

JOY IN SUFFERING

Philippians 1:12-30

ATTENTION GETTER

Before we begin tonight, I want us to pause for a moment together.

Right now, a team of pastors from our church is serving in the Philippines, equipping and encouraging church leaders. It's a reminder that God is building His church here and to the ends of the earth, and that we play a role in that, so we want to lift them up and ask God to bless and strengthen the work they're doing.

And I also want to say this... tonight's message is about joy in suffering, about enduring well. And I know that for some of us, suffering isn't just a topic — it's a present reality. Some of you came in carrying worries, grief, unanswered prayers, or situations that feel heavy on your heart. You may feel unseen by others, but you are not unseen by God.

So before we open His Word, let's take a moment to bring both our mission around the world and the needs we carry right here into His presence as we pray.

Let's pray...

IMAGE OF DR. PERKINS

As I prepared for this message, I thought of a Christian man named Dr. John M. Perkins. Born in Mississippi in the 1930s in a family of sharecroppers, Dr. Perkins experienced suffocating poverty.

But the moment that shaped him most happened when he was seventeen years old. His older brother — a World War II veteran — was shot and killed by a police officer, but there was no accountability or closure for the family.

Dr. Perkins would tell in his books that he carried so much anger after that. Real, consuming anger. Eventually he left Mississippi and moved to California, trying to build a different life and leave the pain behind.

But here, he met Christians who introduced him to Jesus, and for the first time John Perkins knew Jesus as someone that forgives sinners and heals wounded hearts.

As Dr. Perkins began following Jesus closely, he sensed God asking him to do something unexpected.

To go back to Mississippi, the place connected to his deepest wounds. So he did.

He began serving quietly — teaching the Bible, mentoring young people, helping families, simply trying to live out the love of Christ in his community.

In 1970, during a peaceful demonstration, John Perkins was arrested.

That night in jail, he was severely beaten by officers. Injured, exhausted, and unsure if he would survive, he lay on the floor of his cell.

And in that moment, something changed.

He began to pray.

Not for revenge.

Not even for rescue.

He began praying for the men who had tortured him.

Later he said he realized the gospel had to be powerful enough to create love where hatred once lived.

That experience didn't stop his ministry — it expanded it. Churches were strengthened. Leaders were inspired. His witness began reaching beyond his small town.

John Perkins discovered something many believers eventually learn: sometimes the place we think will end our story becomes the very place God uses most.

Two thousand years earlier, another prisoner said something that echoes this truth:
"What has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel."

Tonight's message is not just about Paul, or about John Perkins

It's about every one of us who has ever wondered, "*God, why is this happening to me?*"

In the passage we'll read tonight, Paul gives us an astonishing answer... **this is the Big Idea for tonight:**

God never wastes pain — He uses it to advance the gospel.

EXEGESIS

Now... this raises an important question: *How can Paul say that?*

How can someone sitting in prison — facing uncertainty, limitation, and suffering — speak with that kind of confidence?

Now I recognize most of us will not spend time in prison for sharing the Gospel, but we do know what it feels like to be trapped by circumstances we didn't choose.

When you're let go from a position you poured your heart and soul into
When your partner or ex-partner just quits on you and your family
When a financial challenge you didn't ask shows up..

We may not wear iron chains, but we know what it feels like when life suddenly feels restricted... when options disappear... when the future feels uncertain.

And family... if Paul can speak with hope and confidence while sitting in *his* chains, then maybe there is hope tonight for us in ours.

So let's turn to Philippians chapter 1, beginning in verse 12, and hear what God says through His timeless Word. If you don't have a Bible...

We will read it in parts as we got through our message tonight... beginning with verses 12-14

12 Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. **13** As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. **14** 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.

Paul is writing these words from prison. guarded by Roman soldiers, facing an uncertain future. From the outside, it looked like everything had gone wrong. The missionary was confined. The preacher was silenced. The movement should have slowed down.

But Paul says, *"I want you to know... what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel."*

Paul likely sensed the Philippians were interpreting Paul's imprisonment as a setback, but Paul saw it as a setup. What felt like limitation became multiplication.

