

When Fear Gives Way to Joy: 1. Hope in the Face of Hardship
Philippians 1:18-26
April 26, 2020
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In the midst of uncertainty, I've noticed how social media has become a place where humor is helping to relieve some of our stress. Here's a few memes from the past week that got my attention. *I sent my son next door with a packed suitcase. They called asking Why. I said He is a Home School foreign exchange student.* I'm guessing there are a few parents who would sign up for that program. Here's another. *One polar bear says to another: You got any plans today? Do nothing. You did that yesterday! Didn't finish.* And then this one might get us closer to today's message: *Looking at an Easter picture of the empty tomb, a little girl says: "I'm glad he didn't shelter in place."* and so am I.

What began as a health crisis has become an employment crisis and a financial crisis and even with some businesses beginning to open – it stills feel frightening. Somehow, I never thought I'd be wearing a face mask when I entered a store. But here I am. (face mask) There's a virus out there and not only do I not want to give it to anyone, I don't want to get it. But at the same time, we are losing patience. We want our lives back. We need hope.

Last week, I listened to a presentation by Dr. Henry Cloud. He says to understand what we are feeling in this time of crisis, it's important to understand how we are put together – how God designed us to function. He pointed out four things.

1. Connections. The foundation of human functioning is our connectedness. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul tells us we are to be knitted together, so we cannot be pulled apart. We need each other. The problem is that crisis disrupts the connections. You don't see the people you normally see. You are not coming here and connecting. The very way we were designed is being pulled apart.

2. The foundation needs a structure. The structure of our lives is what we do, where we go, our routines, things we depend on. I get up in the morning and know what day it is. I get my coffee, get in my car, drive to work or wherever I need to be. It's the structure and routine that gives our lives order and keeps us calm. But this crisis has disrupted everybody's structure. When I woke up this morning, I wasn't sure if it was Sunday or just some day. It's almost like we are lost in the woods and not at all sure where we are going. And when we lose our structure and we don't have our connections, our system goes into adrenal overload and we feel stressed – Amanda might even tell you, I get "snippy!"

3. And what happens is fight/flight/freeze – it's fear. And the thinking part of our brain retreats and we start reacting. Not planning, not problem-solving. It's why first responders are taught to be calm under pressure. How do we calm down this fight/flight/freeze response? It's what we are going to learn from Paul.

4. Control. Humans are control freaks! We want to be in control. We were designed that way. Have I told you about my grandson? On Wednesday, I was feed my 9 month old grandson, and he wouldn't let me feed him. He wanted to feed himself. What has happened to our lives in the past 5 weeks? We've lost control of so much. I can't go shopping. My favorite restaurant is closed. I can't visit the people I want. I can't even go to church. We don't have the choices we had a month ago. And when we've lost control and don't have choices, we go into a learned helplessness. I have a friend who lost her job, and she said all she did for the first two weeks

was sit on the couch and eat Oreos. "I can't do anything!" And what we need is something to hold on to.

And as we read Paul's letter to the Philippians that something is hope. A confidence rooted in God's faithfulness. **I hope with daring courage that Christ's greatness will be seen in my body, now as always, whether I live or die.** The apostle Paul was writing this letter to the church in Philippi. It is a gospel of hope and joy in the midst of troubled time. The tone of Paul's letter is especially remarkable when we consider that the letter was written while Paul was in prison in Rome. His life is on the line and yet his faith triumphs over adversity and causes him to rejoice whatever happens.

It all began several years earlier, when Paul was falsely accused of desecrating the Temple in Jerusalem. He was dragged out of there by a mob and nearly beaten to death before Roman soldiers intervened. Thinking he was an Egyptian renegade, the Roman commander ordered that Paul be bound with chains and taken to their barracks. When the commander could not decide what to do with Paul, he sent him to Felix, the governor of Caesarea. When Felix could not decide after two years how to handle Paul's case, he left him in prison for his successor, Festus, to deal with. When Festus couldn't decide either, he tried to satisfy Paul's accusers by asking Paul to return to Jerusalem and stand trial. Knowing that he would be murdered, Paul asked for an appeal to the Emperor in Rome which was Paul's right as a Roman citizen. Several months and a shipwreck later, Paul arrived in Rome. He spends the next two years of his life under arrest chained to the wrist of a soldier twenty-four hours a day. Yet, despite being a victim of false accusations, unlawful arrest, and unfair imprisonment, Paul chose joy. He wrote this letter to the Philippians: **I'm glad and I'll continue to be glad.** Some translations say: **I will continue to rejoice.** This joy is not happiness with life's circumstances, but it is a joy that comes from "**hope with daring courage.**"

