



April 19, 2020: Breakthrough Prayer | Philippians 1:1-11

INTRODUCTION

Q: What is joy? How is it different from happiness?

Q: What things, people, circumstances in life bring you joy? What things can you do or change to bring more joy to your life?

The concept of joy got even more attention than usual last year when Marie Kondo's show, "Tidying Up," released on Netflix. If you aren't familiar with the show or her book, Kondo believes that we can all find more peace in our lives if we keep our spaces neat, organized, clutter free, and minimalist. There was a lot of talk about the show all around the nation. Some people found her methods life-changing while others found them ridiculous. Few people seemed to remain neutral about the show. They were either inspired to take 75% of their belongings to Goodwill or hoard all of their books in protest.

One of Kondo's guiding philosophies is that you should only keep the material items which "spark joy" in your life. Her method is to hold up a piece of clothing, household item, etc. in front of her, and if it doesn't immediately spark joy, to give it away. On one hand, it is wonderful that she encourages us to think differently about our "stuff." To not just accumulate stuff for the sake of having it or to keep up with the Joneses, but to keep only the things that have purpose and are useful to you. On the other hand, Kondo still has an incorrect concept of consumerism if she thinks joy comes from material things. Maybe temporary happiness, but not joy.

It's not our stuff that brings us joy. It's Christ. It's not even positive circumstances like health, safety, a good marriage, and a family who loves you that bring us joy. The Bible talks extensively about how we can find joy in difficult circumstances. We can even experience *more* joy through suffering than through positive circumstances, because true joy comes from Christ, and we often cling to Him more when things are hard. This is one of the biggest themes of the book of Philippians—finding joy through suffering. Not just in the midst of or in spite of, but *because of* our suffering. Paul wrote the book of Philippians from prison, and yet over and over again, he wrote about joy. Because he was focused on the bigger picture of the kingdom of God. Even though he personally was suffering, he could see how his imprisonment was serving to advance the gospel. He was able to witness to the imperial guard, people of influence in Rome who never would have heard about Jesus otherwise. His faith inspired others to share the gospel more boldly. He rejoiced in these things because his life wasn't about himself—his own comfort, safety, and prosperity. It was about bringing true joy to others by introducing them to Jesus.

Q: In what ways do you struggle to find joy in difficult circumstances?

Q: In what ways do we need to change our definition of success and joy in order to align them with what the Bible says rather than what our culture says?

Q: How does rethinking our priorities and our purpose help us find joy?

TALKING POINT #1:
We can find joy in partnering in the mission with other believers.

Read Philippians 1:1–11.

Q: How did the Philippians share in God's grace with Paul?

Q: What did Paul pray for the Philippians and why? Does that sound like your typical prayers for your Christian friends?

Paul's opening follows the typical format for an ancient letter—author, recipients, greetings. Note that Paul included Timothy as an author and calls them both servants of Christ—an intentional choice to emphasize their humility. Paul will spend the next several verses calling the Philippians his partners in the gospel, so he starts by pointing out that even though he and Timothy are leaders in the church, they are all servants of Christ, equal members of His body. Timothy and Silas both worked with Paul to plant the church at Philippi. Timothy was of mixed heritage, with a Jewish mother and a Greek father, so his familiarity with both cultures made him an ideal protégé of Paul. Despite his youth, he was a mature follower of Jesus (1 Timothy 4:12) and became one of Paul's troubleshooters for problems in his churches (1 Corinthians 4:17; 1 Thessalonians 3:2). He is included as an author of Philippians because Paul sent him to Philippi with the letter to report Paul's status in Rome and return with news about the Philippian church (Philippians 2:19).

In terms of the Greco-Roman world, the city of Philippi was quite prominent. Although located on the Greek Peninsula, it was considered an official Roman city rather than just a colony. By this time, its citizens had had full Roman citizenship and legal benefits for over a hundred years. The city was also quite wealthy due to its location on the primary trade route between the East and West, the Via Egnatia, where they met the successful businesswoman, Lydia (Acts 16:14).¹

Paul's relationship with the Philippians began when he, along with Timothy and Silas, first preached the gospel there during his second missionary journey, likely between 49 and 52 AD. Through their ministry, the first church on the European continent was planted (Acts 16:6–40). So about eight to ten years had passed since this church was planted.

