

***“Letters to Phil: A Study of the Book of Philippians—Joy in the Face of Hardship.”***

We’re starting a new series today called “Letters to Phil.” It’s a study of the Book of Philippians. We call it a book, but it was actually a letter that Paul wrote to a little church in the city of Philippi. As we study this book, this letter, we’re going to address how we can move from anxiety to joy. These are anxious times, and what we’re studying can change that.

As we study through Philippians, we first need to embrace the context of who wrote the book, when it was written, and why it was written. Here’s the context: The apostle Paul founded the church in Philippi on his second missionary journey around 52 A.D., about 20 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. He started many churches around the Mediterranean, but you could argue that this church in Philippi was the church that Paul loved the very most. He was very close to the people. In fact, in all the other letters that Paul would write, he would always start off by declaring his title as an apostle. He would say “Paul, an apostle”. This is the only letter that he wrote where he didn’t say, “I’m an apostle,” because he didn’t need to. He was their friend. He loved them, and they loved him.

The second thought is this. Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians in 62 A.D., about 10 years after he started the church. And, he wrote it as a thank you letter. Now, what was he thanking them for? Well, there was a guy named Epaphroditus who delivered a very generous gift. The Philippian church knew that the Apostle Paul was in need so they took up an offering. Epaphroditus risked his life, he almost died, in order to give this gift to Paul. Not only did the people of that church in Philippi send an offering to help Paul, but they also took care of everything for Epaphroditus—his business, his family, his home. He was there with Paul for what was probably a year, maybe longer. Another interesting thing about this is that Paul was adamant about not taking money from any of the churches he started. Whenever Paul was working to start a church, he had a job to pay the bills. By trade, Paul was a tentmaker. He did that everywhere he went so he wouldn’t be a financial burden to anybody. This was the first time that he humbled himself and he said, “We’re like family, I’m in desperate need. I’ll receive this gift from you friends, I know it will be a blessing.” He wrote this letter back as an overwhelming way of saying, “Thank you, I cannot believe you did this for me.”

And then this third thought is maybe the most important for our study. Paul wrote the Philippians from a Roman prison while awaiting possible execution. So everything we study, we have to study with that thought in mind. Paul was locked up 24 hours a day. Part of his imprisonment was in the darkest, nastiest part of the prison in Rome. A hole in the ground covered by a metal grate. But he also spent part of that two years under house arrest. Meaning, he was chained to a Roman soldier, literally chained 24 hours a day to a Roman guard. And the crazy thing about this is, as he wrote the Book of Philippians, there’s one word that all Bible scholars agree describes this letter more than any other word. It is simply the word *joy*.

Paul talks about joy or rejoicing 14 times. In the face of his own imprisonment and possible execution, Paul writes, **“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4).** Clearly there’s something for us to learn in this today. Something we can learn about how we can have joy in the face of anxiety and difficult circumstances.

It’s important to know this as we study Philippians, that Paul was writing as a prisoner in Rome. One place Paul wanted to go more than any other was the city of Rome. You see, Rome was the center, the hub of the entire Roman Empire. He knew that if he could reach the Romans for Christ, then from that very place he could send the gospel into the whole world. He dreamed about going to Rome, he wrote about it, and he talked about it. He envisioned going to Rome as a preacher, but instead he went there as a prisoner.

Everything he’d always wanted, his life dream, his greatest expectations were stripped out from underneath him and yet, he wrote this amazingly joyful letter. That may be where Paul’s story and your story intersect. Because maybe you’re saying, “I wish there was something different in my life. If only

this one thing or these two things or these series of events were different. I thought that by the time I reached this age in life, this position, things would be different.” There may be some things that are nagging you in the back of your mind that have robbed you of your joy.

Would you say that there is maybe one or a few things that you would love to change in your life? Here is what I would like for you to do, if you would. Think for a minute and write this thought down. What do you wish you could change? If you could change something in your life, what would it be? How would you finish the statement, **“I really wish I could change this in my life...”**? Jot down a word or two or maybe a few notes in your phone. What I’d like for you to do is experience the teaching of Philippians based on that which you wish you could change.

