

The last two Sundays, I have been talking about finding happiness in a stressful world. I shared with you my belief that God did not create us to be miserable, to suffer, or even to lack anything. God's design for us was good, to be fruitful and lasting. The pain, suffering, and death we experience now was not part of God's purpose for us. Although we often endure great trials in this life due to how poorly we treat one another, that does not change the initial goal of God for us: a good, transcending life.

To explain how we can experience happiness and a transcending life, I referenced the words of the apostle Paul said amid his suffering and imprisonment, "I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice." (Phi. 1:18b)

I described that for Paul, his rejoicing came from hearing how many of the disciples of Jesus were being encouraged to preach the gospel of Jesus even more passionately than before due to Paul's imprisonment (explain).

Remember that the last four years of Paul's life were miserable. He spent two years in prison in Caesarea, and then he was put on a ship to go to Rome to be tried because of his faith. On his way to Rome, he is shipwrecked and stranded on an island. There he was bitten by a poisonous snake and survived the winter there too. Then, he continued to Rome and spent another two years in prison awaiting trial to be executed. During these two years in Rome, he was chained to a guard for 24 hours a day. He had absolutely no privacy and a long list of grievances to make him resentful and bitter if he had chosen to look at his life through his loss.

However, for him, his happiness was coming from more people hearing and learning about Jesus. He was not looking at his life through the lens of his suffering (his imprisonment) but the lens of his faith. His perspective as a believer in Jesus and an apostle was the source of

his happiness. For him, his priority was the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus, and, since that was taking place regardless of what was happening to him, he was happy.

And then, I asked, “How does our faith direct our thoughts, feelings, and decisions? How does our faith inform and order our priorities?” These questions are so important for us to think about regularly because our priorities will determine our happiness.

Now, for this third and last message, we are going even deeper in our reflection about our faith and priorities in life.

I have only two verses that I will use for this message. This is Philippians 1:21 and 27, and they read,

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain... Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...

As we learned previously, as Paul was standing trial, and pretty much on death row, many of the churches were deeply concerned for the welfare of the apostle. But Paul writes to them in this letter to encourage them and give them peace in knowing that everything will be fine. He explains that no matter what happens, whether he lives or whether he dies, either way, is gain.

Paul explains how he can speak like this because of the certainty of his faith in Jesus. For him, Christ was everything, Christ was his meaning and purpose, and for this reason, he knew death would simply be his passage into the immediate presence of Christ. In other words, he was not afraid of what Caesar may do to him; he was not scared of the suffering; he was not even afraid of death; he had a much broader and higher view of life than just what life on earth is about. And this is where his confidence in the future came from: he knew God was with him and that his life was secured in Christ.

So, Paul was able to be happy, to rejoice even the midst of the most troubling and hostile times.

The questions for us are: How do we live like that? How do we get there?

I hope you want to know the answers to these questions. I know I do. I want to have what Paul had, living appreciating the gift and beauty of today free of fear and also with full confidence knowing that there is more to life than just what it is here and now.

The answers are found in what Paul said, “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain”?

Paul knew and understood his purpose: to share the life and teachings of Jesus with everyone. This goal provided him the complete satisfaction in life, which all of us are seeking too. He was a happy person because he was fully satisfied with what he was doing. But even more than that, he was fully satisfied in Christ. The sum and the substance of Paul’s life were Christ in him. Everything in his life was under the lordship of Jesus. Christ was the very essence of his being, and that was the most profound reality of his soul.

Such was his confidence and contentment in Christ that his death meant the ultimate victory and blessing rather than a defeat.

I told you before that Paul learned to look at his life through the lens of faith instead of his suffering (imprisonment), and that rearranged his priorities and how engaged with the world. Remember that his freedom, his privacy, and any comfort were taken away from him due to his faith, yet that is the reason he rejoices: his faith.

This is very significant because it shows us that Paul knew the difference between what he wanted and what he needed, and he had what he needed: Christ. Of course, he wanted to be

free and safe, but not at the expense of compromising his priorities, or worse, his faith and character. This is what gave him clarity about what mattered to him. This is the main reason why he is happy, joyful even as he faced certain death. His happiness did not depend on anyone or anything else but Christ. And, there was no pain, power, nor evil in this world that could take that away from him.

In other letters, he spoke in similar ways about his life, faith, and priorities. In Colossians 3:4, he said, “Christ is our life.” In Galatians 2:20, he wrote, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.”

Just like many of us, before Paul met Christ and gave his life to him, he lived for himself, for his reputation, causes, and for what he wanted—just like many of us do, right?

If you recall, I explained this self-centered behavior by talking about “greed.” I said “Greed is a powerful foe that keeps us from contentment and being grateful.” Greed says, “If I have more, then I will be truly happy and will have reasons to be thankful.” It says “you are almost there” but we never arrive because greed can’t be satisfied. Therefore, greed tricks us into believing that we don’t have enough yet to be happy and forces us to focus on ourselves at the expense of neglecting what really matters and makes us happy: our relationships.

But Paul changed. He met Jesus Christ and turned his life around into Christ. He became a disciple of his teaching, and then he spent the rest of his life teaching them to others. He describes his conversion by succinctly saying, “But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.” (Phi. 3:7)

In other words, Paul had no competing loyalties, no different agenda. The entire reason for his life, his existence on this earth, for which he lived, preached, traveled, and was willing to

be persecuted and imprisoned can be reduced to this one phrased, "For me, to live is Christ, and whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ."

I know this may be hard to grasp and that you may not be called to do what Paul did: to be a preacher, but all of us are given the same amount of grace to make changes in our lives.

Paul's happiness did not come from having everything, but from knowing he was loved and given new life and that was the grace that rearranged and realigned Paul's life with the initial design of God for us: to give us life and to dwell in love. Paul was perfectly happy because he had exactly what he needed.

Think about it. What does this mean to us? What do you need today? More specifically: by knowing you are loved: How would that affect your decisions? How would you spend your time? How would you spend your money? How would you treat people? How would you love and respect your spouse? How would you teach and encourage your children?

Do you see where I am going with this? The reason why we treat one another poorly and rob each other of our joy is because we are not led by love but perhaps by greed, resentment or bitterness.

Now, challenge yourself by asking these same questions through the lens of faith as you hear these words again, "Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ..."

My friends, you will never be happy by having all the stuff in this world. You will never be satisfied; it will never be enough. Instead, you will find happiness in spending your time wisely, in spending your money responsibly, in treating people with dignity and respect, in loving and caring for your spouse, in adoring and investing in your children. And most importantly, by having your life in Christ, the source of life and love, and of all that is good.

If Christ is in you, he will be in your time, in your money, in your family, in your marriage, in your relationship with your children. Christ will drive, direct, and sustain you in everything and your will be built on love.

Do you want this? If so, this is what we need to do: live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel means living according to the pattern of Christ, which means, to imitate, emulate, reflect Christ with words and actions in every interaction we have with others.

As you can see, Christ was not merely Paul's life on Sunday but was his life in every breath for the rest of his life and made every effort to align himself with Christ.

I pray that in the midst of the complexities, obstacles, and sufferings of this life and this world we may find our footing in Christ, so that in every step of the way, in every word and every deed we may live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. This will give us more happiness than we can imagine for this life and the next.

May your family, your work, your spouse and children, may your friendships and everything your life is about, be filled and guided by the Spirit Christ in you and through you.

Be happy. Amen.