Look at Paul's emphasis on the greatness of his appreciation of them—"I give thanks to my God for **every** remembrance **always** praying with joy for **all** of you in my **every** prayer . . ." (Philippians 1: 3–4). Because of the Philippians' persistent and faithful support, not only for him but for the advancement of the gospel. This is an evidence to him of the genuineness of their faith. They were not just going through the religious motions. Paul called them partners. He wasn't some holier-than-thou bishop in an ivory tower sending down proclamations and judgments to them. They were his *partners* in the gospel. This is key for understanding the rest of the book and Paul's heart for all of his churches.

Because of the fruit he had seen in their lives, Paul was confident to declare their inclusion with Christ on the last day, the day of judgment. In the Old Testament, the prophets preached that some people who thought they were of "the righteous" were really of "the wicked." These people thought they were safe, but they really should have been afraid. The prophets called them to repent and turn back to God. Paul is here telling the Philippians the opposite. He is confident they have nothing to fear. They are of "the righteous" because of their authentic faith in Christ. True righteousness does not come from our works, our religion, or our heritage. It comes from Christ (Romans 3:22; Philippians 3:9). God would continue to work on them "*that their love may abound more and more with all knowledge and discernment*" (v. 9), but they should be confident in their righteousness. They would stand "pure and blameless" on the day of Christ (v. 10).

Even though Paul was in prison and unsure of his own fate, his prayers were filled with thanksgiving, joy, and love. Look at the way Paul talked about the Philippians:

- He thanked God for them every time he remembered them, in every prayer, with joy (v. 4).
- He held them in his heart (v. 7).
- He missed them with the affection of Christ (v. 8).
- He prayed for their love to keep growing (v. 9).

These are the words of a spiritual father who loved his people dearly and wanted only God's best for them. Paul's relationship with the church at Philippi was not casual. It was intimate and loving. The Greek word for "affection" in verse 8 is always used for intense emotion. It was based on its common use for the intestines, so figuratively, it meant loving someone from the very deepest part of you. Paul specifically used this word in combination with "in Christ"—this intense love *in Christ*. His love for them came from their mutual love for Christ.

Though we love our friends and family, there is a deep love that cannot be had except with other people who love Jesus. The mutual love of Jesus and a shared life mission bond fellow believers in a way that we aren't bonded even with our unbelieving biological family. That's why we so often call it our "church family." Even Jesus even used family terms (Matthew 12:50). Anyone who "does the will of my Father"—anyone who shares in God's mission to advance the gospel—is Jesus's family.

Note what Paul prayed for them about in verses 9–11:

- That their love would keep growing
- That they would grow in knowledge and discernment
- That they would be able to approve what is superior
- That they would grow in sanctification

Not a single thing about their health or looking for a new job or their decision to move or that conflict in their family. It's not like most of the things we pray about for others, is it? He prayed they would be sanctified—become more like Jesus. Those other things are important, and God cares about them, but God only sees them in light of our becoming more like Jesus. If taking a job will make you more like Jesus, He's for it. Now, this doesn't necessarily mean the job is one that would have you surrounded with great Christian people who encourage you in your faith. It may be really difficult work in a challenging environment that pushes you and molds you into being more like Jesus. God works all things for our good, not for our comfort (Romans 8:28), and sometimes, we need a fire to refine us (1 Peter 1:7). Even in his opening prayers for them, Paul set the stage for his overall desire them—to find joy in all circumstances, especially in times of suffering, because they make us more like Jesus.

Q: Do you have any dear friends in Christ that you love this way? Have you ever felt that deep love for your church family in a way you don't with secular family and friends?

Q: Have you ever experienced support, physically or spiritually, by fellow Christians? How did that make you feel?

Q: What are some ways you can start supporting other believers around you? How can you reach out to people at Immanuel who may not feel connected to the family?

Q: If you've ever struggled with feeling that kind of love for fellow believers, what do you think the reason is? What are some potential ways to change that?

