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## HAPPINESS: THROUGH CIRCUMSTANCES OR CHRIST?

Philippians 1:12-18

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Philippians Lesson 6

## Happiness: Through Circumstances Or Christ? Philippians 1:12-18

Everyone wants happiness, but most people seek it in the wrong way. They assume that happiness comes through good circumstances, so they set out to improve their circumstances. If they're single, they seek a spouse and a happy marriage. If they're married, but unhappy, they get a divorce and look for someone else who can make them happier. If they're married and childless, they seek to have children. If they're married with children who are giving them problems, they don't know what to do (since murder is not legal)! If they're poor, they seek to get rich. If they're rich, they discover that money doesn't give them what they're looking for. One wag said, "They say it's better to be poor and happy than rich and miserable. But couldn't something be worked out, such as being moderately wealthy and just a little moody?" (*Reader's Digest*, 9/82.)

Jesus explained how we can find lasting happiness, but in so doing He stood the world's way on its head: Lose your life for His sake and the gospel's and you'll find it. He said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's shall save it" (Mark 8:34, 35). He made the same point in the Sermon on the Mount, where He contrasted the pagans, who eagerly seek after the material comforts of life, with believers, who are to "seek first His kingdom and righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33).

The Apostle Paul was a man who proved Jesus' words in the crucible of life. In our text, we find Paul in circumstances in which we could not fault him for being unhappy. Think of who he was-- God's chief apostle to the Gentiles. He was well-educated, experienced, influential. He had founded churches all over the Roman Empire. He had been used of God to pen much of our New Testament. He had endured much persecution and hardship in his labors for the Lord. By now he was over 60, at a time in life when a

man looks forward to enjoying the fruits of his lifelong labors. Many American pastors by this time are looking forward to a relaxed schedule, a little more golf. If you're as successful in ministry as Paul was, you could expect to live off your book sales and speak at a lot of conferences and retreats.

But where was Paul? Instead of being out on the links or speaking under the pines at a retreat center, he was in prison in Rome, awaiting a trial that could result in his execution. He was not in the strictest confinement, in a dungeon (as he later was). He was in his own rented quarters, and his friends were allowed to visit him (Acts 28:30, 31). But he was chained to a Roman guard 24 hours of every day. He had already spent two years being confined in Caesarea without any crime on his part. He had suffered a shipwreck and near death on his trip to Rome. Not only that, but he was being unfairly criticized by a number of jealous pastors in Rome, who probably were saying things like, "If Paul had God's blessing in his life, do you think he would be in prison?" They were promoting their ministries at Paul's expense.

Paul's circumstances were enough to make any man unhappy, and yet we find him abounding with joy (1:18). What was his secret? How could Paul be filled with joy in these dismal circumstances? The answer is, he had put into practice the words of Jesus, that the way to find true life is to lose your life for the sake of Jesus and the gospel.

True happiness comes by proclaiming Christ  
in every situation.

Now maybe you're thinking, "That's a nice idea, but it doesn't apply to me. I'm not called to be an evangelist or preacher or missionary. I'm a simple layman. I try to earn a decent living and raise my family. But I'm not called to proclaim Christ as Paul was." But I contend that Jesus' words apply not only to the Apostle Paul, but to every Christian in every stratum of life. Whether you are a construction worker, a business executive, a housewife, a student, or whatever you do, your objective should be to lose your life for the sake of Christ and the gospel. In so doing, you will find the key to true life and happiness, no matter what trials or hardships you face.

There are two steps toward applying Jesus' words to your life, as Paul did:

1. Say no to the self-life.

"Deny yourself and take up your cross" (Mark 8:34). "Lose [your] life for [Jesus'] sake and the gospel's" (Mark 8:35). Or, as Paul explains it (Gal. 2:20), "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me." In Romans 8:12, 13 Paul put it this way: "So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh [the old self], to live according to the flesh--for if you are living according to the flesh, you are about to die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

The Christian life is decidedly *not* a life lived for self, for personal fulfillment, for doing what we think will bring us pleasure and happiness. That is the way toward death! The Christian life is a life of daily, constant submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ in which, by the indwelling Holy Spirit, we say no to selfish desires and yes to the will of God. It means that we learn to submit every thought, desire, decision, attitude, action, and relationship to the question, "Does this please God?"

In our text, what is striking is Paul's almost total disregard of himself. The Philippians were rightly concerned about Paul's situation. They had sent Ephaphroditus to find out how Paul was doing. Was he suffering terribly in prison? Would he be acquitted and set free? Yet, as James Boice puts it, "In one deft sentence Paul shifts the legitimate interest of the Philippians from himself to the great undeterred purposes of God in history" (*Philippians: An Expository Commentary* [Zondervan], p. 60). With Paul the main question was not, "What is happening to me?" but rather, "What is happening to the gospel?" His focus was not on self, but on Christ and the gospel.

