" Your decisions in life depend on your definition of life. Look at Paul. The Philippians heard about what happened to him, and they're anxious to find out how he's doing. They didn't have Facebook in those days. So if you wanted to give a status update, you had to write a letter. And verse 12 is Paul's status update. The Philippians want to know how he's doing. "Paul, how are you? Tell us the news." And Paul says, "You want to know how I'm doing? Oh, let me tell you. The gospel is doing great!" And if this were a Facebook thread, the Philippians would have said, "No, Paul, we want to know how are *you*? Are they treating you alright? Are you getting enough food?" And Paul's, like, "Yeah, yeah, I told you. The gospel is doing great." How could he say that? Because his reason for living wasn't his reputation, or his career, or his comfort, or even his life, all of which were in danger. What was his reason for living? What was his definition of life?

He tells us in **verse 21**. “For to me, to live is Christ.” There it is. That’s what he’s living for. “For me, to live is Christ.” Or, as he says in **verse 20**, that “Christ will be honored in my body.” And that word “honored” is a word that comes from the Greek word *mega*. Paul is saying literally, “I want Christ to be made much of in my life. Because for me, to live is Christ.” How would you fill in that phrase? “For me, to live is...?” Whatever you put in that space is going to determine the way you respond to suffering in your life. If the thing you’re living for is your career, or wealth, or romance, or even your family, if anything happens to those things, then you will be destroyed, because your reason for living is destroyed. But if your reason for living is Christ, then no matter what happens to anything else in your life, it can’t touch your reason for living. That doesn’t mean that if something happens to one of these things you won’t be hurt or sad. Of course you will. But you won’t be crushed. You won’t be inconsolable or bitter, because they’re not your reason for living. And that means that when suffering does hit, when it feels like God has left the building and he’s so far away, you can respond very differently, because your decisions in life are determined by your definition of life. So instead of responding in fear or panic or despair, you can pray, “God you feel really far away right now. But you must be really hard at work. How can Christ be made much of in my life through this experience?” The only way you can say that is if Christ is your reason for living.

The only way you can say, “For me, to live is Christ,” is to see that on the cross, Jesus said, “For me, to live is you.” The only way you can make much of Jesus in your life is to see that he made much of you on the cross. Because the cross was the ultimate God-has-left-the-building moment. Jesus was abandoned by everyone. His friends had deserted him. The crowds that adored him had all turned on him and demanded his blood. Everybody who had ever supported him was gone. And in the midst of that, Jesus still clung to God, his father who had sent him to earth. But at that last moment, when everyone else had abandoned him, Jesus turned to his father for comfort and instead found only hell opening up before him. It was the ultimate God-has-left-the-building moment. Because Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me.” And yet at that very moment when God felt farthest, he was indeed working the hardest. Because the cross was the place, in that moment of utter horror and abandonment, that Jesus Christ defeated sin, evil, suffering, and death forever. When God felt farthest, he was working the hardest. And when you see that, when you see Jesus Christ making much of you on the cross, you can live for him, and make much of him in your life. And if that’s true of you, then suffering can never defeat you. It can only be the instrument through which God advances his gospel in the world.

I was visiting someone in Mississippi a couple of weeks ago, and as I was driving home, I realized that I was making pretty good time, and if I wanted, I could stop in Memphis and visit a place I’ve always wanted to see. No, not Graceland; the National Civil Rights Museum. The museum is located at the Lorraine Motel, which is where Martin Luther King was assassinated on April 4, 1968. As you walk up to the motel, you can see the balcony where he was shot right in front of room 306. And there’s a big plaque right there as you stand in front of the balcony, with Dr. King’s name, the dates of his birth and death. And below that there’s a quote from Genesis 37:19-20, “They said one to another, Behold, here cometh the dreamer. Let us slay him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.” It comes from the story of Joseph, whose brothers hated him because he had had a dream that one day he would be a great ruler. And the idea of bowing down to their snotty little brother galled them so much that originally they decided to kill him, but eventually sold him into slavery. It’s one of the most famous God-has-left-the-building stories in the whole Bible. Because Joseph spent the next thirteen years in a jail in Egypt. But through a series of twists and turns that could only be orchestrated by God, Joseph ended up becoming second in command of Egypt. And it was only because of that that he was able to save all the surrounding countries from a famine that lasted seven years, including his brothers’ country. And it didn’t just save his family’s life. Because it was through that family line that Jesus came into the world. And in the climax not just of Joseph’s story but the whole book of Genesis, Joseph says to his brothers these famous words,

“You meant it for evil. But God meant it for good.” When God felt farthest, he was working the hardest. And just as the dreams God gave Joseph came to pass through his suffering, and just as the dream of Martin Luther King grew even more powerful through his death, in the same way, God’s plan and his dreams of how he wants to advance the gospel through your life can come even more powerfully to pass through your suffering. And the decision you need to make today is not, “How am I going to respond to it?” The decision you need to make today is, “What am I living for?” Because so many times, when God feels farthest, he’s really working the hardest.

You remember that church I told you about at the beginning, the one that lost its pastor in an epidemic? The year was 1849, and that church was this church. Central Presbyterian Church had only been in existence for a few years. And we lost our first pastor when he was only thirty-two years old. And I’m certain that at that moment, God felt really far away. But he hasn’t abandoned this church yet. And he won’t abandon you. Do you live to make much of Jesus in your life? Do we live to make much of Jesus in this church? You can make much of Jesus, because he made much of you. And the more we make much of Jesus, no matter how far away he feels, God will always be at work. Let us pray.