

JESUS JOY

A DEVOTIONAL VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY

ON PAUL'S LETTER TO THE

PHILIPPIANS

BY LOREN HOULTBERG

Jesus Joy

Copyright © 2026 Loren Houlberg

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other) without the prior permission of the author.

International Standard Book Number 979-890333086-7

Cover design by Mike Cooper

Interior design/format by Chris Moore

Printed in the United States of America by Foursquare Missions Press, 4905 E. La Palma, Anaheim, California 92807

DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal source of my joy; my beautiful wife Erie; my four children Loren Andrew, Benjamin James, Christopher Michael, and Danielle Louise; my daughters-in-law Sandy, Terra, and Laura; and my seven grandchildren Bradyn Marie, Loren Isaiah, Emery Charles, Ari Bloom, Indigo True, Oliver James, and Leo Alfonso, who are all a constant source of Jesus Joy for me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my Mentor Firehouse coffee group, my home church Emmanuel Foursquare, and other friends whose generosity helped get this commentary printed. Thank you to the pastors I serve as a regional pastor—you inspire me to write. Thank you to my faithful editor Brenda Lamer who makes me sound so much better as a writer.

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	9
The Gospel and Fellowship.....	17
Losing Your Life and Finding It in Christ	33
Living with the Mind of Christ	49
Walking in Obedience, Humility, and Servanthood.....	69
Rejoicing, Suffering, and Pressing On	85
Practicing Holy Habits	105
Conclusion	139

INTRODUCTION

This book is a commentary on the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, and the title is *Jesus Joy*. Paul uses a form of the word "joy" or "rejoicing" eighteen times in this letter, which is why Bible scholars often refer to Philippians as the epistle of joy. Philippians is also considered Paul's most personal letter to the churches. As we begin our journey into the life of the Philippian church, I will explain why I chose *Jesus Joy* as the title of this commentary.

First, I would like us to explore two questions about our Christian experience: 1) Is it easy to live the Christian life? 2) Is it fun to serve Jesus Christ in this life? I would answer both questions as "No" and "Yes."

No, living the Christian life is not easy. In fact, the Apostle Paul returned to the churches he founded on his first missionary journey just to tell them one thing: "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Paul echoes the words spoken by Jesus, who says, "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

And yes, the Christian life can be easy if we invite Jesus into every aspect of our daily lives. He desires to help us

through trying times; if we will come to Jesus, He promises to share our burdens. “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matt 11:28–30). If you want to ease your burdens in this life, stay yoked to Jesus.

Should we expect the Christian life to be fun? If you are human you can attest that, Christian or not, life is not always fun. Thus, the answer to this question is often a resounding NO! On the flip side, yes, we do experience seasons of “fun” as we live for Jesus. The problem with fun is that it does not endure. If we focus our lives on seeking fun, we will never find fulfillment. A life lived for Christ, however, offers something much more valuable than fun—it offers joy.

Jesus makes this wonderful promise: “These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11). The term I use to define this posture of joy is “Jesus Joy.” A life filled with Jesus Joy satisfies because His indwelling joy makes it much easier to contend with the ups and downs of life.

What is joy? I know how it feels when I experience it, but I find it challenging to put into words. Let me give you my simple definition of joy. Joy is the reward of being a Christian—living with Jesus in you and living for Jesus through you. It is Jesus Joy. One of the qualities of faith is believing God is a rewarder (Heb 11:6). And one of His wonderful rewards for us is Jesus Joy.

The ultimate reward for a Christian who has finished his or her race on this earth is hearing Jesus say, “Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will

make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord” (Matt 25:21). The reward that awaits us is entering into and living forever in the joy of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus also tells us, His disciples, that He wants us to live on this earth with His joy in us and for our joy to be full (John 15:11). The prophet Nehemiah declares that “the joy of the Lord is our strength” (Neh 8:10). Strong’s concordance defines strength as a place of safety and protection, a safe harbor, a fortified place. Jesus Joy keeps us safe and secure during the storms and trials of life.

We as believers experience joy in our souls as calm delight and quiet confidence, a little hallelujah deep in our souls that comes from knowing we are right with God and ourselves. We can rejoice this little hallelujah to the surface at times, as an exuberant joy that Peter calls “joy inexpressible and full of glory” (1 Pet 1:8). Joy is also the fruit of yielding to, walking with, and being led by the Holy Spirit who helps us make room for Jesus to live within us and through us. Galatians 5:22–23 lists the fruit of the Holy Spirit, with joy second only to love. I see joy as the reward that accompanies the other fruit of the Spirit. For example, we experience joy’s calm delight as a reward of being at peace. This thought reminds me of a phrase from Fanny Crosby’s (1820–1915) classic hymn “Blessed Assurance” that aptly describes joy resulting from peace: “Perfect submission, all is at rest. I in my Savior am happy and bless’d.”

Joy is the quiet confidence and contentment of security in Christ that allows us to live with an attitude of meekness rather than self-promotion. Joy is the companion of longsuffering, enabling suffering to become redemptive in building our character in Christ. Joy is the reward we enjoy

when we exercise the fruit of temperance or self-control. Joy is the reward of obedience when we are faithful to the Lord in word and deed. Joy is the reward of serving others with kindness and good works. Joy is the reward of allowing the love of God to flow through us to others.