Q: How do you need to change the way you pray for your fellow believers? For yourself?

TALKING POINT #2:
We can find joy in suffering because it advances His mission.

Philippians 1:12–18.

Q: Why did Paul rejoice in his imprisonment? What positive things had happened because of it?

Q: How could Paul rejoice even when people had wrong motives in preaching Christ?

Q: What kind of faith did it take for Paul to rejoice in these situations?

We all know people who put a positive spin on everything. “I lost my job, but that just means an even better one is around the corner!” Or “I’ve got the flu, but that just means more time to catch up on binge-watching Netflix!” But Paul’s attitude—rejoicing in his imprisonment because it advances the gospel? That’s a pretty extreme positive spin! Paul wrote this letter from Rome, where he was living under house arrest. In this kind of imprisonment, Paul had to provide for his own needs. He had to pay rent for the house where he was imprisoned and for his own food and supplies (Acts 28:30). Yet he wasn’t able to continue his “day job” of tent making, so many of his churches sent money and provisions. The Philippians were one of the churches who supported him. He wrote this letter partly to thank them and to let them know their money was being put to good use, but also to encourage them that he was okay and that God was using him, even in prison.

This imprisonment created a whole new ministry for him. He was able to witness to people he never would have had access to—the royal guard, an elite and specialized group of soldiers who typically guarded prominent Roman officials.² He was also given freedom by those guards to allow visitors from all over Rome to come to him. Paul was there for two years awaiting trial and, through the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, the book of Acts says, “Paul stayed two whole years in his own rented house. And he welcomed all who visited him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:30–31).

This is the last verse of the book of Acts, but it’s not the end of the story. Paul was eventually released from prison and went on to do other things. But it is where Luke, the author of Acts, chose to end the book. In fact, when you read Acts, the ending feels abrupt; we want to know more of what happened to Paul. But Luke makes it abrupt on purpose, to end on what he thought was the most important point of Paul’s life. He wanted to focus on how, even in prison, even though Paul had guards and chains keeping his body contained, his message advanced without hindrance!

Paul made the same point here, that he rejoiced in his suffering because the gospel was being advanced. This was a man who was more focused on his mission than on himself, his own comfort, his own life. If you’ve ever been in the military, particularly in a time of war, you may have known people who lived this way. People who were willing to risk anything for the mission. You may have even been in companies where people talk this way about the mission of the company. Maybe they aren’t willing to die for it, but that the company matters more than any one individual. Are there very many of us modern Christians who feel this way about advancing the gospel? I would like to think I do, but if I were in Paul’s shoes, would I? Really?

Besides the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit, the key to Paul’s rejoicing in his suffering was his *attitude*. What others saw as an obstacle, Paul saw as an opportunity. Those chains weren’t a hindrance to the gospel, they were an opportunity to preach to a whole new group of people who otherwise may never have heard the gospel. In Acts, we see other obstacles that God used as opportunities. When Paul was shipwrecked on the way to Rome, he had an opportunity to heal and witness to an entire island full of people (Acts 28). When he was on trial for his life before Agrippa, he had the opportunity to proclaim the gospel to the king! (Acts 9:15; 26:28). The key to finding joy in suffering was his attitude, his motivation, and his priorities. “But I consider my life of no value to myself; my purpose is to finish my course and the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of God’s grace (Acts 20:24).

Paul also had an incredible attitude toward his “rivals” in preaching the gospel. The people he was talking about were not just preaching out of selfish ambition—to make themselves look good or to gain power, money, or fame for themselves. Paul said they also did it specifically to “cause me trouble in my imprisonment.” They were particularly gunning for Paul, probably saying things like, “God isn’t protecting Paul. God let him be thrown into prison. Obviously, I’m a more blessed preacher than he is.” Paul’s response to these rivals was so admirable and so fitting of his focus on the mission, to his motivation for everything. He said, “As long as Christ is preached, I rejoice. Whether they do it with selfish motives or to hurt me or whatever, it doesn’t matter. As long as the gospel is being advanced, it doesn’t matter what happens to me.”