Family, I would love to remind you tonight that our God can take what enemy meant for evil and use it for good. **Our God turns chains into channels.**

I. God Turns Chains into Channels (v12-14)

What looks like a chain to us often becomes a channel in God's hands.

Listen to what Paul says:

It has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else I am in chains for Christ.

Now think about this for a moment.

Paul is not preaching in a church building.

He's not traveling freely from city to city.

He is under Roman custody — likely chained to a soldier for hours at a time.

Every shift change meant a new guard.

Every guard meant a new conversation.

And every conversation meant another person hearing about Jesus.

The very chains meant to silence Paul became the means through which the gospel entered the Roman Empire's inner circles.

Rome thought Paul was the prisoner.

But spiritually speaking — **Paul had a captive audience.**

You see, perhaps like Paul, one of the things we can do is to grow from asking “Why is this happening to me?” to asking “God, how are you working in me and through me in this?”

The chain becomes a channel when we begin looking at God to move through our situation.

Paul continues... he says that because of his chains, the brothers and sisters around him have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

How does this happen? Because joy in the midst of suffering is contagious.

We see this throughout scripture and today:

Joseph trusted God in prison, and an entire nation found hope through his faithfulness.

Hannah continued to worship while her prayers seemed unanswered, and her testimony strengthened generations who learned to trust God in waiting.

Esther stepped forward in courage, and her obedience gave an entire people confidence to stand.

Paul and Silas sang in prison, and the other prisoners listened as worship echoed through the darkness.

And in 2015, after nine believers were murdered during Bible study at Mother Emanuel AME Church, grieving family members publicly forgave the shooter — and their Christlike grace stirred faith and conviction across the world.

Even today, when believers walk through cancer with peace, or endure loss with steady hope, others begin to believe that faith can truly hold in suffering.

Because joy in suffering has always been contagious — and God turns one person's chains into courage for many.

May I encourage you tonight that God will often do His deepest and most strategic work in the places we would never choose. He will work all things for the good of those who love Him.

Application: So can I challenge us tonight... What if we identify that one thing that's difficult right now and we start asking "Lord, what can you do in me and through me in the midst of this?"

Bridge: Because if we are intentional to bring this before the Lord, then we can live into the reality that suffering strengthens the church.

II. Suffering Strengthens the Church (v15-19)

Look at what Paul says in verses 15-19

15 It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill.

16 The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.

17 The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. **18** 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 to rejoice, **19** 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.

After telling us that believers are preaching the gospel more boldly because of his chains in verse 14, Paul adds an honest clarification:

Some preach Christ out of love.
Others preach Christ out of envy and rivalry.

Some were encouraged by Paul's faithfulness.
Others saw an opportunity to advance themselves while Paul sat in prison.

And let's be honest — that had to hurt.

Even though they were preaching Christ and not a false gospel, their motives were flawed. They were trying to elevate themselves at Paul's expense.

Now I want to be clear about something.

Paul is **not** saying motives don't matter.

Just a few verses later, Paul commands:

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.” (Philippians 2:3)

So Paul is not approving their hearts.

He is revealing **his** heart.

A heart so transformed by Christ that personal opposition cannot steal his joy when Jesus is lifted up.

Paul condemns the motive — but celebrates the message.

And this is where suffering begins to strengthen the church.

Because suffering exposes what is actually important to us.

When comfort disappears...
when reputation is threatened...
when control is taken away...

the question becomes simple:

Does my response to suffering reveal that my life is about Christ, or about myself?

Paul answers clearly:

“The important thing is that in every way... Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.”

If He is known by others, I am okay taking a backseat, I am okay with my reputation taking a toll. Because he knows that ultimately he will be delivered.

Paul says:

“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.”

Notice Paul names **two realities working together**.

First, **the Spirit of Jesus Christ**.

Paul believes the Spirit strengthens his inner being

The Spirit gives courage when he is afraid

The Spirit steadies the heart when circumstances remain uncertain.

The Spirit enables Paul to endure suffering without losing hope.

