

3. Choice, not chase

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If it is one of our undeniable rights to chase after happiness, why have so few of us found permanent happiness? Why, after ten thousand years of progress, haven't we made more headway in capturing this elusive prize?

The answer lies in that one word 'chase'. To chase after something suggests that it's outside of us, that it's somewhere "out there" needing to be discovered or caught. But true happiness doesn't come from without. Rather it comes from within. It is not dependent on outward circumstances, but on an inner mindset. It's a choice, not a chase.

Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

If we chase after happiness instead of choosing joy, we will become toys of circumstance. Our inner peace will be tossed back and forth according to the whim of events beyond our control. But if we exercise our "right" to choose our attitude – the one basic freedom that can't be taken away from us we can choose joy even in the midst of the cruelest and most horrible circumstances.

Happiness is our translation of the Latin word 'fortuna' and it is closely related to chance. So, if things happen to work out in a way which we approve, we are happy. If they do not so happen, we are unhappy. Happiness is circumstantial, but not joy. Joy is an inner quality of delight in God, or gladness, and it is meant to spring up within the Christian in a way totally unrelated to the adversities or circumstantial blessings of this life.

It's not enough, however, to simply say, "I choose to be joyful." To choose joy means that we set our minds on the kinds of things specifically listed in Philippians 4:8.

Philippians 4:8 Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy--meditate on these things.

A. CONFIDENT IN GOD FOR EVERYTHING

Philippians 1:12-14 But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, 13 so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; 14 and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

To find proof that joy is something we choose rather than chasing after a wind, we need not look any further than the apostle Paul. Let's go back a few pages in his life and thumb through the events that led up to his letter to the Philippians:

Apostle Paul wanted to go to Rome as a preacher, God sent him in an all-expense-paid-trip at the Roman Government courtesy, but as a prisoner. He could have written a long complaining letter about that experience alone. Instead, he sums it all up as "the things which happened to me" in v12.

It begins with Paul's illegal arrest in the temple in Jerusalem. The Jews thought he had desecrated their temple by bringing in Gentiles, and the Romans thought he was an Egyptian renegade who was on "Roman's ten most wanted" list. Paul became the focal point of both political and religious plotting and remained a prisoner in Caesarea for two years. When he finally appealed to Caesar which was the privilege of every Roman citizen, he was sent to Rome. En route, the ship was wrecked. After three months of waiting on the Island of Malta, Paul finally embarked for Rome and the trial he had requested before Caesar.

To many, all of this would have looked like failure, but not to this man with a "single mind," concerned with sharing Christ and the Gospel. Paul did not find his joy in his current circumstances, but he found his joy in winning others to Christ.

In fact, originally Paul was going to go into Asia with the Gospel of Jesus, but the Spirit of God continuously stopped him on his track and turned him around to Europe where he had an opportunity to share the Gospel to the people of Philippi.

God sometimes uses strange tools to spread the Gospel. In Paul's case, they are his chains in v12-14 and his critics in v15-19. Even though he is in prison, he is not out of the will of God, and God's work still continues.

The word 'furtherance' means "pioneer advance." It is a Greek military term referring to the army engineers who go before the troops to open the way into new territory. Instead of finding himself confined as a prisoner, Paul discovered that his circumstances really opened up new areas of ministry.

The new areas of ministry was sharing the Gospel to the Praetorian Guard which comprised an elite special force of bodyguards used by Roman Emperors.

To begin with, Paul was chained to a Roman soldier twenty-four hours a day. The shifts changed every six hours, which meant Paul could witness to at least four men each day! Imagine yourself as one of those soldiers, chained to a man who prayed "without ceasing," who was constantly interviewing people about their spiritual condition, and who was repeatedly writing letters to Christians and churches throughout the Empire. On top of it, he treats you with respect. It was not long before some of these soldiers put their faith in Christ. Paul was able to get the Gospel into the elite Praetorian Guard, something he could not have done had he been a free man.

Do you see it? The same God who used Moses' rod, Gideon's clay pitchers and David's sling, used Paul's chains. Little did the Romans realize that the chains they affixed to his wrists would release Paul instead of bind him. He did not complain about his chains. Instead he consecrated them to God and asked God to use them to advance the Gospel. And God answered his prayers.