Again, I wonder, would that be my reaction? I would like to think so, but, put in his shoes, I don’t know. I know I would be tempted to take a shot at those guys, at least. But he doesn’t. As a result, we have so much more respect for Paul than those other guys. They may have gotten some temporary fame and glory, but anyone who truly believes will respect someone like Paul, who didn’t use the gospel as a platform for his own glory, who didn’t put others down in order to lift himself up. Who didn’t react when goaded by people, who didn’t sink to their level or play their game.

When God spoke to Ananias about Paul at his conversion, He said, “This man is my chosen instrument ... I will show him how much he must suffer for my name” (Acts 9:15–16). Some of God’s greatest instruments have been marked by suffering. Jesus, obviously. But He also said His disciples would suffer in this world (John 16:33) and that the world would hate them (John 15:18–25). And yet, He told them that those who are persecuted are blessed, that they should “rejoice and be glad” when they were persecuted because their “reward is great in heaven,” and that the prophets had been persecuted the same way (Matthew 5:10–12).

Does this mean we should welcome persecution? Should be worried if we’re not experiencing persecution? Like, maybe if we’re not being persecuted, we aren’t really living for Jesus? In our current cultural climate, probably not. We shouldn’t expect this kind of physical persecution for our faith. But, it does mean we shouldn’t be surprised if we find the world seems to hate us when we stand up for what is right or when we work to advance the gospel (1 Peter 4:12). When Satan sees you as a threat to his mission, he’ll start attacking.

Neither Paul nor Peter viewed suffering as meaningless or as proof that God had abandoned them. Rather, they saw it as an opportunity and a tool that molded endurance and faith in us (Romans 5:3–5). When our motivation is centered on advancing the gospel rather than on our comfort or ease, when we see advancing the gospel as the goal of our lives, we can, like Paul, see obstacles as opportunities. It’s all in our attitude.

Q: Have you ever personally seen anyone using their suffering as an opportunity to share the gospel? How did that work out for them?

Q: How can you reframe your thinking to see your obstacles as opportunities for mission?

Q: Have you ever known someone in your life or read about someone (Joni Eareckson Tada, Andrew Brunson, etc.) who went through great suffering with this kind of attitude—that if it advanced God’s mission, they would suffer willingly, joyfully even?

Q: What does a life like that say to the world about the gospel?

TALKING POINT #3:

We find joy in suffering when our lives are centered on Christ and His mission.

Read Philippians 1:18–30.

Q: How did Paul have so much courage in the face of such suffering and even possible death?

Q: Why would Paul prefer to go ahead and die? Why did he consent to keep living anyway?

Q: How did Paul encourage the Philippians that they too could rejoice in their sufferings?

No, it's not a typo that we are reading verse 18 again in this section. Paul used verse 18 as a transition verse between the two sections. The word "rejoice" is used twice, in a literary device often used by the Greeks called a "tail-head construction." The two "rejoices" are back-to-back, or more accurately tail-to-head, connecting two different reasons Paul rejoices. This created a smooth transition from one idea to another.³ The last section and this section are linked. First, Paul said God was using his suffering to advance the gospel, then he encouraged the Philippians that their suffering would also be used to advance the gospel. He even said they were engaged in the same conflict (v. 30). If Paul could rejoice in his sufferings, they could rejoice in theirs. Not just *endure* their suffering, but actually *rejoice* in it (Romans 5:3; Colossians 1:24; James 1:2).

In verse 21, Paul makes one of the boldest, most profound, most hard-core statements in all of Scripture—his thesis statement of the whole book of Philippians, of his whole life, really. "*For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*" (Philippians 1:21). Paul didn't just make this statement out of the blue; he led them through it. In verses 18–19, Paul said he would rejoice because he was confident that through their prayers and the Holy Spirit, this would all turn out for his deliverance. Bible commentators generally agree that although he was hoping to be released from prison (1:25–26), he had the grander deliverance of his salvation in mind.⁴ Even if he wasn't released from prison, this would end in his deliverance. Because death for him is deliverance.