So, can we be joyful no matter what? The answer is absolutely. And we can learn how in this little book, this letter, called Philippians. Everything that Paul had dreams of was stripped out from underneath him and yet, he was joyful in spite of the circumstances. How do we do that? In the next few weeks, we’re going to discover how.

Today, we’re going to start with a foundational thought which is this; we must learn to ask the right question rather than the wrong one. **Instead of asking “Why?” we’ll learn to ask “Now what?”** Instead of saying, “Why is this happening, I don’t understand, why, why, why, why, why?” Instead, we’re going to ask “Now what?”

That’s exactly what Paul did. He didn’t ask, “Why me? Why this? Why now?” He knew God didn’t put him in jail. That was the result of evil and selfishness. In light of the circumstance he asked, “Now what?” Now what is God doing? Now what does God want to show me? Now what does God want to do through this? Paul wrote, **“Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.” (Philippians 1:12).**

Paul’s saying, “To the untrained eye, what I’m going through looks like a tragedy, but watch what God can do in the face of tragedy. What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.”

In verses 13 and 14 Paul says, **“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.” (Phil. 1:23-24).** He’s saying, “Because I’m chained up here, others are saying, ‘We’ll go and proclaim the message of Jesus!’” Paul’s imprisonment launched a whole bunch of people into ministry! They knew that Paul couldn’t do it, so they started doing it.

Now here’s what’s crazy. The very chains that looked like they would bind and restrict Paul’s mission, were the very chains that set that mission loose. Here’s what I mean. Paul wanted to reach Rome and what better way to reach Rome than to reach the leaders of Rome? Who were the leaders? The Roman soldiers who happened to be chained to Paul 24 hours a day! We’re told that they were the Praetorian Guard. They were the best of the best elite military. They were the body guards of the Emperor himself. So when Paul was under house arrest, he could have visitors. And as Paul talked to people, as he wrote and conversed, these elite soldiers heard every word. Paul would have had plenty of time to talk to them personally about why he was in chains. And every 6 hours Paul would get a new guard. Paul had a captive audience chained to his wrist! What are the chains in your life that are binding you? What’s the thing that you feel restricts you? It may be the very thing that God uses to release you.

God is the one that changes what we call obstacles into opportunities. God is the one who can take what we define as set-backs and use them as set-ups. The very thing that we wish would change, the very thing we think binds us, could be the very thing God uses to release us. What are you chained to? A problem? A struggling relationship? A physical problem? Financial problem? A deep grief? That which most often we would like to change may be the very place that God does His greatest work.

You may say, “Man, I feel like I’m a prisoner of something.” You, like Paul, are no ordinary prisoner. You’re a prisoner with a purpose. When something happens that we don’t understand, the

first thing we're going to say is, "Now what?" Everybody say it. Now what? Now what do you want to do God? What opportunities arise because of my chains? How are you going to take this tragedy and bend it into something good? This pandemic? This grief? This crazy political season? This illness? This limitation? Now what?

The second thing we're going to say, and you have to say it with a little attitude or it doesn't work, is... **"So what?"** You've got to say it with a little more attitude. So what? Paul learned to say, on things that don't really matter, so what? So what.

Here's what's happening in some of the early churches—there were some people who were preaching about Jesus and they were trying to gain popularity so people would like them more than Paul. Some preached about Jesus with a sense of rivalry, "I can do this better than you, Paul." And here's what Paul said about it. **"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 defense of the gospel. The former preach about 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. And because of this I rejoice."** (Philippians 1:15-28).

Notice that little phrase there, "But what does it matter?" In Greek it's *tis gar plen*. **"But what does it matter?" = Tis Gar Plen = "So what?"** So what? Paul's saying, "Some people are preaching out of love, some to be popular, some for profit, some out of spite. I wish it wasn't that way. It kind of offends me a little bit, but in the end, so what? People are hearing about Jesus." *Tis gar plen*. So what?

