

# Finding Joy/Pursuing Joy

Mennonite Church of the Servant, August 8, 2021

## *Philippians 1:1-26*

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: <sup>2</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>3</sup>I thank my God every time I remember you, <sup>4</sup>constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, <sup>5</sup>because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. <sup>6</sup>I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

<sup>7</sup>It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. <sup>8</sup>For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

<sup>9</sup>And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight <sup>10</sup>to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, <sup>11</sup>having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

<sup>12</sup>I want you to know, beloved that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, <sup>13</sup>so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; <sup>14</sup>and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear. <sup>15</sup>Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. <sup>16</sup>These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; <sup>17</sup>the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. <sup>18</sup>What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, <sup>19</sup>for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance. <sup>20</sup>It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death.

<sup>21</sup>For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. <sup>22</sup>If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. <sup>23</sup>I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; <sup>24</sup>but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. <sup>25</sup>Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, <sup>26</sup>so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

## Finding Joy

Suffering happens. Most of us have learned that the hard way. Young adults often think, Nothing bad will ever happen to me. By my age, I know that bad things have happened to me, and probably more bad things will happen in the future. But still, I sometimes catch myself thinking, Everything should go well for me. Nothing bad ought to happen to me. I deserve to have good things happen to me. I have a sense of entitlement. So when bad things do happen, I find myself feeling angry, mistreated, depressed, or even descending into that pit of thinking, Nothing matters any more—the vice the ancient desert fathers and mothers called *acedia*. It has sometimes been translated “sloth,” but *acedia* is not laziness; it is a feeling of not caring. Dorothy Sayers in her article “The Other Six Deadly Sins,” that *acedia* is “the sin that believes nothing, cares to know nothing, seeks to know nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing ... and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die.” The 20<sup>th</sup>-century writer Evelyn Waugh claimed *acedia*’s malice lay not merely in the neglect of duty, but in the refusal of joy.

In the midst of suffering or tragedy, in the midst of bad things happening, in the midst of grief, or in the midst of finding it hard to care, how is it that we reach out for and find joy?

### Philippians as the Letter of Joy

This series of seven sermons on Paul’s Letter to the Philippians focuses on joy. In fact, Philippians has often been called the book of joy because joy or rejoicing is mentioned so many times in its four chapters.

One might think that the Apostle Paul had little to be joyful about. He was, after all, imprisoned. He was awaiting trial in Rome for a crime he had not committed. How could he have joy?

Earlier in Philippi, Acts 16 reports that Paul and Silas were arrested for exorcising a slave girl and imprisoned because the owners of the slave girl complained to the magistrates, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.

Paul’s present imprisonment was a result of false charges laid against him by Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. They falsely accused Paul of bringing an uncircumcised man into the temple. Paul was arrested in Jerusalem and then taken to Felix, the Roman governor in Caesarea. Paul was left in prison there for two years until a new governor, Festus, came to power. Festus discussed the case with the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem and with King Agrippa. Paul had a hearing before the king, and because Paul was a Roman citizen, he exercised his right to appeal to the emperor in Rome. Only later Festus said, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to the emperor.” And Paul was shipped off to Rome. In Rome, according to Acts 28, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him, evidently chained to him. He was there for at least two years, preaching and teaching those who came to visit him. We do not know what the legal outcome for Paul was, or how he met his death. That is the situation in which the Letter to the Philippians was written. And this is the context in which Paul spoke of joy. How did Paul find joy in such a circumstance?

## Solidarity—Philippians 1:1-8, 19

Paul has friends and companions in faith while he is suffering.

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, **To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:** <sup>2</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>3</sup>I thank my God every time I remember you, <sup>4</sup>constantly praying with **joy** in every one of my prayers for all of you, <sup>5</sup>because of **your sharing in the gospel** from the first day until now. <sup>6</sup>I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup>It is right for me to think this way about all of you, **because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.** <sup>8</sup>For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ...

<sup>19</sup>for I know that through **your prayers** and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.