Joy also comes when we experience the Lord's presence. "In your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Ps 16:11). This fullness of joy can overflow in tears or laughter. The joy that flows from His presence can be the silent, holy joy of adoration that comes from beholding God's beauty. I have at times felt a roller coaster of joy going up and down in my soul but also times of holy joy where I stood in absolute silence before my God. Joy also accompanies a thankful heart as we rehearse the benefits of serving our Savior.

It is a fine thing to be happy but a much greater thing to be joyful. Happiness comes from the old Norse word *hap*, which means luck or chance. Happiness depends upon favorable circumstances or relationships in your life. Jesus Joy, however, is available to us in all circumstances, even in suffering.

A good example of Jesus Joy is the joy that sustained Paul as he founded the church at Philippi. The same joy later sustained him as he wrote the church while confined in a Roman prison. Although Paul suffered many trials in establishing the Philippian church and was chained to a Roman soldier while he wrote the Philippian letter, Jesus Joy was his companion in both circumstances. Acts 16 tells the story of the Philippian church's founding. Luke, who wrote Acts, was an eyewitness to these events as confirmed by his use of the word "we" in Acts 16:13. Paul received the call to

ministry in Macedonia through his vision of a man from that region pleading with him to come and help them. Paul realized the Lord had called him to preach there and “immediately” (Acts 16:10) obeyed by boarding a ship bound for Macedonia. Paul ended his journey in Philippi, a Roman colony and the foremost city in that part of Macedonia.

We are told in Acts that Paul’s first Philippian convert was Lydia from the city of Thyatira, a merchant who dealt in the sale of purple cloth (Acts 16:14). Lydia was already a worshipper of God, and after opening her heart to Paul’s teaching she and her whole household followed Jesus and were baptized.

In the very next verse, Luke relates the story of a slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination who began following Paul and his companions, proclaiming day after day, “These men are the servants of the Most High God.” You might think this kind of attention would help in spreading the gospel, but it actually hindered it. Finally, Paul became annoyed and commanded the spirit in the name of Jesus to leave the girl, and the Scripture says “he came out that very hour” (Acts 16:18).

When the owners of the newly freed slave girl realized they could no longer profit from her demonically inspired divination, they seized Paul and dragged him before the authorities. The whole city was stirred up against Paul and his associates, and they were beaten with many stripes of a rod (2 Cor 11:24). He and Silas were thrown into the inner prison, and their feet were fastened in stocks.

This story doesn’t sound like one that would promote joy in your heart, does it? For Paul and Silas, it did. Experiencing joy at sharing in the suffering of Christ, we find them at

midnight singing hymns to God with all the other prisoners listening. Suddenly the prison shook with a great earthquake, and all the prisoners were freed from their chains. When the jailer saw the prison doors standing open he assumed the prisoners had escaped. Fearing that torture and a slow death awaited from his superiors, the jailer opted for a quick end and prepared to fall on his own sword. Paul quickly intervened, calling out from the darkness that not a single prisoner had been lost.

Realizing Paul and Silas were not ordinary men, the jailer begged to know what he must do to be saved. He and his whole household surrendered their lives to Jesus Christ and were baptized that very night. The jailer washed and cleaned Paul's and Silas' wounds and fed them. The Scripture reports the jailer's response to the evening's miraculous events: "He rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household" (Acts 16:34). The next morning the magistrates sent word to free Paul and Silas, not knowing they already had been freed supernaturally from their bonds. This story is a clear reminder that we can experience Jesus Joy in suffering, and that it can drastically alter our circumstances and result in blessings to those around us.

As a pastor for more than fifty years I see one of my assignments from the Lord outlined in 2 Corinthians 1:24: "Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy" (KJV). Through this commentary my desire is to help you live with Jesus Joy. The best way to do this is to discover from the Philippian letter the reason and source of Paul's Jesus Joy.

Here is a little taste of what we discover in Philippians about the root of Paul's joy. Jesus Joy comes through

understanding and embracing the gospel of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:1–18). Jesus Joy comes through surrender, through losing your life to find it in Christ (Phil 1:19–30). Jesus Joy comes through humility and serving others with the mind of Christ (Phil 2:1–25). Jesus Joy comes from the lifelong, single purpose of seeking, knowing, and serving our Lord Jesus Christ (Phil 3:1–21). Jesus Joy comes by forming and living out holy habits in Christ (Phil 4:1–23).

Let us join Paul as he helps the Philippian church with their Jesus Joy and let him help us with ours. In Jeremiah 31:21, the Lord tells Jeremiah, “Set up signposts, make landmarks.” Throughout this commentary, you will find signposts reminding you of sources of Jesus Joy.

Jesus Joy

CHAPTER ONE

THE GOSPEL AND FELLOWSHIP

Philippians 1:1–11

1:1 Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

A characteristic of letters written during this time period was that writers would identify themselves at the beginning rather than at the end. Most scholars contend Paul wrote this letter during his first Roman imprisonment somewhere between AD 61 and AD 63. Charles Erdman proposes in his commentary how long the Philippian church had been in existence when Paul wrote the letter. “Therefore, it would seem that some ten or eleven years had passed since the founding of the church” (*Philippians*, 22).

In all of Paul’s other letters, except the letters to the Thessalonians, Paul begins by calling himself an apostle. He establishes his apostleship because in most of his letters he is bringing authoritative correction to problems or addressing doctrinal error in the churches. *Philippians* starts differently by stating the letter is from *Paul and Timothy, bondservants*

of Jesus Christ (v 1). The letter is the most personal of all his epistles. He did not write it to correct any major errors in the church but instead to express his thanks for the gift they had sent him, and also for their ongoing fellowship and support of him and his ministry. He does exhort Euodia and Syntyche to come into unity, but even then he expresses how thankful he is for these two women who have labored with him in the gospel (4:2–3).