In this letter, Paul is clear. The purpose in life is not to make Paul popular. It is not about receiving recognition as a great leader. But life is all about glorifying God. If that be in prison, so be it. If that be achieving great things in life, so be it. If that be death, so be it. Paul has decided to cling to the cross of Christ and let everyone know it is Christ who is working in him and Christ who will never let go of him.

One of the temptations we face in life is thinking that God takes care of his own. That somehow faithfulness will pay off with an easier life or a more prosperous life. Just come to church, profess an allegiance to Christ, and God will save us from hardships in life. In his book, *Disappointment with God*, Philip Yancey tells the story of Richard, a seminary student, who lost his faith in God. Richard became a Christian in college and frequently attended church meetings where there were great testimonials about God's protective care. Unfortunately, Richard experienced none of that care in his life. His fiancée, who introduced him to Christ, dumped him. His parents divorced. A prospective employer duped him. In fact, the four years Richard was a Christian things had gone from bad to worse. Finally one night in a seminary dorm room, Richard and God had it out. "I don't want to tell you how to run your world," said Richard, "but you need to give me some evidence that you exist." God said not a word. "After four hours of waiting," said Richard, "I stood up and said, 'I will forget God and live my life in my own way.' I was converted that night. I was converted not to God but from God." I've met other people like that. People disappointed, hurt, beaten down by the struggles of pain and doubt – and then picked up their faith and walked away from God.

The book of Philippians is for such persons as this. The message offers hope. The Christian who trusts in God can confidently find Christ sharing each and every experience with them. We discover that disaster leads to new opportunity, sorrow to joy, and death to resurrection life.

Maybe you watched the concert by Andrea Bocelli on Easter. This world-famous 61 year old tenor entered an empty Cathedral in Milan, Italy and began singing a message of hope to the world. If you don't know his story, his life is a message of hope. During his mother's pregnancy, doctors predicted that her son would be born with a disability and she might want to terminate the pregnancy. But instead, they had hope, and gave birth to Andrea. When he was five months old, his parents received the news that Andrea had congenital glaucoma and his sight would be minimal. But still his parents had hope that God would do something. Andrea showed a love for music. His mother said music was what brought Andrea comfort. At the age of 12, he was playing football (what we call soccer) when a ball hit him in the head causing a brain hemorrhage that left him completely blind. And yet, they had hope that God would do something. Andrea finished high school, went on to college, and graduated from Law School – but what he loved was singing. A few years later, he left his law practice and became one of the greatest singers of our time. Andrea Bocelli is a Christian – not a perfect one. He would tell you he's made his share of mistakes, but it's his faith in the risen Christ that gives him hope. Or as Paul wrote: I hope with daring courage that Christ's greatness will be seen in my body, now as always, whether I live or die. Like Paul, Andrea refused to give up.

Easter must have been his greatest crowd ever. At the end of the concert, he walked out of the Cathedral, into the Plaza to sing this message of hope to the world. [video]

In the midst of circumstances he could not control, with great suffering and even greater fear, he chooses and he invites us to choose – the one thing that will never fail us – and that's God's amazing grace. Therefore, I choose to hope with daring courage.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of April 26, 2020

Weekly Prayer: God of us all, we come to you with hearts that are heavy with the needs and concerns of your people. We seek your guidance to overcome the fear that exists in this time of global, national, and even family uncertainty. Free us in this moment to allow your grace and mercy to flow and fill us with hope. Use us to serve and to encourage others as we live for your glory now and forever. Amen.