Paul is not surviving prison because he is emotionally strong —

he is sustained because Christ Himself is present through the Spirit.

The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead now strengthens a prisoner in chains.

But Paul does not stop there.

He also says deliverance comes **through your prayers**.

Family, do not undermine the power of your prayers. In God’s wisdom and kindness, He has willed it so that our prayers, when aligned with His will and timing, will bring about the provision He desires for us. God sustains His people by the presence of Christ **and** the people of Christ.

This is why suffering strengthens the church.

Because hardship reveals that Christianity was never meant to be lived alone.

When believers suffer:

- the Spirit draws near,
- and the church draws together.

Suffering activates dependence on God and interdependence with one another.

Application: Can I remind you... do not be a lone wolf. Pursue community. Share life with one another. Prioritize it in your calendar. No, no group of friends is perfect, but God works powerfully through imperfect communities. So, build the discipline to be filled with the Spirit and to be in community. This will help you persevere. If you're suffering, invite the prayers of God's people. If someone else in the body is suffering, pray for them. God extends His grace both through His Holy Spirit but also through your faithful intercession.

Bridge: Up to this point, Paul has talked about what God is doing through his suffering. Now he lets us see what suffering has done *in* him. And what we discover is the conviction behind his courage, his joy, and his freedom even in prison. And that conviction is simple, yet so powerful... to live is Christ, to die is gain.

III. To live is Christ, to die is gain. (v20-26)

What follows are some of the most moving words in all of Scripture. We read these words remembering that Paul's utmost love is unto God, but that he also really loves the church. Listen to these words:

20 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. **21** For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. **22** 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! **23** I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; **24** but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. **25** Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, **26** so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

Paul does **not** say.

- "I hope I survive."
- "I hope I'm proven right."
- "I hope my suffering ends soon."

Paul's deepest concern is this:

That Christ would be exalted.

Whether he lives... or whether he dies...

Paul wants his life to magnify Jesus.

Suffering has clarified his priorities.

Let me make that relatable.

A few weeks ago, both of our kids got the stomach flu and were throwing up nonstop for hours. In that moment, do you think I cared about emails, schedules, or plans for the week? Nothing else mattered. Their suffering didn't create my priorities — it revealed what was already true. My children were my priority all along.

We see this whenever life becomes fragile. When people walk through serious illness, loss, or uncertainty, conversations change. Suddenly the questions aren't about achievements or possessions but about faith, relationships, and what truly lasts.

Suffering has a way of stripping away lesser things and revealing what matters most.

And that's what we see in Paul.

Comfort taken away, reputation taking a toll, future uncertain.
What was once very important to him has now been removed.

But Paul doesn't say, *"All I have left is Christ."*

Paul has matured enough to realize that:

Christ was never the leftover.
Christ was always the center.

Suffering didn't give Paul something new — it revealed WHO had been sustaining him all along.

And that leads to his conviction:

"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."

Paul is saying:

If I live, Christ is my purpose, my identity, my joy.
If I die, Christ is my fulfillment. Death does not take away the One he loves the most.

Either way, Paul wins.

When we make Christ our life, nothing can ultimately take life from you.

In Christ we are secure.
In Christ, we are kept.
In Christ, our future is certain.

Paul then describes a tension that could easily be misunderstood.

He says he feels torn between going to be with the Lord and remaining with God's people.

Now listen carefully — this isn't spiritual confusion.

Paul loves Christ.

And Paul loves the church.

His longing to be with Christ shows how deeply his heart has been captured by Jesus. But that same love for Christ has reshaped how he loves people.

Grace has reordered Paul's affections.

He longs for Christ's presence...
and because he loves Christ, he also loves Christ's people.

So Paul isn't choosing between two competing desires.

He is living with two holy loves.

And that's why he doesn't stay begrudgingly.

He joyfully remains — because love compels him to serve the very people Christ loves.

Indeed, the more Christ becomes our life, the more our lives become a gift to others.

Application: Light & Life, may I encourage you:

Until the Lord calls you home, would you joyfully love the body of Christ?
Would you serve the church, His people?
Would you, like Paul, seek the growth, the faith, and the joy of the people God has placed around you?