Erdman describes the tone of Paul's letter by saying, "A friend is pouring out his heart to those whom he loves" (*Philippians*, 26). Paul's letter to the Philippians was delivered to the church by the hand of Epaphroditus. He had been sent by the church to Paul and had been with Paul in his imprisonment. Epaphroditus had taken ill and almost died (2:25–30) and Paul sent him back to Philippi with the letter, thereby comforting the church by allowing them to see that Epaphroditus had recovered.

The letter is also from Timothy, whom Paul calls "a true son in the faith" (1 Tim 1:2) and "a beloved son" (2 Tim 1:2). In the Corinthian letter he simply calls Timothy "our brother" (2 Cor 1:1). What a comfort, blessing, and strength Timothy was to the great Apostle Paul in his life and ministry. We all need a Timothy to walk alongside us in our Christian life. Scripture tells us, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls" (Eccles 4:9). Do you have a Timothy in your life, a son or daughter in the faith that you have disciplined? As a pastor myself, one of my greatest joys has been mentoring other pastors and seeing them released into pastoral ministry.

As bondservants of Jesus Christ (v 1), Paul and Timothy

were bound for a lifetime and eternity of serving Jesus Christ, not by force but willingly because they had been captured by the love of God in Christ. They used this term to introduce themselves to the Philippian church, and it is Paul's most-used description of himself in all his epistles. Confessing that "Jesus is Lord and I am His bondservant" is a safe way to live. When we first meet Paul in Scripture he is known as Saul, which means "prayed for" in Hebrew. Following his conversion to Christ, he became known as Paul, which means "small" in Greek. I am speculating here, but I believe he identified himself to the churches as Paul because he had come to recognize his smallness now that Jesus lived large inside him and through him. These thoughts bring us to our first signpost to Jesus Joy.

JESUS JOY SIGNPOST #1

Jesus Joy comes from identifying and living as a bondservant of Jesus Christ.

Paul's letter is written to the saints in Philippi. In Greek the noun "saint" and the verb "sanctify" come from the Greek word for holy, *hagios*, meaning set apart unto God. All who are believers in Christ are saints because of their position in Christ; they have been set apart unto God, holy without blame before the Father in love because of what Christ has done for them (Eph 1:4). We are saints not through our own holiness but because we are in Christ, sanctified by His death and resurrection.

Philippi was founded in 357 BC by Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great. The town was located on an important trade route between Europe and Asia, the Via Egnatia,

and was established as a Roman colony approximately one hundred years before Paul's time (Walvoord, 17). Erdman describes a Roman colony as "an outpost, an extension, a small reproduction of the Imperial City...in reality, a miniature Rome." Colonists of these outposts enjoyed the benefits of Roman citizenship, including exemption from "taxation and tribute" (*Philippians*, 13).

Two firsts for the gospel of Christ occurred in Philippi. Lydia (Acts 16:14–15) was the first convert to Christ on the continent of Europe, and Philippi was the first Christian church established in Europe. This all happened because of the Apostle's sensitivity to the leading of the Lord. The Holy Spirit forbade Paul to preach the word in Asia (Acts 16:6) and he obeyed. When Paul and his companions later tried to go to Bithynia, we are told that the Holy Spirit did not permit it, and again they obeyed (Acts 16:7). It was a short time after this that Paul received the Macedonian call through a vision (Acts 16:9). The gospel spread across Europe and eventually made its way to America, making us benefactors of Paul's sensitivity and obedience to the Lord's leading. The effect of the gospel in Philippi could be likened to a rock thrown into a lake where the ripples spread to distant shores.

The saints receiving this letter had another home besides Philippi, they were *in Christ Jesus* (v 1). Helping believers understand their position in Christ Jesus was a major theme of all Paul's epistles. Erdman enumerates the recurrence of this phrase in Paul's writings: "In his letters as a whole he uses 'in Christ' thirty-seven times, 'in Christ Jesus' forty-one times, and 'in the Lord' forty-three times" (*Philippians*, 41–42). Learning to live from the heavenly seat we now have in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:6) is the key to victorious Christian living.

Erdman notes that Paul prefers to use the name “Christ Jesus” over “Jesus Christ” when speaking of the Lord, and he offers this reason: “It is the divine, the omnipotent, the reigning Christ who is ever in the mind of the apostle” (*Philippians*, 40–41).

The Philippian church was large enough and healthy enough to have established leaders at the writing of the letter, known as bishops and deacons. This is the first mention of recognized leaders in a local church. Paul spells out the qualifications for these leaders in his first letter to Timothy, as he clearly describes both bishops (1 Tim 3:1–7) and deacons (1 Tim 3:8–13). The Greek word for bishop is *episkope* and could be translated in English as overseer or elder (Titus 1:5). My understanding is that in a local church those known as elders would include pastors, teachers, and others overseeing the spiritual affairs and direction of the church. The Greek word for deacon can be translated as servant. The deacons in a local church had the responsibility of attending to the physical needs of the people, as seen in the ministry of Stephen and other capable men chosen to administer the daily distribution of food to the needy (Titus 6:1–4). John Walvoord, whose understanding parallels that of sixteenth-century French reformer John Calvin (1509–1564), supports these definitions. “As Calvin and most commentators since have understood it, the address to bishops and deacons is evidence that a bishop is equivalent to a pastor or teacher, and that a deacon usually is the one in charge of charity and temporal things in the church” (24).