It's amazing that Paul does not speak a word of complaint about his situation. He's not asking, "Why is this happening to me? I've served God faithfully all these years! I've always sought to do His will. Why this?" The modern approach would be to urge Paul to get in touch with his feelings: "How do you feel about the way

God is treating you? Go ahead and be honest. Get out your anger and rage. God can take it! Tell Him how you feel!" If Paul answered, "I'm rejoicing and I'm determined to keep on rejoicing" (1:18) he would be accused of being in denial!

He would also be accused of being "in denial" about his feelings toward his critics! "How do you feel about the Christian leaders who are criticizing you, Paul? Don't you feel hurt, wounded? Don't you want to lash out at them?" "If they're preaching Christ, I rejoice that the gospel is going forth."

Who were these critics? Some commentators say that they were the Judaizers, those Jewish legalists who dogged Paul's steps, seeking to bring his converts under the Jewish law, especially circumcision, for salvation. Paul warns against this sect in Philippians 3. But these men Paul speaks of in 1:15a, 17 (the KJV reverses verses 16 & 17, but the strong weight of evidence is for the order in the NASB) could not have been the Judaizers, for several reasons.

These critics preached Christ (1:15a, 17), but the Judaizers preached another gospel, which is not a gospel (Gal. 1:6-9; 5:11). Paul rejoices in the message these critics were preaching (their message was true, even though their motives were wrong), but he wishes the Judaizers to be accursed because of their heresy (Gal. 1:8-9). Paul calls these men brethren, but he calls the Judaizers "false brethren" (Gal. 2:4). So these critics were apparently Christian pastors in Rome whose doctrine was correct, but whose hearts were wrong. They were jealous of Paul and selfishly ambitious to promote their own ministries. But, at least the message they preached was the true gospel. Paul would never rejoice at the preaching of false doctrine concerning something as crucial as the gospel.

I have found over the years that the most stinging criticism comes from fellow believers, not from the world. You expect the world to be hostile, but you also expect Christians to be on your side. Yet I have encountered the most hostility from those in the church, not from those outside. The Greek word translated "selfish ambition" was used of politicians building a personal following. Many in the church play politics to build a following. But it's not the way of self-denial and living for Christ.

So Paul was not complaining to God, and he shrugged off the criticism of these jealous preachers, because he was denying self. Also, as we'll see in our text for next week (1:20, 21), Paul didn't even have a concern for whether he lived or died! If he got acquitted and lived, that would mean more useful service for Christ. If he got executed, he would be with Christ, which is better. But, he didn't consider his life of any account as dear to himself (Acts 20:24). Paul had said "no" to his self-life.

Lest you think that Paul was some sort of super-Christian, with a level of dedication that very few attain, I remind you that Jesus' words about denying yourself and taking up your cross apply to every person who wants to follow Him (Mark 8:34). Discipleship isn't an option for those who feel called to a life of hardship, who like a challenge. Discipleship is the *only option* for those who believe in Jesus. The only path for the true Christian is that of learning daily to say no to selfish desires and yes to the lordship of Jesus. The first step to happiness is to say no to the self-life.

## 2. Say yes to the gospel as first in your life.

Paul told the Corinthians, "I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow partaker of it" (1 Cor. 9:23). The progress of the gospel must be our goal (note, "gospel" in 1:5, 7, 12, 16, 27 [twice]). If the progress of our happiness (comfort, success, etc.) is our goal, we will miss true happiness. With Paul, the progress of the gospel should be our main concern. Seek first to fulfill your own needs, and you'll come up empty. "Seek first the kingdom of God," and you will find that God meets your needs.

### A. Saying yes to the gospel as first requires understanding and believing the gospel.

I'm amazed at how many people who attend evangelical churches cannot begin to explain the basics of the gospel to another person. It makes me wonder if they even understand, let alone believe in, the gospel. The gospel is *not*, "If you're having some problems in your life, invite Jesus into your heart and He will help you work out your problems." Nor is the gospel, "If you'd like a happier life, try Jesus." That kind of approach trivializes the gospel by missing the key problem the gospel addresses.

The main problem every person faces is that his sin has alienated him from a holy God and that he is under God's wrath or judgment. If he dies in this condition, he will spend eternity in hell, under the just condemnation of God. The good news ("gospel") is that God has not left us in this terrible situation. Nor does He expect us to earn our way back to Him, which no one can do, because it requires perfect righteousness. Rather, "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, met the requirement of God's Law in His perfect obedience to the Father. He went to the cross as the Lamb of God, to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29). God did not leave Jesus in the tomb, but raised Him bodily from the dead, victorious over sin, death, and hell. God offers to every person a full pardon from sin and total reconciliation to Himself based on what Christ did on the cross. The only way to receive this deliverance from God's judgment is to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31; Eph. 2:8, 9).