In spite of Paul's house arrest, he was not alone. Not only were people coming to visit him in his house, he was in touch with Christians he had worked with earlier, including those in Philippi. They were praying for each other, and, Paul wrote, "You hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel." What allowed Paul to pray with joy is the solidarity with Christians in Philippi. He called them "fellow partakers of God's grace with me" (v. 7) (Grace and joy are related in Greek: *charis* = grace; *chara* = joy.)

This is the kind of solidarity German theologian Dorothee Soelle wrote about in her book *Suffering—standing with those who are suffering*, rather than turning away, refusing to look at suffering.

Throughout her writings Soelle grappled with the never-ending questions that are raised by suffering: Why does injustice exist? Can pain have any meaning? Why do some forms of suffering overpower us while others enrich and strengthen us? She insisted that Christians ought to take sides with those who suffer and that they work collectively to abolish the conditions which produce it like hunger, war, oppression, violence and torture. She said, "Whoever deals with their personal suffering only in the way that society has taught them—through illusion, minimization, suppression, apathy—will deal with societal suffering in the same way."

It is tempting to ignore suffering—personal and societal. We think we can wish it away. But that leaves us, and everyone else who suffers, alone.

The second Beatitude says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." The point is not that sadness is good. It is that those who **feel**—both mourning and comfort—are blessed, are to be congratulated. Those who cannot feel or refuse to feel or who are apathetic, the ones with *acedia*, are the ones who are lacking. Being with those who are suffering, or recognizing our own suffering, requires feeling, sometimes uncomfortable feeling. But this solidarity, this accompaniment, this caring, makes it easier to cope with suffering. Solidarity makes joy possible.

### Prayer/ritual—Philippians 1:3-5,9

Another route to joy through suffering is also in this passage: prayer.

<sup>3</sup>I thank my God every time I remember you, <sup>4</sup>constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, <sup>5</sup>because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. <sup>6</sup>I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

<sup>9</sup>And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight <sup>10</sup>to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, <sup>11</sup>having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Paul prays—with joy. Prayer can be not just a spontaneous talking with God, but a ritual, a discipline, a habit. The habit of prayer reminds of God’s power to save and gives us hope in the midst of suffering.

The problem is, when we are in the depths of suffering, we often find it hard to pray. The spontaneous words just don’t come. That is why it helps to have others praying for us, to have the prayers of others in church carry us along when we ourselves don’t feel like praying. It also helps to pray the prayers that others have written down, perhaps in a prayer book—or to pray the Psalms, which cover a lot of the human condition.

In Kathleen Norris’s book *Acedia and Me*, the story is told of an eighth-century Syrian monk named Joseph Hazzaya, whose ability to pray had suddenly abandoned him. He was getting ready to leave the monastery as a failed monk, when he received an “interior inspiration” that told him to stay in his cell and at each hour of the liturgical office (when monks were to pray eight times a day), he was to recite only Psalm 117. Psalm 117 is the shortest psalm—only two verses! Yet even this was enough to bring his problem to an end.

Psalms of lament are especially helpful in digging us out of despair. Psalms 42 and 43, for example, have the refrain, “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?” Ps. 42:3 says, “My tears have been my food day and night while people continually say to me, ‘Where is your God?’” Enemies are oppressing. God seems absent. But the refrain also includes, “Hope in God; for I shall again praise, my help and my God.” God is called “my exceeding joy” (Ps. 43:4). With the ritual of praying the Psalms, we can be moved from despair to hope and joy.

### Seeing the good that can come out of bad—Philippians 1:12-18a

Another way to cope with suffering is to see the good that has come out of it. It is not that suffering is a good thing, but good can come out of suffering. As in the story of Joseph from Genesis that we read earlier this year, others may have intended it for evil, but God used it for good. In Philippians Paul is already looking at the ways in which God has used his suffering for good.

<sup>12</sup>I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, <sup>13</sup>so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone

else that my imprisonment is for Christ; <sup>14</sup>and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear. <sup>15</sup>Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. <sup>16</sup>These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; <sup>17</sup>the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. <sup>18</sup>What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.