Grace and *peace* (v 2) were the normal greetings of Paul’s day, but these classic biblical words take on a much deeper meaning for believers in Christ. The word “grace” is possibly

the most comprehensive word describing Christianity. Grace is not only God doing for us what we could not do for ourselves, it also encompasses His provision for all our needs through Jesus Christ. God's peace conveys the meaning of fully flourishing in every area of our lives. This grace and peace originate from our Heavenly Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, and they are revealed to us by the Holy Spirit, the great Comforter. Paul writes *grace and peace* to the church at Philippi, and I write grace and peace to you who are reading this commentary.

1:3 I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, 4 always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, 5 for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, 6 being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ; 7 just as it is right for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as both in my chains and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers with me of grace. 8 For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ.

Every time Paul thought of the saints of this church, he thanked God for them. On his *Thru the Bible* radio program, J. Vernon McGee would invite the audience to join him on the Bible Bus as he traveled verse by verse through the Scriptures. As he expounded on Philippians 1:3, McGee contended, "If Paul hadn't said anything else about his relationship to this

church, this would have been enough to reveal how special it was” (19). One of the greatest expressions of love you can display for other Christians is to pray for them. I have found the most meaningful way can I express my love for my wife, children, their spouses, and my grandchildren is bringing them before the throne of God every day and praying for them whenever they come to mind.

The second signpost that points to the source of Jesus Joy comes from Paul’s first mention of joy in the epistle. Paul states that his prayers for the saints at Philippi are accompanied by joy and then he identifies the source of his joy as *your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now* (v 5). Let us discuss how this is a source of joy.

JESUS JOY SIGNPOST #2

Jesus Joy comes from the gospel and from the fellowship of others who serve the gospel.

The message of the gospel is defined in its simplicity in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians: “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3–4). The blessings that come to those who receive and believe and understand this simple gospel message are as infinite as our God. The whole New Testament explains the blessings this gospel brings to us, and yet we are told it will take eternity for the Father to explain the blessings that abound toward us through His Son. The Scripture says that “in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of

His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:7).

The angel that announced the birth of our Lord Jesus proclaimed the power within the gospel to bring great joy, Jesus Joy. “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people” (Luke 2:10). The gospel, when believed, received, and understood, contains power to bring great joy to all people regardless of their circumstances. The term “good tidings” used at Christ’s birth and the word “gospel” are the same Greek word, *euaggelizo*. The gospel is called the “gospel of your salvation” in Ephesians 1:13. Hearing and believing the gospel is the only means by which a person can be saved, forgiven, born again, and find their new home in Christ. Listen to the sermon of Peter to the rulers, scribes, and elders of Israel: “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

The gospel is called the “gospel of Jesus Christ” (Mark 1:1) because it encompasses who Jesus is, what He has done, and what it means for us to be in Christ and for Christ to live in us. This brings to mind one of the names of our Lord Jesus seen in the book of Isaiah—Wonderful (Isa 9:6). Jesus is wonderful, and one who is wonderful induces absorbed, ecstatic attention; deserves enthusiastic recognition of superiority; and inspires awe and admiration. The gospel brings joy because it is about the Wonderful One. The gospel is called “the gospel of the kingdom” three times in Matthew (4:23, 9:35, 24:14) and throughout the synoptic gospels. The gospel teaches what it is like to live in the kingdom of God under the rule and lordship of King Jesus.

The message of the gospel of the kingdom is proclaimed by Jesus about Himself. “The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me,

because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD” (Luke 4:18–19). The gospel when “fully preached” (Rom 15:19) brings about these things. The gospel is called the “gospel of peace” (Eph 6:15) and brings peace *with* God and the peace *of* God into our lives. As I have been writing this commentary and emphasizing the theme of Jesus Joy, I have become aware that most of the sources of Jesus Joy in Philippians are evidenced in Paul’s own life. The abundance of Jesus Joy that springs from the gospel is an example.

In the opening sentence of Paul’s letter to the Roman church, he sums up his life as being “separated to the gospel of God” (Rom 1:1). Elsewhere Paul describes his view of the world and his ideal for the people in it. An insight I have gleaned from these verses is that the love of Christ gave Paul his singular purpose, a purpose that controlled his thoughts and actions and held his life together. Here is how Paul describes his life and his ultimate desire for others: “For the love of Christ compels us...if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again” (2 Cor 5:14–15). The remainder of this chapter explains this desire as the lens through which Paul views all people. You might say that Paul looks at life through “gospel lenses.”

When I was in the Army and stationed in Vietnam, I had a pair of red-tinted sunglasses. I viewed Vietnam much of the time through these glasses that sometimes softened what I saw as I studied people and situations. Paul viewed life through the lenses of the gospel, which could soften harsh circumstances

with the hope of life in Christ. The love of Christ controlled Paul's life, and his singular purpose was sharing with others that Christ died and rose again for them. The gospel gave Paul a deep-seated purpose and brought Jesus Joy to his life. Anyone who took part in this fellowship of living and sharing the gospel also brought him joy and thankfulness.

The Apostle says he has joy when he prays for the Philippian saints who have joined him in this ministry. Does the gospel bring you Jesus Joy as you live it and share it with others, and do you find joy in praying for others who have same purpose? Jesus says if your eye is "single" your whole body will be full of light (Matt 6:22, KJV). Living for Jesus, and seeking and taking opportunities to share Him and His gospel with others, should be the single controlling purpose in the life of a Christian. It should bring the light of joy and purpose to our lives.

