

This past spring, my family and I headed to Florida for spring break and spent one of our days at a place called Treeumph! It is a climbing park in a forested area of central Florida, and it was the scene of a day to be remembered.

They start you out easy. This is how they fool you into thinking the day is going to be a piece of cake. In fact, when we started, I looked at my boys and said, "Please tell me it's going to be more than this." It was. We progressed from these low platforms to a more challenging netted walkway. The footing was not as stable here, and we had quickly increased our elevation. But, even at the end of this, I thought "we'll be done in no time." I was wrong, because we eventually got here. What started as a fun and leisurely stroll on some raised platforms became an arduous journey of greater challenge and height.

And here's what I discovered. This is a skinny man's game. If you've ever watched American Ninja Warrior or documentaries on people free climbing the sheer face of a mountain, you'll quickly notice that none of the participants are former offensive lineman with short stumpy legs and large rear ends. That meant this wasn't going to be an easy day. Every step I took seemed to lead me to more terrifying heights, vulnerable and precarious situations, painful moments of muscle fatigue and great suffering, and utter exhaustion as we made our way through the course.

And when we finished, there was only one word to describe the day's experience: joyful. This journey we were on, while arduous, was also full of joy. I was with my boys, our courage was tested, we celebrated the progress we made throughout and we persevered because we knew, in the end, we'd be safe, and we'd be together. And as I prepared for this new series we start this morning, I thought back to then and realized that's a lot like our journey with God.

We begin by trusting in Jesus. We know our sins are forgiven, and we'll be with God for all eternity. And as we live our lives for God, there are times of great progress, fun, fulfillment, family, but we also realize it's not all easy. Life is hard. Following Jesus comes at a cost. As hostility towards our faith grows here, a missions team we sent out this week is going to a place in the world where sharing the gospel will get you thrown in jail. We're reminded that we live in a broken world. We have a number of members who are extremely ill and facing an uncertain prognosis, the names Botham and Atatiana cause us to cry out to God for justice to be done, and the world keeps telling us why we shouldn't like each other. And then you get to church and the pastor keeps telling you to take a courageous next step, and it may leave you asking "Where does all this lead?" Well, we are going to spend the next six weeks finding out.

In the book of Philippians, the Apostle Paul writes to a church he started in the city of Philippi. In it he writes about this journey with Jesus, the highs and lows, the times of progress and times of pain, and the theme he keeps coming back to over and over is joy. In fact, in a book only four chapters long, he makes reference to it sixteen times. **According to Paul, the Christian life doesn't just have the potential for joy. It is an essential experience of it.**

But if joy is so foundational, then how do we get it? Scripture tells us that joy is a fruit of the Spirit, and in John 15 Jesus says it's a gift he gives to his followers. That's because it's based on our relationship with him, not on the circumstances of our lives. In fact, it's during the most difficult times of life that joy shines brightest. Joy is the reminder that, regardless of what is

happening in our lives, we belong to God and he is present in our lives. Our circumstances will change, and our level of happiness will follow suit. But joy can be consistently experienced because our relationship with the God who gives it to us is permanent. That's why Paul, in writing his friends in Philippi about this journey with Jesus, says it can be one full of joy.

Throughout this series, we'll see the different ways God manifests joy in our lives. This morning we begin with the joy of partnership. It is a wonderful reminder that this journey we are on will be infinitely more joyful if we take it with others.

A joyful partnership is forged in intimacy and shared activity. Acts 16 tells us how Paul began with the Philippians. I'd encourage you to read it. Philippi was a Macedonian/Greek city that was conquered by Rome and became a leading city in that part of a Roman colony in 168 BC. Luke tells us that, during Paul's second missionary journey, he had a vision of a Macedonian man urging him to come to Macedonia to help them. They immediately go and meet a woman named Lydia. She and her household become followers of Jesus. The Philippian church had begun. After, Paul heals a girl who had a spirit of divination and fortune-telling, and the men who profited from her work had Paul and Silas beaten and thrown in jail, where they sang hymns. A great earthquake follows, the jailer thinks they've escaped, but haven't, and they convert the jailer and his whole family, who then rejoice. Then the officials find out they were Roman citizens and are afraid and hurry them out of town. What started in that time became a decade-long relationship with a people Paul would visit several times and would grow deeply fond of. Ten years later, he now sits in a Roman prison to write them this letter.

[Philippians 1:3-5, 7-8] ³ I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now...⁷ It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Paul begins his letter with an expression of his heart for these people. His affection for them is unmistakable. Imagine getting a letter from someone who said every time he thought of you, he thanked God for you, and his prayers were filled with joy. The reason for this affection was their partnership in the Gospel. Paul describes their relationship using *koinonia*. It gets translated as "partnership" but is most often translated as "fellowship". The word expresses deep devotion and commitment, often used in a marriage context, and literally means "to have all things in common". What they have in common was Jesus. They were brought together by the power of the gospel and are now partners in the purpose of the Gospel. This Jew and these Gentiles are common members of the family of God. They have the same Savior, are equipped with the same grace of God, and been sent on the same mission. Out of that common identity in Christ and common purpose to make him known, a deep bond of intimate friendship was forged.

