

¹ Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. ² Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. ³ For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— ⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If others think they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵ All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

¹⁷ Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. ¹⁸ For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

-- Philippians 3

When JI Packer got into a hot tub for the first time, this is what he wrote:

“As I sat there savouring hot tubness, cracking small jokes and adjusting to the feel of being bubbled over from all angles, it struck me that the hot tub is the perfect symbol of the modern route in religion. The hot tub experience is sensuous, relaxing, floppy, laid-back: not in any way demanding...but very, very nice, even to the point of being great fun. Many today want Christianity to be like that, and labour to make it so. But if there were no more to our Christianity than hot tub factors—a self-absorbed hedonism of relaxation and happy feelings, while dodging tough tasks, unpopular stances, and exhausting relationships—we should fall short of biblical God-centeredness and the cross-bearing life to which Jesus calls us, and advertise to the world nothing more than our own decadence.”¹

Images of wrinkly old theologians in hot tubs aside, the call to a cross-bearing life is one that is given to all those who would call themselves Christian, not just those with a masochistic streak. And as cross-bearing tends to imply, there is pain in the offering as we walk on towards our death. Yet for what reason should we do it? Simply to die for the cause of some Kingdom that we cannot see, touch, taste or smell? There are faster and more pleasant ways to die than to be crucified! An elevated tolerance for pain is not the key to endurance. What has surprised me in the last few days has been to see that the strength to endure suffering comes out of joy.

¹ J.I. Packer, *Hot Tub Religion*. (Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.: Wheaton, IL) 1988, pp.68-69

When I first approached this passage, I thought I could get away with a quick and dirty exposition. I thought I might sleepwalk my way through Scripture and leave you all feeling as though you ought to try harder at everything. However, what has happened is a challenge of a different kind. Being a rather renowned melancholic, I am fairly comfortable with the idea of being tortured and killed for Jesus. What I find more difficult by far is to contemplate the means of contentment in every situation, and that is joy.

Joy surrounds us. It permeates all of Creation. We see the joy of God in the way wind makes treetops creak, we hear it as thunderstorms rattle window panes, and we smell it when we walk by magnolias at night. Even more, we experience the joy of God in the mundane; in the simple taste of white rice or bread, in the way a hot shower scrubs off a long day at work, in the company and laughter of like-minded friends. These experiences are good. We need more of them—yet good as they are, they are still waypoints that direct us to the source of beauty and goodness. At the center of everything that's good is a God who paints sunsets, makes wild weather, and gives food its taste. And He does it in a million different ways. The secret of endurance is to look into these seemingly disparate joys to the time when we will be overwhelmed by joy made complete.

We often mistake simple pleasure for joy. Indeed, there are many joyful things that give us pleasure. Yet pleasure is not the same as joy, for pleasure is a matter of being *pleased* by something or someone else. Joy, however, is active and gives birth to rejoicing.

This is where Paul begins a famous passage of Scripture wherein he describes how he can so easily give up his old self-justifying life for one of following Jesus. It is not as though Paul just gave up on perfecting himself by buffing out every last personal flaw. Instead, he writes in v.7 that something he has found—or that has found him—is now so precious to him that he considers all that he did in the past to be worthless, revolting even. And the only way he can put behind all the things that he now considers about as much good as a steaming pile of human excrement is because what he has exchanged it for is so much better.

Look at the language Paul chooses: *“The surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ”*; *“The prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”* This is not the gloomy brooding of a man who follows Jesus out of self-pitying masochism, but out of knowing the worth of being found in Christ.

In this life, pain and the threat of death are our constant companions; yet even these are incomparable to the freedom that Paul has found by putting his faith in the sufficiency of Christ. It is not as though that once Paul becomes a Christian he ceases to feel pain. Rather, now that he is found in Christ, he sees that this is immeasurably more valuable than trying to justify himself by observing the Law. For Paul, being found in Christ is occasion to rejoice not only because Jesus accomplishes the forensic cleansing of our sin, but because Jesus is *good*. This is the basis of our joy as well—and thus, also the foundation of our strength.

This is something I’m only just beginning to understand. Growing up in a fire-and-brimstone tradition, the emphasis was upon how unworthy I am to receive anything

from God, let alone the gift of eternal life. And in the years since then, I have been burdened with the idea that since becoming like Christ involves the death of the self, I should only feel sadness and pain. Yet now, as I grow older, and as I look into this text, I am beginning to see that the strength to continue following Christ even into my death does not come from steeling myself for the day when I close my eyes for the final time, but by looking ahead, and considering the joy before me.