In life or in death, he would glorify Christ. Whether Paul was released from prison to do more ministry or died as a martyr, Christ would be proclaimed. He would "not be ashamed about anything" (v. 20). No matter what they did to him, even to the point of death, he would not be ashamed of the gospel (Romans 1:16). Paul's boldness came from his perspective. They couldn't hurt him; they couldn't threaten him—because he didn't fear death. Death would actually be a good thing for him. It meant he would get to be with Jesus forever. Life after death would be his reward for finishing the race well (1 Corinthians 9:24; 2 Timothy 4:7–8). Being with Jesus was his heart's greatest desire. So, Paul could confidently say that death was *gain* for him. Because his life was all about Christ. So, dying and going to be with Him would be even better.

Have you ever heard people say, "Music is life" or, "Traveling is life" or even, "This cheesecake is life"? They mean that it's not just the best thing in their life, *it's what their life is all about*. What the rest of their life revolves around. That it brings them life, it makes them feel alive. Think about people you know who love music so much their lives revolve around it. They always have earphones in. They plan their schedules around concerts. The first thing they do when they get in the car is plug in their AUX cord, they obsess over the perfect playlists for parties. When they're hurting, they go to music for comfort. When they're happy, they play fun music. For that person, music is life. This is how Jesus was for Paul. Jesus not only brings us life—eternal life in heaven and abundant life on earth, He *is* life. For Paul, Jesus was what his life was all about, what the rest of his life revolved around.

Too many of us compartmentalize Jesus. He's just one part of our lives, maybe even the most important part of our lives. But Paul says Jesus *is* life. Think of it this way. Our life is like a dresser, with different drawers. You have a drawer for work, a drawer for family, a drawer for hobbies—one for each of the things you put on your list in the opening activity. Jesus isn't one drawer in the dresser. Jesus is the dresser, and all the other drawers fit into Him. If Jesus is life—not just part of our lives—we have a totally different perspective. It's not about putting our faith first; it's about fitting everything else into our faith. Take work, for example. Instead of thinking, "I need to make sure I don't work on Sundays because I need to make it to church," we think, "How can I glorify God with my work each and every day of the week?" The same with family and hobbies and so on, for every drawer in our lives.

For Paul, to live is Christ and to die is gain. He will either live for Christ or die for Christ. To die would actually be preferable, because he would be with Jesus. But, if God wants him to continue to live, he will live for Christ. This reasoning makes total sense. We can follow the theological argument. But if you stop and think about it, it's intense. How many of us can really say we feel this way? That we would rather die and go be with Jesus?

Paul knew that even though he desired to be with Christ, God still had work for him to do on earth. Notice Paul's two options weren't going to heaven to get his mansion in the sky or staying here to enjoy his life while he could. Both of Paul's options are about Jesus. In verse 24, Paul said he needed to stay for the sake of the Philippian believers (v. 24). He was convinced, for the time, that God wanted him to stay with them, for their "progress and joy in the faith" (v. 25). Paul's mission was not just to make more new disciples, but also to develop a deeper faith in established believers like the Philippians. Advancing the gospel is both evangelism and discipleship.

He used the same Greek word for "advance" here as in verse 12, and it is coupled with "joy," his linking word between the two sections (1:18).⁵ Paul's goal was not only to live for Christ himself, but to advance the gospel in the lives of others. This is what brought him ultimate joy. The reason he rejoiced, either in prison or in death or in life. As he said later in this same letter, "Whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need" (Philippians 4:13). In every situation, Paul rejoiced, because God can use every situation to advance the gospel.

As believers, we are not just biding time until we get to heaven to be with Jesus. We are not called to live only for ourselves. We don't live just for our own pleasure or even just for our own spiritual growth, though that is important. We are here on mission—to bring more people into the kingdom and to advance spiritual growth in the lives of others.