So when you run into something that starts to steal your joy, if it doesn't really matter, *tis gar plen*. So what? Yes, there are some things that are very important and when we run up against something that is very important, we address it and take it to the Lord with intensity and passion. But generally, the things that freak us out the most are the little things that don't really matter that much. It's the little things that make me go home cranky. It's the little things that bring fights up in a lot of the marriages. It's the little things that make us wig out. So, we learn to say *tis gar plen*. So what?

Now, not every situation merits a "So what?" Here's how we judge if you can say it. You ask yourself, "Will this matter 100 years from now?" If it doesn't, *tis gar plen*, so what. Ask yourself, "What does this really matter in eternity?" If it doesn't, *tis gar plen*, so what. And then ask yourself, what is really important right now? That which is important, we address. That which isn't, *tis gar plen*.

Try it out. If it doesn't matter that much say, "So what?" Your car broke down. So what. Yeah it's a pain. But 100 years from now, so what? You don't really like your job? So what. Are you going to let that steal your joy or are you going to see that maybe God has a purpose there for you. So what. So and so doesn't like you. So what. Are you here to please people or are you here to please God? Your hair is thinning. So what. Yea, that wasn't very convincing. One of the people on the production team told me last Sunday, Aaron, could you not sit over on the side during the music. All we see on that camera is your bald spot! So what? So what if you have more hair on your back than you do on your head! I mean, 100 years from now it's not going to matter!

Some things do matter and you take them to the Lord. You try to figure out what to do with it, right? If it doesn't matter, *tis gar plen*. So what? I'm not going to let it steal my joy." Is the state of being joyful in any circumstance possible? Oh, absolutely!

But let's be clear, we're not talking about happiness, because happiness and joy are two different things. Happiness is based on happenings. They're based on the same word. When happenings are good, we're happy. When happenings are not good, we're not happy. Joy though, is never based on happenings. Joy is based on God and God alone.

How do you get there? Mastering the right questions is a start. Now what? What do you want to do God? So what? If it doesn't matter, it's not going to get me down. That's what I would call level one of the joyful life, and I'm not completely there yet, but I'm a heck of a lot closer than I was.

There's another level, a deeper level of ultimate joy. That's where Paul was and where we can be, too! Now remember, where was Paul when he wrote this, he was in prison and he was facing execution. In fact, around 64 A.D. he was taken out of that prison by Emperor Nero and beheaded. He knew it was coming. And in verse 21, he wrote these words under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and in the context that he was literally facing death. He said, **"For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." (Philippians 1:21)**. For me to live is to represent Christ. It is for my life to count for Christ. To live is for me to shine the light of Jesus as far and wide as I can. To die is even better. In the next few verses he basically says, "I don't know which to choose. To be honest, I'd rather die and go to be with my Lord Jesus, which is better by far, but for your sake, I want to stay and help and encourage." How to be joyful no matter what, the ultimate joy, the win-win situation. For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

I did the funeral of Jack Quinn yesterday. Another tragic casualty of COVID-19. Jack was an influencer. He made a difference particularly in the recovery community around here. He had found his way to sobriety, and found his way to God, and he wanted to help everybody he could in the time he had. But at the same time, Jack knew that every day was a gift and it could all end at any time. He was always sure to tell people he loved them, to savor every moment. He didn't let little things bother him. I think Jack Quinn got it. I think he knew that to live is Christ and to die is gain. He didn't fear death. I was with him on the day he died. He was not afraid.

Now I'm not there yet, and I'll tell you why, because I still care too much about what you think about me. I still care too much about things that do not last. I still get wrapped up in things that don't matter in eternity. But with the help and the power of God, within my lifetime I pray that I will be able to say no matter what, *for me to live is Christ and to die is gain*. And at that moment, I can glorify God with a joy that is real no matter what. It's possible for all of us. Paul teaches us to ask the right questions—What now? And, so what! He teaches us that, *to live is Christ*, so get busy living for Jesus. But *to die is gain*, don't live in fear. This is the first lesson on joy, and there are more to come. And for today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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