This is, after all, how Jesus does it. We should never minimize the fact that death and parting of all kinds is difficult, but the difference in how we live out our death is in what we look forward to. For the *joy* put before him, Jesus willingly endures the cross.² Now, for the joy put before us, what could we possibly endure but the same? The path we choose when we respond to the call of God to Christ is one that leads us to our deaths. Not merely physical death—a reality that every living being faces—but the death of the idea that we are self-sustaining individuals whose only purpose in life is to self-actualize and become impressive. Some who say they follow Christ will never know the joy of letting go of the responsibility to make a name for themselves.

What, then, is the basis of Christian joy? Is it only because we hope to one day strum harps and sit on clouds for all eternity? No, the deepest joy any of us will ever know is in knowing God through Jesus Christ.

From a certain perspective this might seem nothing more than Jesus-flavoured jargon, but what if we made the turn from seeing our faith as an economic exchange of

² Heb 12:2

faith for life and instead began to see that at the center of it all is One who is very good? What would our lives look like if instead of looking at the cross and all that we must give up, we looked at Christ and saw his beauty and his goodness?

This is what Paul begins to see as he forgets what lies behind and strives on. He admits that he hasn't already "obtained all this", but the singular quest of his life is no longer in seeking righteousness from ethnicity or from legal observance, but to continue to be conformed to Christ in every way, to be hidden in him like a child tucked into bed. And as Christ is formed in him, Paul hopes to somehow attain to the resurrection of the dead—a cryptic aphorism at best. Yet what if we viewed this conformity to Jesus in his suffering and death under the rubric of joy? Then the many deaths we die on the way to our final death get a little less frightening. As we learn the cycle of letting go and grieving our losses, a part of us rises in this life because what dies in us now is preserved, and raised in Christ, the living Lord. When we learn to let go and die these small deaths, a strange thing happens—the life we think can only happen once we die a final time actually begins in us now. What Paul suggests here is that there is even now a deep and lasting joy to be had—if only we would press on with our eyes on what Christ has prepared for us.

Paul ends this passage with a warning: that there are those who masquerade as followers of Christ but who hate the cross. This is, of course, a normal reaction to the idea of being hanged to death by iron spikes. However, those who truly would become

disciples of Christ must, as Jesus says, take up their crosses and follow him.³ Discipleship means nothing without obedience, suffering, and death.

The alternative is that we shift from knowing Christ to simply believing in him; from walking with him to confining him to a statue we wear around our necks. We would keep Jesus in a gilded box and trot him out when we're feeling guilty or need our wishes fulfilled. Then and only then is the inconvenience of true discipleship taken from us. It is only as we reduce Jesus to a nice idea that we can then be free to chase whatever whims and desires that pique our fickle hearts from one moment to the next. This may be the life that the world tells us is good, but this is not Christian discipleship. This is not the way of Jesus, and this is not the way of joy. The more we look to indulge our cravings for anything other than the lasting joy of God, the more we become the people Paul talks about: those who have their appetites for gods. Having a stomach for a god might seem meet and right to any who believe in nothing better, but human physiology has our stomachs beneath our hearts, as though they are unworthy of our love and devotion.

This is why the basis of our joy is in knowing God, not just believing in His existence as the "Big Guy Upstairs". And we come to know God by paying attention to who Jesus is, for he is the image of the invisible God.⁴ Knowing Jesus, then, is not just something we do once and for all when we first put our faith in him, but it is a dynamic process of maturation that comes through taking steps in faith that God is good indeed.

³ Mt 16:24

⁴ Col 1:15

It is as we come to know Jesus that we forget about the distant and somewhat deaf “Big Guy Upstairs” and begin to see “God Down Here”, God with us, God for us, Immanuel. And it is here, when God appears in the places we least expect Him, that we experience joy. Not simply because God surprises us like a divine jack-in-the-box, but because we finally come to understand that we are not alone, and that the love of God is stronger than death. Even death on a cross.

- 1.) Where are you joyous? How is this different than pleasure or happiness?
- 2.) How has God surprised you recently?
- 3.) How has God been present to you in your suffering?