

## SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

January 9, 2022

**Joy to the World**  
**Philippians 1:12-19**  
**God Will Make A Way**  
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In an interview in *AARP magazine* back in 2015, singer and poet Bob Dylan talked about his new music, life on the road, and true happiness. Towards the end of the interview Dylan said, “OK, a lot of people say there is no happiness in this life and certainly there's no permanent happiness ... I'm not exactly sure what happiness even means, to tell you the truth. I don't know if I personally could define it.” When the interviewer asked if Dylan has touched and held happiness, Dylan replied, “We all do at certain points, but it's like water—it slips through your hands. As long as there's suffering, you can only be so happy. How can a person be happy if he has misfortune?” As we continue in this sermon series through the book of Philippians that we've entitled, “*Joy to the World*,” I would like us to dig a little deeper into what Dylan is asking, not just how can we be happy when we are suffering but how we can all have joy no matter what circumstances we might find ourselves facing. The Apostle Paul was an expert in this topic as he endured a tremendous amount of suffering for serving Jesus and yet in the midst of his trials, he wrote this letter to the church in Philippi that especially focuses on the joy of the Lord.

### **PHILIPPIANS 1:12-19**

*<sup>12</sup> And I want you to know, my dear brothers and sisters,<sup>[a]</sup> that everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News. <sup>13</sup> For everyone here, including the whole palace guard,<sup>[b]</sup> knows that I am in chains because of Christ. <sup>14</sup> And because of my imprisonment, most of the believers<sup>[c]</sup> here have gained confidence and boldly speak God's message<sup>[d]</sup> without fear.*

*<sup>15</sup> It's true that some are preaching out of jealousy and rivalry. But others preach about Christ with pure motives. <sup>16</sup> They preach because they love me, for they know I have been appointed to defend the Good News. <sup>17</sup> Those others do not have pure motives as they preach about Christ. They preach with selfish ambition, not sincerely, intending to make my chains more painful to me. <sup>18</sup> But that doesn't matter. Whether their motives are false or genuine, the message about Christ is being preached either way, so I rejoice. And I will continue to rejoice. <sup>19</sup> For I know that as you pray for me and the Spirit of Jesus Christ helps me, this will lead to my deliverance.*

## ***FACING OVERWHELMING CHALLENGES OF LIFE***

Again, it is amazing to me that Paul wrote this very positive, uplifting letter to the church in Philippi even though he was in the midst of ***FACING OVERWHELMING CHALLENGES OF LIFE***. Paul did not write this letter to the church while he was on vacation or from a retreat but from the depths of very challenging circumstances. Some of the best advice I have received from people is not from what they have learned from reading about it but by walking through similar trials like I am facing. Paul has been there and done that. Paul's message here in Philippians is even more powerful as he speaks from a place of experience, a place of finding joy in the midst of trying times. Paul and Silas first came to Philippi during Paul's 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey. There in Philippi, they told the people about the good news of Jesus and as a result some people in this Roman colony began to follow Jesus and a church was born. Not everyone in Philippi, though, appreciated the good news from Paul and Silas and as a result they suffered terribly while in Philippi as they were arrested, severely beaten, and thrown into prison. God miraculously intervened and rescued them and the good news of Jesus spread as a result of their persecution. Then when Paul is writing this letter to the church in Philippi some years later, he is once again in prison for sharing the good news of Jesus.

Prison, whether in house arrest or in an actual prison cell was not some kind of nice retreat setting, resort, or spa. I don't think we can appreciate today just how challenging it was to be in prison in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. The Apostle Paul spent roughly ¼ of his missionary career in prisons. John McRay gives us some insight to these prisons as he wrote in an issue of *Christian History*: "Roman imprisonment was preceded by being stripped naked and then flogged—a humiliating, painful, and bloody ordeal. The bleeding wounds went untreated as prisoners sat in painful leg or wrist chains. Mutilated, bloodstained clothing was not replaced, even in the cold of winter. Most cells were dark, especially the inner cells of a prison, like the one Paul and Silas inhabited in Philippi. Unbearable cold, lack of water, cramped quarters, and sickening stench from few toilets made sleeping difficult and waking hours miserable. Because of the miserable conditions, many prisoners begged for a speedy death. Others simply committed suicide. In settings like this, Paul wrote encouraging, even joyful, letters and continued to speak of Jesus." Even though most of us have not faced anything like this in our lives, we have faced our own unique, challenging trials.

Somebody has designed ornaments depicting the last two years of 2020 and 2021 as one big dumpster fire. One says, "***Our first pandemic: We're Fine, Everything's Fine***". The last 2 years of walking through an unprecedented pandemic really has been very trying for many of us. How do we experience real joy when we are in the midst of these tough times?

## ***GOD IS IN CONTROL***

I see at least 2 keys for Paul here in Philippians that would be transformational for us if we could also grasp. The 1<sup>st</sup> is that for Paul he had a perspective that ***GOD IS IN CONTROL***. Paul was in prison because of the turmoil that existed whenever he came to