I experienced the intimate joy of partnership in Florida. Here are their faces. The main cause of my joy that day was that I got to take this journey together with these boys. We are part of the same family, we'd been equipped with the same gear, and bonded over the same mission: to triumph at Treumphant! We encouraged each other when things got tough, we coached each other

based on our own experience, and we cheered each other on when we progressed through the course...with maybe a dash of competition thrown in. And our affection for each other was abundant.

That is the model and heritage of our church. It's why we are named what we are named...and also because Fellowship Bible Church sounds a lot better than Partnership Bible Church! This is who we are. We are the family of God, gathered here together by the power of the Gospel, and now partners in the purpose of it. **And for us to accomplish what God has called us to, this kind of love, intimacy, and friendship must be true of us.** It's why we believe so strongly in Covenant Membership. It is a commitment to God and one another to live together in this way, to share our lives with one another and partner in living out our God-given purpose of defending and confirming the gospel in word and deed. There are no sole proprietors in the Kingdom of God. If you find you are working alone, I remind you there are hundreds of partners here at Fellowship waiting for you to join them, and there's joy to be found when you do.

A joyful partnership holds fast to eternity. After reminding them of his unending love and devotion to the Philippians, he now reminds them of God's.

[Philippians 1:6] ⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

The Philippians are experiencing some difficulty externally and it's impacting their unity internally. Paul is encouraging them to keep going, and he does so by expressing his certainty in the faithfulness of God and their unbreakable union with him. He tells them the work God began when they placed their trust in Christ will continue all the way until the day of Jesus Christ, when he returns. Remember our salvation is both a point and process. It begins with our **justification** when we place our faith in Jesus, being declared righteous by God, receiving his Spirit, and being eternally adopted as his child. Salvation continues with our **sanctification**, that process of becoming more like Jesus and living our lives more fully for his purposes. Our salvation ultimately culminates in our **glorification**, where we are perfected and transformed fully into his image for the rest of eternity. In this time of difficulty, these promises of God are exactly what the Philippians need. Paul again preaches the gospel to his partners in the gospel. What God has started, he will finish. It is a message of hope and eternal security. God's got you.

You may not have noticed it in the pictures, but Treeumph has a way that guarantees you will get securely to the end. Throughout the course is a wire cable that you are tethered to from the moment you step on the course until the end. You can grab on to it for support and balance. It will catch you if you slip or fall...Not that I ever did...I just heard that part. It guides you along the path you are to take. And it supports you as you move forward. In fact, there were parts of the course you simply couldn't get through unless you let that cable take some of the burden. And then, at the very end, that cable becomes a 350' zip line. You climb a very high tower, put all of your faith in that cable, and jump. It carries you safely to the end, where you are received by angelic staff members who usher you to the ground. It's there where your journey is over. If you are a follower of Jesus, you are unbreakably tethered above to a God who loves you. The work God started in you when you trusted in him will be brought to completion. As you take your next step in this journey, he will guide you. If you stumble, he will catch you. If you veer

off course, he will direct you back. When the burden is too heavy to carry, he will carry it for you. And if you begin to become overwhelmed and disheartened by the difficulties of this journey, he reminds you that there is a finish line you will one day safely cross, and he promises to take you there personally.

If you are discouraged, receive that for yourself and, just as I am doing today, be quick to remind others of it. Our partnership in the gospel includes preaching it to each other regularly. Our certain hope is a source of joy. The Holy Spirit wants that for us, and wants to use each of us to remind one another of that magnificent truth. Like the Philippians, God's got you.

A joyful partnership points to purity. As we go through this journey and look forward to that finish line, we are called to live in a way that will please God when we come face-to-face with him.

[Philippians 1:9-11] ⁹ And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Paul closes this section by praying that their love would abound more and more. But it's not a sentimental love he's calling them to. It's a sacrificial love based on the true knowledge of God, because we grow as we know, and guided by his wisdom and discernment as it's put into practice. The purpose of living that way is so that they may approve what is excellent. The word for approve relates to testing metals for purity. Paul is saying that when we love with the knowledge of God and the guidance of his wisdom, we will be able to discern what is best, and live in a way pleasing to God and for the blessing others.

I heard a gentleman speak on Friday who's up there in years and has his share of health struggles. He said this: "As I get closer to meeting Jesus face-to-face, I realize that it's really all about people and introducing them to the God who loves them. That's what I want to do." This loving man, who knows God deeply and wants to live by his wisdom, has tested his options and been able to approve what is best in the eyes of God. He is now living his remaining days doing those things, for the work of the gospel and the glory of God. When he told it, he was full of joy.

If joy is the fruit of an eternal relationship with God, then living a life that honors that relationship becomes a pathway to that joy. We are all going to come face-to-face with Jesus one day. Living with a posture of sacrificial love, based on the knowledge of God and guided by his wisdom, leads to a life that is pleasing to God and a blessing to others. And when we live this way, we model for and encourage our partners in the gospel to live the same way, to experience the same joy, and to please and glorify God.

When the boys and I got back in the car that day, we were exhausted, sore, thirsty...and we couldn't stop looking at each other with smiles and laughter. The journey we had partnered in

was grueling...and glorious. It was a journey filled with joy, and that joy came because we were in it together.

God has you on a gospel journey. He's given you a church full of people he wants you to partner with, if you'll allow it. Who are you going to take with you? I know we have challenged all of you with courageous next steps and covenant membership, but I want you know we do that because we believe that's how we live out this journey. As you consider that this week, let me say that I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in this church 42 years ago will bring it to completion, for our joy, and for his glory.