Because of Paul's imprisonment, the whole imperial guard, the *praetorium*, knows why Paul is imprisoned. Brothers and sisters in the church in Rome are speaking about the gospel "with greater boldness and without fear." More people are preaching the good news about Christ, even if some of them are doing it to inflate themselves and put down Paul. God has used Paul's imprisonment for good.

I have found that I don't learn much through success. I learn the most when I reflect on my failures, on my suffering. Suffering makes me more empathetic with others who are suffering. I learn that sometimes no amount of effort or skill brings the success that I want, and my suffering makes it harder to blame others for their failures.

Soelle writes that suffering has meaning through the process of dying to oneself and thereby becoming more receptive to God. We learn that we are dependent on God. Everything is not up to me. I need other people, and I need God. Suffering thus has a profound spiritual significance that can only be learned from inside the experience, not as a bystander.

### **Joy is connected with the Holy Spirit—Philippians 1:18b-19**

In the New Testament there also seems to be a connection between joy and the Holy Spirit, usually in the context of suffering.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, <sup>19</sup>for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.

In Acts 13:52, Paul, Barnabas, and the disciples at Antioch of Pisidia, following persecution, are "filled with joy and the Holy Spirit." First Thess.1:6 refers to "joy inspired by the Holy Spirit," in the context of persecution. The Holy Spirit gives joy irrespective of the circumstances. In Acts 5, The disciples go on their way rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for the Name.

Joy is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a fruit of the Spirit in Galatians.

Joy is not something we conjure up ourselves. We do not pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We are dependent on God. Joy is God's gift through the Holy Spirit.

### **Keep the main thing the main thing—Philippians 1:18b-26**

The experiences of suffering and joy help us to get our priorities straight. They help us to keep the main thing the main thing. We see Paul's recognition of that in this passage from Philippians.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice,<sup>19</sup> for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.<sup>20</sup> It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death.

<sup>21</sup>For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.<sup>22</sup> If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer.<sup>23</sup> I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better;<sup>24</sup> but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.<sup>25</sup> Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith,<sup>26</sup> so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

For Paul, whether he lives or dies is not the most important thing. Christ can be exalted no matter if he lives or dies, remains under arrest, or is released and can travel to Philippi again, but Paul hopes for deliverance so that he can help the church in Philippi make progress in faith.

Like Paul, joy in suffering helps me realize that I am not the center of the universe. The gospel is more important than my life or my pursuit of happiness. What is the most important thing? Not the self; not the continuation of my life, but the progress of God's mission in the world.

Through Christ, his death, resurrection, and ascension, God is gathering all people who will claim Jesus as Lord, as Ruler, as Savior. The church is the forerunner of God's reign—the preview of the age to come when everyone acknowledges Christ as Lord, and suffering and death are no more.

Right now it often seems that evil and lies and oppression have the upper hand. But in the day of Christ, as Paul calls it later on in Philippians, truth and love and peace will win out. Nothing can ultimately stop God's purposes.

In other words, joy requires us to take the long view. We cannot focus on today's suffering and injustice. Dictators, politicians, many big businesses look at the short term—next quarter's profits, next year's voter suppression, tomorrow's propping up of the ego. But the long term is what matters. In the end, God wins!

### Summary

Joy is more than happiness or pleasure. Joy is the assurance that God is in charge, no matter what our circumstances now.

To summarize, joy in the midst of suffering is made possible by:

- Solidarity
- The ritual of praying
- Seeing that God can use suffering for good
- Experiencing the Holy Spirit
- Giving priority to God's mission in the world

If we understand singing as a metaphor for joy, we can resonate with the folk hymn that we have in *Servant Songs*:

My life flows on in endless song above earth's lamentations.  
I hear the real, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.  
No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging.  
It sounds an echo in my soul; how can I keep from singing?

What though the tempest round me roars, I know the Truth, it liveth.  
What though the darkness round me close, songs in the night it giveth.  
No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging.  
Since Love is lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

When tyrants tremble, sick with fear, and hear their death knells ringing,  
When friends rejoice both far and near, how can I keep from singing?  
In prison cell and dungeon vile, our thoughts to them are winging.  
When friends by shame are undefiled, how can I keep from singing?