I have quoted the next verse in Paul's letter many times to myself and to others: *being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ (v 6)*. N. T. Wright says of this verse, "The confidence Paul has throughout this letter is that God Himself is a 'finisher' as well as a 'beginner'" (83). McGee, the beloved Bible teacher who has said this is his life verse, writes, "This is a great verse of Scripture. Oh, I have held onto this during many a dark night when the storm outside was beating against my little bark. My, how wonderful to have a heavenly Father like this!" (24). Are you persuaded and confident about this comforting verse in your own life? This good work that God has begun and will finish in our lives is God's will, which is "good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2).

I realize looking back at my life (75 years of it now) that

the unseen hand of God's providence was always at work even before I fully surrendered to His will for my life. At first, His love and providence in my life were like the words of Francis Thompson's (1859–1907) famous poem "The Hound of Heaven" written in 1890, which can readily be found online. In retrospect it is clear, although I didn't know it at the time, that the Lord had been pursuing me "with unhurrying chase, and unperturbed pace, deliberate speed, majestic instancy."

One brief story I will never forget took place in Vietnam in a little chapel a few of my buddies and I wandered into one day. I went up to the front and began pretending in a mocking way that I was a preacher. Right in the middle of my "sermon," I was struck silent as I perceived a voice in my heart saying, "You will be doing this for real someday." My fellow soldiers asked what was wrong and why I had so abruptly stopped my mocking. I did not know what to say so I just said, "I'm going to stop doing this." It was more than two years later on August 12, 1972, that I surrendered my life to Jesus Christ and chose to follow His will for my life.

Every good and perfect gift comes from our Heavenly Father (James 1:17). I now realize everything that has been good in my life has been a gift from God. Because He dwells in eternity and sees my whole life all at once, He can fulfill Romans 8:28 and make "all things work together for good"—even my mistakes and experiences I would not consider good within themselves. There was a time before that day in 1972 that I resisted God's will for my life. But now, every day, I want Him to be the potter while I am the clay. I am secure in knowing His will is the very best plan for my life here on earth. I am confident that in His faithfulness, He will finish the good work He has begun in me. God's word assures me,

“Even to your old age, I am He, and even to gray hairs I will carry you! I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you” (Isa 46:4). I believe He has done and will do the same for you. There is, however, a part we must play in this good work. Paul instructs the Philippian believers to *work out your own salvation with fear and trembling* (2:12). We will discuss this concept further as we continue our journey through Paul’s letter.

JESUS JOY SIGNPOST #3

Jesus Joy comes through surrendering to God’s will
for our lives.

Paul ends this passage by saying God will continue and finish the good work He started *until the day of Christ Jesus* (v 6, NIV). This expression occurs in some form three times in Philippians (1:6, 10; 2:16). Walvoord says the day of Christ Jesus will be fulfilled when the Lord Jesus comes for His church as described in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. Walvoord contrasts the phrase “the day of Christ Jesus” with “the day of Lord,” another phrase used in Scripture that refers to a time of judgment (28). The day of the Lord will be fulfilled at the Lord Jesus’ second coming to earth (Rev 19:11–21).

Verses 7–9 show Paul’s great affection for the Philippian believers. He says they are in his thoughts, his heart, and his prayers, *both in my chains and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel* (v 7). He then says in the form of a solemn oath: *For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ* (v 8). Erdman says of this verse, “Paul thus speaks of his love as though it were identical with the love

of Christ. He loves his friends with the very heart of Christ.” He then contends, “The strongest bonds of friendship are those which are formed by fellowship in Christian service” (*Philippians*, 50).

Jesus declares one sure way that people will know we are His disciples is by our love. “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). It should come as no surprise to find that this kind of love is not always prevalent in the church; Paul himself tells us that *all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus (2:21)*. May this be the exception and not the rule in our lives and churches. Being a vessel through which the Lord Jesus can love the world and His church are hallmarks of a mature, growing disciple. Love is the gold standard of Christian character.

1:9 And this I pray, that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and all discernment, 10 that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, 11 being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Paul’s apostolic prayers in his letters to the churches are powerful petitions that we can pray for one another. Paul found Jesus Joy in praying for the church because he kept the people in his heart. The Old Testament high priest wore an ephod containing twelve jewels with the name of a tribe of Israel engraved on each of them (Exod 28:15–29). The jewels hung over his heart. Warren Wiersbe comments on the high priest and then parallels this with Paul: “He (the high

priest) carried the people over his heart in love, and so did Paul. Perhaps the deepest Christian fellowship and joy we can experience in this life is at the throne of grace, praying with and for one another” (34).

Paul prays for the members of the Philippian church that love would abound and overflow from their lives in every direction—toward the Lord, toward one another, and toward the world around them. He adds, however, that this love should be accompanied by knowledge and discernment. The word “knowledge” used here is the Greek word *epignosis* that could be defined as real, full, or experiential knowledge that goes beyond intellectual knowledge. Discernment is the ability to correctly perceive or comprehend a situation without judgment. Steven Lawson writes, “Rightly exercising Christian love requires God-given insight into people and situations. It necessitates the practical wisdom that only God can impart. Genuine love never operates in a fog. Authentic love requires penetrating discernment into the real needs of people as they find themselves in real-life situations” (37).