The word used here for "let your manner of life" is uncommon for the New Testament (v. 27). It's a very specific word that means to "live as a citizen;" it is connected to the word from which we get the word "politics." Remember, Philippi was an official Roman city. Its citizens had full Roman citizenship and legal benefits, which would have been a source of great pride and superiority in their culture. Paul intentionally used this word to subtly challenge their thinking. A more literal translation would be "live as a citizen worthy of the gospel." Paul said it more explicitly a few chapters later. *Our citizenship is in heaven* (Philippians 3:20). For the same reason that Paul asserts "to die is gain," to live means living as citizens of a greater kingdom.⁶ He describes how to live as a citizen worthy of the gospel:

- Standing firm (v. 27)
- In one spirit, with one mind (v. 27)
- Contending together for the faith of the gospel (v. 27)
- Not frightened in any way by your opponents (v. 28)

Paul again emphasized their mission, what they were to strive for—the gospel. By standing firm in unity. No matter what happened, no matter what their opponents did to them, even unto death. The imagery is of a team working together, side-by-side to accomplish a goal.⁷ Imagine a soccer team working together to pass the ball down the field. Or a team of co-workers at a company working together to complete a project. Or a cast and crew working together to make a film. We simply *cannot* complete our mission if we don't all work together. In many of his writings, Paul described this need for unity as parts of the body of Christ (Romans 12:4; 1 Corinthians 10:17, 12:12–31; Ephesians 2:16–18, 4:4–16).

All of this leads Paul to his final point of connection, what he has been building toward in the whole chapter. It has been granted to the Philippians to suffer for the gospel just as Paul had (v. 29–30). Granted to them, as if it were a gift, a blessing, an honor. The word for "granted" is another form of the word for "grace" or "favor." It means "to show favor, to give freely."⁸ Suffering can be a gift from God because it can mold us into who God wants us to be (Romans 5:3–5). Paul didn't *enjoy* suffering, but he saw it as an opportunity to share in Christ's suffering and to become more like Jesus (Romans 8:17; Philippians 3:10). That is why it gave him such joy.

The way we handle suffering can be one of the greatest testimonies of our faith. When unbelievers see believers weather suffering with peace and joy, they know something about our faith is different, and they want to know more. Paul didn't just resign himself to suffering, he *rejoiced* in his sufferings. He saw privilege in suffering for Christ's kingdom the way the Philippians saw privilege in their Roman citizenship.⁹ He told them that suffering for

Christ was the way to advance the gospel (v. 12), the way for Christ to be exalted (v. 20), and the way to experience God's grace (v. 29). Because for Paul to live is Christ, anything that brought him closer to Christ and/or served the mission of Christ was joy.

Q: If you really lived this philosophy, Jesus = Life, how would your life be different? If you really lived this philosophy, how might your community be changed?

Q: What things compete for that center spot in your life? Why is it so difficult to keep Jesus at the center of our lives?

Q: How is the Christian view of suffering different from the world's?

Q: Why is it so hard to see suffering as a gracious gift? How might seeing suffering as a gift from God change how you experience it?

Q: Why is suffering for Christ worth it? How can God use our suffering to help others?

APPLICATION

PRAY

- For God to help you center your life on Jesus.
- For God to help you find joy in your suffering.
- For God to change your obstacles into opportunities to advance His gospel.
- That you would have the faith to live as if "to live is Christ and to die is gain."
- For God to show you what true joy is.
- For unity and partnership with other believers in our focus on the mission.
- For your Christian friends the way Paul prayed for the Philippians.

ACT

Turn Your Obstacles into Opportunities. Take some time to look at the obstacles in your life. Think and pray through how God might use them as opportunities for His kingdom. What are your struggles, your sufferings, your setbacks, your frustrations? How can God use them for His glory, His purposes, and His kingdom? Then act on it! Go out and turn those obstacles into opportunities!

¹ Peter Thomas O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 4.

² G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2009).

³ Peter Thomas O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 108.

⁴ Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, The New American Commentary v. 32 (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman Press, 1991), 80.

⁵ Strong's #4297

⁶ Tony Merida, Francis Chan, David Platt, and Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Philippians*, Christ Centered Exposition Commentary (Holman Reference Publishers, 2016), 75.

⁷ Tony Merida, Francis Chan, David Platt, and Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Philippians*, Christ Centered Exposition Commentary (Holman Reference Publishers, 2016), 78.

⁸ Strong's #5483

⁹ Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, The New American Commentary v. 32 (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman Press, 1991), 91.