Monday, April 27

Scripture: Philippians 1:1-11

From Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus. To all those in Philippi who are God's people in Christ Jesus, along with your supervisors and servants. May the grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

I thank my God every time I mention you in my prayers. I'm thankful for all of you every time I pray, and it's always a prayer full of joy. I'm glad because of the way you have been my partners in the ministry of the gospel from the time you first believed it until now. I'm sure about this: the one who started a good work in you will stay with you to complete the job by the day of Christ Jesus. I have good reason to think this way about all of you because I keep you in my heart. You are all my partners in God's grace, both during my time in prison and in the defense and support of the gospel. God is my witness that I feel affection for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. This is my prayer: that your love might become even more and more rich with knowledge and all kinds of insight. I pray this so that you will be able to decide what really

matters and so you will be sincere and blameless on the day of Christ. I pray that you will then be filled with the fruit of righteousness, which comes from Jesus Christ, in order to give glory and praise to God.

Observation: Some have called this book the Gospel of Joy. It is a letter written by Paul to the Christians in the city of Philippi, which is on the northeast coast of Greece. What makes Paul's message of joy so compelling is that the letter was written while he was imprisoned. Some Bible scholars suggest his imprisonment was in Ephesus; others suggest it was in Rome at the end of his ministry. For the next five weeks, we will consider the health and financial realities of our time that give birth to fear while hearing from Paul how it is possible to open ourselves to joy.

Application: Paul prayed with joy, surely not because everything was happiness. For Paul, joy was a confidence rooted in hope, a trust in God's faithfulness, knowing that God will never desert us. Have you experienced that kind of joy? What would such joy do for you? Why might Paul pray with joy?

Prayer: God, I pray that my love might become even more and more rich with knowledge and all kinds of insight. Help me to be opened up so that joy may be complete in and through me. Amen.

Tuesday, April 28

Scripture: Philippians 1:12-18c

Brothers and sisters, I want you to know that the things that have happened to me have actually advanced the gospel. The whole Praetorian Guard and everyone else knows that I'm in prison for Christ. Most of the brothers and sisters have had more confidence through the Lord to speak the word boldly and bravely because of my jail time. Some certainly preach Christ with jealous and competitive motives, but others preach with good motives. They are motivated by love, because they know that I'm put here to give a defense of the gospel; the others preach Christ because of their selfish ambition. They are insincere, hoping to cause me more pain while I'm in prison. What do I think about this? Just this: since Christ is proclaimed in every possible way, whether from dishonest or true motives, I'm glad and I'll continue to be glad.

Observation: Paul was in prison not because he was guilty of some crime but on account of his stand for the gospel. He proclaimed that Jesus had been raised from the dead. A contingent of soldiers would have been assigned individually to guard him during the course of his imprisonment. Paul was able to share the message of the gospel with every one of them. Instead of hindering the spread of the gospel, Paul's imprisonment served to make it known.

Application: How did Paul's perspective on his suffering bring him joy? What does this mean for how you look at suffering? While Paul was in prison some Christian preachers seemed to take joy in this - pointing to conflict and competition even in the early church. Paul was able to rise above bitterness and find the ability to "rejoice." What might this mean for you when dealing with people who would "stir up trouble for you"?

Prayer: God, please guard my heart so that my worth is secure in the knowledge that you love me and will never forsake me. I want to be the person who builds others up so that my words and actions proclaim your glory. Amen.

Wednesday, April 29

Scripture: Philippians 1:18d-26

What do I think about this? Just this: since Christ is proclaimed in every possible way, whether from dishonest or true motives, I'm glad and I'll continue to be glad. I'm glad because I know that this will result in my release through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. It is my expectation and hope that I won't be put to shame in anything. Rather, I hope with daring courage that Christ's greatness will be seen in my body, now as always, whether I live or die. Because for me, living serves Christ and dying is even better. If I continue to live in this world, I get results from my work. But I don't know what I prefer. I'm torn between the two because I want to leave this life and be with Christ, which is far better. However, it's more important for me to stay in this world for your sake. I'm sure of this: I will stay alive and remain with all of you to help your progress and the joy of your faith, and to increase your pride in Christ Jesus through my presence when I visit you again.