Jesus loved with both knowledge and discernment. Matthew 19:16–22 and Mark 10:17–22 both tell the story of the rich young ruler, but Mark adds something that is not included in Matthew’s account: “Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him...” The affluent young leader had kept all the commandments from his youth but Jesus, in His love for him and in His full knowledge and discernment, saw that the young man’s wealth was an idol in his life that needed to be pulled down. Jesus told the people who were judging Him as He taught in the temple, “Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment” (John 7:24). We cannot discern righteously without His help.

Paul adds that by loving with knowledge and discernment we will be able to *approve the things that are excellent* (v 10). You may have heard the phrase, “Good is the enemy of best.” Paul is praying here that the believers will not just do “good” things, but with Christ’s love and guidance in their lives they will do the best, most excellent things. In the Apostle John’s letters to the churches, he says that he rejoices greatly when he sees the church walking with this kind of love (2 John 1:4, 3 John 1:3, 4).

Next in Paul’s prayers, he asks for Christian character in believers’ lives, that they would be *sincere and without offense* (v 10). The word “sincere” comes from the Greek words for “sun” and “to judge.” Paul prays our lives can be judged in the sunlight. Scripture says that God is light and “if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:5, 7). Have you ever been in a room where the sunlight shines through a window with such intensity and at just the right angle that it illuminates all the dust particles in the air? If we walk in the Lord’s love and His word, the Holy Spirit will show us and convict us of sin in our lives that we cannot see without His light.

This kind of purity will cause us to live without offense toward God and others, and it will produce the *fruits of righteousness* (v 11) in our lives. Certainly, the fruit of the Spirit can be included here along with other fruit in our lives that indicates we are living rightly with God and others. Fruit can be tasted and the Father wants to taste the life of His Son in us and through us. Peter refers to this kind of purity and Christlike character when he instructs the church to conduct themselves in a way that is “honorable among the Gentiles,

that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation” (1 Pet 2:12). My eldest son who is a pastor was once observing and comparing himself to another outwardly talented minister. I told him character always trumps talent in the long run of Christian ministry. Someday, after the *day of Christ* (v 10), all believers will stand before the judgment seat of Christ—not to be judged for our sins but to be judged for what we have done with this life He has given us (2 Cor 5:10).

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. In your own words how would you define grace and peace?
2. When you pray do you begin by thanking the Lord for the people you are lifting up in prayer?
3. Why is the gospel a source of Jesus Joy in your life and in the lives in others who receive it?
4. Does Philippians 1:6 bring you comfort? If so, why, and can you give an example of God doing a good work in you?
5. What is the main insight you received from Paul’s apostolic prayer in Philippians 1:9–11?

CHAPTER TWO

LOSING YOUR LIFE AND FINDING IT IN CHRIST

Philippians 1:12–30

“**A** man’s heart plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps” (Prov 16:9). Paul wanted to go to Rome and preach the gospel there (Rom 1:15, Acts 19:21). Although he planned to go as a preacher, he went instead in chains. Clearly, God’s ways are not our ways. While imprisoned in Rome, Paul had the opportunity to apply to his own life an important truth that he penned to the Roman church: “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom 8:28). For Paul, who was accustomed to actively moving from town to town preaching the gospel, sitting in prison must have been difficult. Whether Paul was confined in the private house that Luke describes in Acts or in the stricter custody of prison awaiting trial (commentaries differ regarding his location), neither location was where he had planned to be in Rome. Paul practiced what he preached and gladly accepted that God was able to work his imprisonment together for his good.

*1:12 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.

Paul lists in this passage at least four ways that show how God used his imprisonment for good. As we have seen, Paul's primary call and joy in life was to spread the good news of the gospel. Paul states the gospel has been advanced by his being in prison. The gospel was furthered in a greater way than if Paul had been free and preaching from place to place. The second evidence that God worked this for good is shown in his reference to the *palace guard* (v 13). Paul was chained to a Roman soldier twenty-four hours a day with the shifts changing every four to six hours. These were not ordinary soldiers but members of the Praetorian Guard. Erdman provides an in-depth description of these soldiers.

Paul was to be tried before the tribunal of the emperor. It was natural, therefore, that he should be committed to the charge of the praetorian troops which formed the imperial guard. This guard numbered some ten thousand picked men. Originally, they were drawn from Italy but later from other parts of the empire, including Macedonia and Spain. They were granted special privilege, double wages, and, when retiring, liberal bounty (*Philippians*, 59).

Surely some of these elite soldiers came to Christ through Paul's witness and then took the good news of the gospel back home to their family and friends in different parts of the Roman Empire. In addition, Paul ends his letter to the Philippians by conveying special greetings from *Caesar's household* (4:22), evidence that men and women who served and worked near the throne in Caesar's palace also came to Jesus because of Paul's confinement.

The third evidence that Paul's time in prison worked for good is that Paul's confident, fearless, and joyful witness, even while in chains, was a shining example to other believers. The effect it had on them was to make them *much more bold to speak the word without fear* (v 14). Lawson cites similar examples such as Martin Luther in sixteenth-century Germany, John Knox in sixteenth-century Scotland, along with later examples such as George Whitefield in America and Susanna Wesley in England in the eighteenth century. He asserts that "one believer on fire for God can embolden thousands with new courage to bear witness for Christ" (50). May this be said of you as a believer, that your life and witness give others boldness.