Bridge: And once Paul declares, *"To live is Christ,"* he turns to the church and asks:

If Christ truly is our life...
how should we live together?

Which leads us to Paul's final challenge in this chapter

IV. Living Worthy of the Gospel (v27-30)

We've seen that God turns chains into channels.
We've seen that suffering strengthens the church.
We've heard Paul declare, *"To live is Christ."*

Now Paul asks: What does a Christ-centered life actually look like?

This next passage is not a burden placed on us — it is an invitation to live out the grace we've already received.

27 Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel **28** without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. **29** For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, **30** since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

Notice Paul begins with the words, **"Whatever happens."**

Whether Paul is released or executed...
whether life gets easier or harder...

their calling doesn't change. They are to live in a manner worthy of the Gospel. Now this does not mean: earn the Gospel, prove yourself worthy of salvation, try harder. Living worthy of the gospel is not perfection, it's daily faithfulness shaped by grace.

To live in a manner worthy of the Gospel means standing firm together, striving together, living courageously, and trusting Christ even in suffering. Joy in suffering doesn't come from perfect circumstances — it comes from living every day centered on Jesus. It comes from letting Him strengthen us.

Because opposition will come, won't it? Challenges will show up, and our joy and peace, and our choosing of standing firm in Jesus will be a testimony to those watching.

Jesus saves. Jesus delivers. Jesus keeps us.

Now, as the worship team comes and I begin to close... I got one more thing to share before I invite one of our sisters to share:

Paul calls suffering a **gift**.

Not because pain is good.
Not because hardship is pleasant.

But because suffering allows believers to participate in Christ's story.

They share in:

- Christ's mission,
- Christ's endurance,
- Christ's victory.

Suffering is not proof that God has abandoned them.

Family if you're suffering unto the Lord... if you're enduring out of honor for Him, then the promise of Scripture is that suffering places you closer to Christ. And if you're sharing in His suffering, then you will also share in His glory.

Application: So, let me ask you... Who are you standing firm with? Who is enduring with you in your suffering?

Living worthy of the gospel means refusing isolated faith.

This week, take one step toward deeper Christian community — encourage someone, pray with someone, or walk alongside someone who is suffering.

TESTIMONY

Jessica shares.

“Jessica isn't here to explain her situation — she's here to testify to God's faithfulness in suffering.”

CHALLENGE

1. Re-center life on Christ
2. Embrace community
3. Reframe suffering “Lord, how are you working in me and through me?”

RESPONSE

Altar Call — Three-Fold Invitation

Tonight I want to invite you to respond to the Word of God in three ways.

Not because emotion demands it...
but because God's grace invites it.

1. Re-center your life on Christ

Some of you love Jesus... but if you're honest, He hasn't been at the center lately.

Maybe life has become driven by stress... achievement... fear about the future... or just exhaustion.

You're still believing — but you're running on your own strength.

And tonight the Spirit is gently calling you back.

Not to try harder.

Not to feel guilty.

But to return to the simplicity of this truth:

To live is Christ.

If you sense God inviting you to place Him back at the center of your life — I want to invite you to come and pray.

2. Embrace community

Some of you are carrying things alone.

You show up to church, you smile, you serve... but very few people really know what you're walking through.

Maybe you've been hurt before.

Maybe vulnerability feels risky.

Maybe independence feels safer.

But tonight God may be inviting you to step out of isolation and into the life of the body.

You were never meant to follow Jesus alone.

If you need courage to be known, to be prayed for, to walk with others instead of alone — come and pray tonight.

3. Reframe your suffering

And some of you are in a hard season right now.

You may not have chosen it.

You may not understand it.

You may be tired of asking “*Why?*”

Tonight may be the moment where your prayer changes from:

“Lord, why is this happening?”

to

“Lord, how are You working in me... and through me?”

Not denying pain.

Not pretending everything is okay.

But trusting that God is still present and still at work.

If you need strength to trust God in suffering, I invite you to come and pray.