Observation: *[Note: When you see a verse listed, like 1:18d above - the letter signifies sentences or phrases within the verse - so that the fourth phrase or sentence in verse 18 is "I'm glad and I'll continue to be glad."]* Paul faced this question: will he survive his present imprisonment, and then be released so that he can visit them again, or will the power of the world decide that he's better off dead?

Application: Notice that joy came in part through the prayers of the people caring for Paul. How have you experienced the power of prayer when others have prayed for you? In verse 20, Paul says, "I hope with daring courage." Paul chose hope when others might have retreated into fear. Such hope was rooted in the resurrection of Jesus. (Read 2 Corinthians 1:8-11 – also written by Paul.)

Prayer: God of eternal grace and love, I choose you. I choose to trust you. When I feel fear and uncertainty welling up inside me, help me to hold on to your faithfulness. Amen.

Thursday, April 30

Scripture: Philippians 1:27-30

Most important, live together in a manner worthy of Christ's gospel. Do this, whether I come and see you or I'm absent and hear about you. Do this so that you stand firm, united in one spirit and mind as you struggle together to remain faithful to the gospel. That way, you won't be afraid of anything your enemies do. Your faithfulness and courage are a sign of their coming destruction and your salvation, which is from God. God has generously granted you the privilege, not only of believing in Christ but also of suffering for Christ's sake. You are having the same struggle that you saw me face and now hear that I'm still facing.

Observation: "Don't let your opponents intimidate you," Paul tells the Philippians. Being a Christian is about living by the belief that Jesus is already the true Lord of the world. Most of the world does not know that, so Christians are inevitably out of step with the rest of the world. It is easy for Christians to feel intimidated, but Paul insists that we must not.

Application: What is Paul challenging you to do in these verses? What does it mean to strive "for the faith of the gospel" (v. 27c)? Remember that Paul was arrested when he started the church in Philippi. It appears from verses 29-30 that the believers there were still being persecuted. What would persecution look like in our communities? Have you ever felt ridiculed or ignored because of your faith?

Prayer: Strengthen me, O God, for challenges that I face. When others would suggest that I give up on you and give up on faith, help me to feel your presence and to know that you are real. Thank you for loving me. Amen.

Friday, May 1

Scripture: Philippians 2:1-5

Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any sympathy, complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other. Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus:

Observation: As you begin reading Philippians 2, remember that Paul is here giving the Philippians the key to "thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other" - in other words, living without conflict. Paul is providing keys to working through conflicts. (We will hear more about this over the next two Sundays.)

Application: What do these verses teach us about the heart of a Christian? How are you doing at allowing God to shape this heart in you? Remember that the hallmark of the Christian life and faith throughout the New Testament is love. Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-8 for another picture of the Christian life. Note how 1 Corinthians 13 was a guide to help the Corinthians, who were also experiencing conflict, to find joy and peace in their church. Use both of today's scripture readings as an outline for prayer asking God to form these attitudes in your heart.

Prayer: Lord God, be at work within me. Shape me and prepare me for the hard work of love. Let me be patient, kind, and trusting. Remind me that the love you offer will never fail. Amen.

Saturday, May 2

Scripture: Philippians 2:5-11

Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus: Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings. When he found himself in the form of a human, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God highly honored him and gave him a name above all names, so that at the name of Jesus everyone in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Observation: These verses are considered by many scholars to be an ancient Christian hymn. Here's why: 1) It was written in a style that is different from the rest of the letter and different from Paul's normal form of writing - indicating Paul was quoting something else. 2) These verses reflect a poetic style which is why most Bibles typeset them as poetry. 3) The content, while making Paul's point, does not flow naturally from what comes before, but seems to be quoted to illustrate what Paul has said before. For these reasons and others scholars believe that what Paul is quoting is a hymn that the early believers likely sang in praise of Jesus. The hymn reveals to us the beliefs of the earliest Christians.

Application: What do you learn about Jesus' here? What do you learn about his heart? What does this mean for you? What do you learn about his divine nature? According to this scripture,

one day everyone will acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord. That he is sovereign and has ultimate and complete authority. Have you done this already?

Prayer: Praise God from whom all blessing flow. Praise God all creatures here below. Praise God above ye heavenly host. Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.