The fourth evidence of God working for Paul's good through his plight in Rome is hidden in Paul's writing of this passage. Paul had time in prison to write, resulting in his gift to the world of the magnificent prison epistles—Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon—all of which he authored from his prison cell. No, Paul's chains were not part of his plan, but God worked it together for good for Paul, the gospel, and the whole world. Can you give examples from your own life where God worked for your good a circumstance or situation that was not your plan and that you did not see as

good when it happened?

When I knew it was time to transition out of the local church my wife and I had planted and pastored for forty years, I planned for it. The last seven years before stepping down as the pastor I went back to school and earned my master's degree and a doctor of ministry degree. My plan was to teach in a Bible college or seminary, but it has not worked out that way. What my education quest did, however, was give me a joy for writing and this commentary is my seventh book. I serve as a regional pastor for the Central District of the Foursquare Church. The generous support of my friends has allowed me to have my books printed, and I am able to give most of them away free to the churches in the district. God's plan for my life has turned out to be much better than mine. This leads me to the hidden signpost of Jesus Joy in Paul's letter.

JESUS JOY SIGNPOST #4

Jesus Joy comes from knowing all things work together for good because we love God and are called according to His purpose.

1:15 Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from goodwill: 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.

The gospel of Jesus Christ was being preached in Paul's day by many kinds of people. As discerning Christians, how concerned should we be about the motives of a person proclaiming the gospel? Paul gives insight into this question in this section of his letter. First, he is not naïve enough to assume everyone who preaches the gospel is living a holy life with right motives. We are to be discerning Christians like the Bereans who "received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). We are not to swallow hook, line, and sinker everything we hear from every preacher. Paul discerned some were preaching the gospel from *selfish ambition* (v 16) with envy, strife, and even competition with Paul himself. Paul describes these teachers as ones who "suppose that godliness is a means of gain" (1 Tim 6:5), adding that believers should distance themselves from them. Jude devotes nearly all of his letter to describing apostate preachers and teachers, and warns those called to serve Christ to keep them at arm's length. Paul also notes that others preach from a position of *goodwill* (v 15) out of love for him. The Apostle ponders the benefit of preaching by those who may be less than honorable when he poses the question, "*What then?*" He immediately answers by saying that *in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice* (v 18). I quote Erdman who sums up Paul's attitude eloquently.

There is something superb in this tolerant attitude of the apostle. It is a tolerance born not of indifference but of a burning zeal for Christ. Paul does not rejoice in wrong motives, in "faction" and "pretence," but in the fact that

in spite of the imperfections in the preachers the gospel is being preached. Paul was large enough to seize upon the salient point in the situation. He did not trouble himself too greatly about the aims and errors and faults of other men. Above all their contending voices he heard the name of Christ (*Philippians*, 61).

Yes, we are to possess God-given discernment, but we are not to see ourselves as God's police detectives analyzing and nitpicking His servants. The Lord Jesus seems to echo Paul's attitude. John told Jesus about someone casting out demons in His name who was not following Jesus with the other disciples. Jesus replied, "Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is on our side" (Mark 9:38–40). We need to be careful lest we unknowingly "stretch out (our) hand against the LORD's anointed" (1 Sam 26:9).

JESUS JOY SIGNPOST #5

Jesus Joy comes in rejoicing that the gospel is being proclaimed without judging the speaker's motives.

1:19 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. 21 For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

These verses, along with verses 22–26, give us a window into the great Apostle’s soul and the source of his all-encompassing purpose, boldness, and zeal. In this key verse that captures Paul’s identity he states, “*For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain*” (v 21). Paul lost his life on the road to Damascus in his encounter with the Lord Jesus, and then found it again in Christ. Matthew 10:39 happened to Saul of Tarsus that day: “He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.” In his letter to the Galatians, Paul expounds on what it means to find life in Christ. “I have been crucified with Christ; 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 gave Himself for me” (Gal 2:20). Let us look at the fruit this mindset brought to Paul’s life. I also want to point out here that this perspective was one of the primary reasons the Apostle had Jesus Joy in his life even in times of tribulation.

The fruit of Paul’s deep trust in God’s sovereignty could be tasted both by God and the people around Paul. His life now belonged to the Lord Jesus, and Jesus, the Lord of his life, was in charge. Lawson comments on this trust, “Paul lays his head on the pillow of the sovereignty of God—and he sleeps well on it” (57). Paul says of his imprisonment, “*I know that this will turn out for my deliverance*” (v 19), and goes on to say that either he will be freed and continue his ministry or his life will end here on earth and he will join Jesus for eternity. His part in trusting God’s sovereignty was asking for prayers

of deliverance and depending on the *supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ* (v 19). I confess there is a mystery here I do not fully understand, that believing prayer and God's sovereignty work hand in hand. John Wesley's (1703–1791) commonly heard quote on prayer captures this: "God does nothing on earth save in answer to believing prayer."