To believe the gospel is not merely to give intellectual assent to the facts of the gospel. To believe the gospel means to commit your life, both now and for eternity, to the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior from sin. You can say that you believe that an airplane will carry you from Phoenix to Los Angeles, but you don't truly believe it until you get on board. Only then is your faith effective in transporting you from Phoenix to L.A. You can give mental assent to the truth of the gospel, but it is not effective in transferring you from Satan's domain of darkness to the kingdom of God's beloved Son, in whom you have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:13, 14) until you fully commit yourself by faith to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Thus saving faith necessarily includes repentance (turning) from sin. It means entrusting yourself to Jesus as Savior and Lord. Saving faith is a commitment of all of myself of which I'm aware to all of Jesus whom I know. From that point, I grow in awareness of my own selfishness and sin, which I relinquish to Christ's lordship; and I grow in my awareness of the person and work of Christ, to which I yield. But there is no such thing as believing in Jesus as my Savior, and then living the rest of my life to please myself. We must

understand and believe that the gospel is absolutely free, but it rightly demands total commitment.

- B. Saying yes to the gospel as first requires proclaiming the gospel through your walk and words in every situation.

Here was Paul, under arrest, chained to Roman guards. Most of us would have thought, "What a restriction for proclaiming Christ!" But Paul thought, "What an opportunity! I've got a captive audience!" Every four hours or so the guard changed. They thought Paul was their captive, but Paul saw them as his captives!

These were rough, worldly Roman soldiers, used to guarding tough, accused criminals. Imagine the difference they saw in this prisoner! For one thing, his *attitude* was different. He never complained! He never bad-mouthed the system. Instead, he was always singing, praying, and praising God. All sorts of interesting people came to visit him, some from the far corners of the empire. They heard him dictate letters to churches, answering their questions with wisdom. They heard him talk about God and how God wants us to live. They heard him pray specific, heartfelt, personal prayers to a God who was very alive.

Besides, this prisoner took an interest in the guards as persons. He asked about their families, their backgrounds, and their thoughts about various issues. He prayed for their needs. And he told them how they could know the living God and have their sins forgiven through faith in His risen Son. Some of these rough soldiers began getting saved, and they talked to other guards. Word spread beyond the Praetorian guard even to the members of Caesar's household, some of whom believed (Phil. 4:22).

Paul's proclamation of Christ through his attitude and words in this difficult situation not only resulted in witness to these lost soldiers, but it also encouraged many of the Roman Christians. Previously, they had lacked the courage to bear witness of Christ for fear of being laughed at or persecuted. But when they saw the power of the gospel for salvation to these soldiers, and even to those in Caesar's household, they took courage and began to talk fearlessly to others about God's Word (1:14).

Our walk (especially, our attitude) always has an effect, not only on the lost, but also on the Lord's people. If we're cheerfully

trusting in the loving sovereignty of God in the midst of trials, as Paul did, we proclaim the reality of faith in Christ both to the lost and to the saved. Lost people will want to know why we're different, why we don't complain like everyone else. The Lord's people who are discouraged will see our faith in God in the midst of trials and be encouraged to trust Him and bear witness for Him.

Many years ago I was praying for more of God's power in my life. I had in mind things like speaking in tongues, the power to see God do miraculous healings, and that sort of thing. In my Bible reading I came across Colossians 1:10-12, where Paul prayed (verse 10) that his readers would walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, pleasing Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God. Then I read in verses 11 & 12, "strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all miracles, signs, and wonders"? Wait a minute! That's not what it says! "For the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light."

I thought, "The only time you need steadfastness and patience is when you're going *through* trials, not when you're instantly, miraculously delivered." God is saying that His mighty power is manifested by our having a thankful, joyous attitude in the midst of trials, not by being miraculously delivered from them.

### Conclusion

Some of you, like Paul, are in situations you never planned to be in. He planned to go to Rome, but not in chains! Maybe you're in a confining situation where you feel bound by chains. It may be a difficult marriage which you didn't plan on. Maybe you're chained to a house full of kids. It may be a family problem. It could be a boring or a difficult job or the lack of a job. It could be a personal problem over which you have no control--a health problem or a situation that you've been thrust into with no choice on your part.

What should you do? *Make your chains a channel for proclaiming Christ.* How? First, *say no to the self life*, to seeking your own way, your own happiness, your own will. Say no to a grumbling, complaining spirit. Second, *say yes to the gospel as first in your life*, by understanding and believing it; and, by proclaiming Jesus Christ in every

situation by your cheerful attitude of trust in Him and, as He gives opportunity, by your words of witness. You'll find that by so losing your life for the sake of Christ and the gospel, you'll find true happiness both for time and for eternity.

### Discussion Questions

1. Does denying self mean that we can never do things we enjoy in life? What does it mean?
2. How can Christians break free from the pursuit of circumstantial happiness? Is it wrong to seek to improve our circumstances?
3. Why is the message, "If you've got problems, come to Christ" inadequate as the gospel? What is the core issue of the gospel?
4. How does "putting the gospel first" fit in with a job, family, etc.? Can every Christian seek first God's kingdom? How?

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