town to share the good news of Jesus as some of the people in these towns, villages, and cities did not like the message about Jesus and how the lives of people and the community changed when people started turning their lives over to follow Jesus. Paul was upsetting the status quo and as a result was being opposed to the point that his life was in danger and sometimes was even put into prison to protect him from the mobs. While Paul was in prison, he says here in Philippians that as bad as things are he can see God's hand at work in what has happened. Paul could see that God was using Paul's persecution and imprisonment to spread the good news of Jesus to not just the Jewish people but to the powerful, expanding Roman world of that time. Paul's imprisonment was strategic to the good news of Jesus spreading to the world. Before every official that Paul stood before to make account for his actions, Paul took every opportunity to tell these powerful officials all about Jesus. Paul also recognized that the world was taking note of why he was in prison for telling the world about Jesus. Imagine being one of the guards who had to watch this really nice and engaging prisoner. Paul was not your typical prisoner. Imagine what they must have heard, saw, and experienced being around Paul. They took note of Paul possibly singing songs of praise to God, praying, how he handled adversity, actions, words, and his attitude. They met all of his friends and fellow Christians who constantly visited him taking care of him and providing all of his physical needs. Please, don't get me wrong. Paul was not a glutton for punishment, wanting to stay in prison nor was he enjoying himself. He wanted out and wanted people to pray for his deliverance. But while he was in this situation, he knew that God was making a way to get the word out about the good news of Jesus. Paul even said that God was using people out in the world to bring the gospel even though some of them were sharing about Jesus for all the wrong reasons. Paul understood that God was at work and could take the worst situations and use them to accomplish His greater good, His greater purpose. As *Romans 8:28* says, "*And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.*" God takes even the most horrible situations and tragedies, and God uses them to accomplish His perfect will. Somebody once said, "God permits what he hates in order to accomplish what he loves."

Paul then understood that no matter how bad a situation was, God had not abandoned Him. God was with Him even when He was in the deepest, darkest, most destructive prison. God is good in the midst of the worst and the best of time. Somehow and in some way that we cannot see and understand in this life, God is in the midst of our lives and God is at work. As legendary architect Ludwig Mies van der Roh said, "God is in the details." God is not just a spectator but an active participant working His will in whatever we are facing. God was not only with Paul but was for Him. John Piper offers these thoughts about God's work in our lives, "Life is not a straight line leading from one blessing to the next and then finally to heaven. Life is a winding and troubled road. Switchback after switchback. And the point of biblical stories like Joseph and Job and Esther and Ruth is to help us feel in our bones (not just know in our heads) that God is for us in all these strange turns. God is not just showing up after the trouble and cleaning it up. He is plotting the course and managing the troubles with far-reaching purposes for our good and for the glory of Jesus Christ."

## ***TRUSTED AND YIELDED HIS LIFE TO GOD'S PLAN***

Knowing that God is in control working the details in the highs and lows of life is still not enough, though, for us to experience the joy of the Lord. Our response to God's activity in our lives is equally important. The Apostle Paul ***TRUSTED AND YIELDED HIS LIFE TO GOD'S PLAN***. Do we really trust God? Do we really believe that God's ways are always the right ways? Do we believe that God knows and always does what is best? Do we then daily put our lives into the hands of God, yielding our lives to God, turning our lives over to God? Paul could find joy in the fact that God even used his imprisonment to get the word out to the world about Jesus so that more and more people would be saved and enter into a relationship with God. Paul was willing for God to use His life in whatever way God believed best for God's plan and in that Paul could find God's joy, even in the most painful, unfair, challenging trials of life. Paul really did trust that God was in control and doing a great work in and through his life. The Apostle Paul didn't second guess God but instead he did what Corrie Ten Boom said, "Don't bother to give God instructions; just report for duty." That is very hard to do. Trusting God, means that we have to let go of control and put our entire life into the hands of God and allow God to be in complete control. That is a place of great uncertainty as we turn over the details of lives to God's control. Brennan Manning, in his book *Ruthless Trust*, wrote about the time when the brilliant ethicist John Kavanaugh went to work for three months at "the house of the dying" in Calcutta, he was seeking a clear answer as to how best to spend the rest of his life. On the first morning there he met Mother Teresa. She asked him, "And what can I do for you?" Kavanaugh asked her to pray for him. She then said, "What do you want me to pray for?" He voiced the request that he had borne thousands of miles from the United States: "Pray that I have clarity." Wisely, Mother Teresa said firmly, "No, I will not do that." When he asked her why, she said, "Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of." When Kavanaugh commented that she always seemed to have the clarity he longed for, she laughed and said, "I have never had clarity; what I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God." Most of us want clarity which is our being in control of the details of our lives. Instead, God is asking us to trust Him with the details as He is working His great plan in and through our lives. Do we trust God in the midst of uncertainty, chaos, pain, loss, darkness, and in the difficulties of life by letting go of being in control and putting our entire life into God's hands recognizing that God is in control and is working His will and plan in our lives? Is God calling on you to trust Him more in whatever you are facing?

A prayer that I've used several times in my sermons with us I would like to use again as it does exactly what I have been saying. This is a prayer that puts our lives into God's hands and is a perfect prayer as we enter into 2022 and to do so with the right perspective and attitude that God can use for His perfect will. If we will do what this prayer says we will experience the true joy of the Lord. This prayer is John Wesley's Covenant Prayer. Please put your life in the hand of God and pray this out loud:

"I am no longer my own, but thine.  
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.  
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,  
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.  
Let me be full, let me be empty.  
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.  
I freely and heartily yield all things  
to thy pleasure and disposal.  
And now, O glorious and blessed God,  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.  
And the covenant which I have made on earth,  
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.”

Icebreaker I – When you have had a bad day, what do you do?

Icebreaker II – Are you the kind of person who sees the glass half-empty or half-full?

1. Paul was in prison but joyful. What difficult circumstances are you dealing with? What's your attitude toward this situation?
2. What has happened as a result of Paul's imprisonment?
3. What effect did Paul's situation have on most of his fellow believers (v. 14)?
4. What negative result did Paul's situation have on others in the church (vv. 15-17)?
5. What does this passage say about what your attitude should be toward Christians whose motives you might question?
6. Where has God been able to use bad for good in your life?
7. How can this group pray for you this week?