Paul's chains not only gave contact with the lost, but they also gave courage to the saved. Many of the believers in Rome took fresh courage when they saw Paul's faith and determination. They were much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Discouragement has a way of spreading, but so does encouragement. Because of Paul's joyful attitude, the believers in Rome were encouraged and witnessed boldly for Christ.

B. SO WHAT?

Philippians 1:15-18 Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from good will: 16 The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; 17 but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel. 18 What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.

If I am allowed to paraphrase this portion, "So what if some preach with wrong motives? So what if some are overly interested in themselves? So what if there are some who take unfair shots at me? What matters is this: Christ is being preached and that thought alone intensifies my joy!"

There was a time, however, when Paul was not joyful in spite of what others preached, when he didn't simply say, "So what?" On the contrary, his advice to the Galatians was to let certain others be 'anathema'- accursed!

Galatians 1:6-9 I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, 7 which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. 9 As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.

Why does Paul say in one letter, "Let him be accursed," and in another, "So what?" Isn't his contrasting advice of condemnation and indifference contradictory? No and the reason is simple. In Galatians, the Apostle is denouncing those who garble the Gospel of grace into a message of works. In Philippians, he's rejoicing that, despite the impure motives of some, the Good News of Jesus Christ is still being proclaimed accurately.

The message mattered most to Paul, not the messenger. Sure, he didn't enjoy hearing about the selfish ambition of some, but he would not let their wrong motives rob him of the joy of Jesus being preached. There is no envy in Paul's heart, because he sees the big picture. It is one thing to get upset with garbled gospels, it is another thing to get upset with garbled motives.

Those who preached Christ from the wrong motive supposed to add affliction to Paul's chains. Their competitive hearts didn't only want to "win" themselves, they wanted Paul to "lose." Rather than winning the hearts of lost people, they were busy making Paul look bad.

It is a matter of historic record that the two great English evangelists, John Wesley and George Whitefield, disagreed on doctrinal matters. Both of them were very successful, preaching to thousands of people and seeing multitudes come to Christ. It is reported that somebody asked Wesley if he expected to see Whitefield in heaven, and the evangelist replied, "No, I do not."

"Then you do not think Whitefield is a converted man?"

"Of course he is a converted man!" Wesley said. "But I do not expect to see him in heaven – because he will be so close to the throne of God and I so far away that I will not be able to see him!" Though he differed with his brother in some matters, Wesley did not have any envy in his heart, nor did he seek to oppose Whitefield's ministry.

C. HOPEFUL IN GOD NO MATTER WHAT

Philippians 1:19-20 For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, 20 according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.

You won't find any self-pity in these words, because for Paul the most important thing in life wasn't his plans or his personal comfort, it was exalting Jesus.

Does Christ need to be magnified? After all, how can a mere human being ever magnify the Son of God? Allow me to make an illustration. The stars are much bigger than the telescope, and yet the telescope magnifies them and brings them closer to the observers. The believer's body is to be a telescope that brings Jesus Christ close to people. To the average person, Christ is a misty figure in history who lived centuries ago. But as the unsaved watch the believer go through a crisis, they can see Jesus magnified and brought so much closer.

The telescope brings distant things closer, and the microscope makes tiny things look big. To the unbeliever, Jesus is not very big. But as the unbeliever watches the Christian go through a crisis experience, he ought to be able to see how big Jesus Christ really is. The believer's body is a "lens" that makes a "little Christ" look very big, and a "distant Christ" come very close.

The day we quit chasing after happiness and choose to follow Christ will be the day we discover the same joy that replaced Paul's anxieties and fears with a calm contentment and peace in the middle of a Roman dungeon.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) When Christ is central, He broadens the dimensions of our circumstances.

Jesus wasn't bound by Paul's chains, nor is He confined by our limitations. In every circumstance, God is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think. He can turn a loss into a gain, a weakness into a strength, a prison into a place of proclamation. And that gives us confidence.

2) When Christ is central, He delivers us from a preoccupation with others.

Paul's joy wasn't dependent on others. As a matter of fact, he didn't need anyone's approval, because he had Christ and His approval was all that mattered. When we put Jesus above all others, that brings us joy.

3) When Christ is central, He calms our fears regarding ourselves and our future.

When the person of Christ is in full focus, at the center of our hearts and minds, we find contentment instead of insecurity, peace instead of anxiety, joy instead of fear. And that instills in us a hope for the future.