In the book of Revelation, before the seven seals are opened (Rev 5:8) and before the seven last trumpets are blown (Rev 8:3–4), the prayers of the saints come up before God as incense. The seals and trumpets usher in God's final plan for the earth, and the prayers of the saints play a role in it. I love the Greek meaning behind the word "supply," which is used in connection to the Holy Spirit. We get our English word "choreographer" from it. A choreographer designs and directs all the movements of a production. Paul trusted and followed the leading of the great Choreographer, the Holy Spirit, in his life. God is sovereign, but our part as the Lord's disciples is to partner with Him by praying and following the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Another fruit that this attitude produced in Paul's life was boldness. Phrases from *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (1997) used to describe the primary Greek word for boldness in the New Testament (*parrhesia*) include "speech that is unreserved or without concealment," "free and fearless confidence," and "cheerful courage." Immediately after Paul's conversion and being filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17), he became bold in his witness for Christ. Paul also states his deep desire that Christ would be *magnified* (v 20) in his suffering. Using descriptions found in Thayer's lexicon for this word, Paul's desire was for Christ to be made great

through his life and for Christ to receive glory and praise as a result of his testimony in all circumstances. Paul's goal was to please Christ as a Christian soldier. He reminds Timothy of this when he tells him we are Christian soldiers and our goal is to please Him who has enlisted us, our captain, the Lord Jesus (2 Tim 2:3–4).

A final fruit I want to mention is that Paul's mindset eradicated the fear of death. Hebrews 2:15 says the fear of death can keep people in bondage all their lives. This fearless attitude gave Paul great courage to face and overcome all the fears that assailed his inward and outward man on a daily basis. Paul describes his life like this in 2 Corinthians 7:5: "We were troubled on every side. Outside were conflicts, inside were fears."

Let me make application of verses 1:19–21 to my life and yours. I want a deeper trust in God's sovereignty in my life. I want greater boldness in my life, both in my witness and in my preaching and teaching. I want to please Jesus Christ in everything I am and do, magnifying Him in my life. I want to be free from fear of every kind, including fear of the future, fear of sickness, and fear of death. We read in 1 John 4:18, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love." We might be in heaven before *all* fear is gone, but the Apostle Paul had been perfected in the love of Christ to the point where most fear had been cast out by the assurance of Jesus' great love. Dear reader, I hope today you also desire these things, as do I. If so, we both must seek a deeper level of surrender and abandonment to the Lord Jesus so we can say with bold sincerity, "*FOR TO ME, TO LIVE*

IS CHRIST, AND TO DIE IS GAIN!" (v 21). Erdman says of Paul's declaration in this verse, "The aim, the purpose, the inspiration, the sum of his life, was Christ" (*Philippians*, 64). The degree to which the truth of this verse is evidenced in our lives will match the degree to which Jesus Joy abides in us.

JESUS JOY SIGNPOST #6

Jesus Joy begins with, and increases with, surrender—losing and finding one's life in Christ.

1:22 But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. 23 For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. 24 Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you. 25 And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith, 26 that your rejoicing for me may be more abundant in Jesus Christ by my coming to you again.

Paul says he has a desire to *depart* (v 23) and be with Christ. He does not fear death. The Greek word here for depart is *analuō* and it paints the picture of a ship being loosed from its moorings, or tent stakes being pulled to leave camp. Both are metaphors used in the Scriptures of death for a Christian. A poem I have often read at funerals is "Gone from My Sight," written by the Rev. Luther F. Beecher (1813–1903). The poem describes death as a ship leaving one shore with people saying

of her, “There, she is gone,” and arriving on another shore with people gladly shouting, “Here she comes!” In 2 Timothy 4:6, Paul indicates his ship is about ready to depart for the heavenly shore when he says, “the time of my departure is at hand.” Peter alludes to his death using the second metaphor when he says, “shortly I must put off my tent” (2 Pet 1:13). The “sting” of death (1 Cor 15:55) is eliminated for the Christian by our sure and certain hope of eternal life in Christ (Titus 1:2).

Erdman comments on Paul’s phrase, *to die is gain* (v 21): “Paul does not mean that ‘to die is gain’ because it will bring an end to pain and sorrow and toil, but because it will bring more of Christ; it will make possible the full enjoyment of those ‘unsearchable riches of Christ’ which are now known only in part” (*Philippians*, 65). Paul chose these words not because life was intolerable but because being present with Christ was so much more desirable. I ask myself, “Can I talk this way and really mean it?”

Paul concludes this section by stating he is confident he will continue with his ministry for the time being because it is best for the *progress and joy of faith* (v 25) of the church. Paul speaks twice of joy and rejoicing in the final verses of this passage, but his focus is not on joy for himself but on joy for others. Paul defines the purpose of a minister of Jesus Christ as coming alongside other believers to help develop joy and faith in them: “Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy; for by faith you stand” (2 Cor 1:24). It is a rare thing, though it should not be, that joy in others makes us joyful and we rejoice with those who rejoice. When our joy can be expanded to include the joy of

others, it has the capacity to be much fuller.

JESUS J.O.Y. SIGNPOST #7

Prioritizing **J**esus, **O**thers, and **Y**ou (in this order) gives you a greater capacity for Jesus Joy.

1:27 Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, 28 and not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God. 29 For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, 30 having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear is in me.

Here are four general instructions for Christian living while on this earth, individually and corporately with other believers:

1) Live worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ moment by moment, even if no one is watching. Live each day as a citizen of heaven because, in fact, *your citizenship is in heaven (3:20)* under the rule of your King, the Lord Jesus Christ. Erdman captures this in his description of a Christian's life: "While engaged in the humblest tasks on earth, he is living as a citizen of heaven" (*Philippians*, 72). Paul defines this rule of life in *Colossians 3:17* when he says, "Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to

God the Father through Him.”

2) Stay in unity and work as a team with other believers to defend and promote the gospel of Jesus Christ. The world should see all churches working in unity with one goal—pointing people to Jesus and winning them for His kingdom. Strive to be a good team member and use the gifts God has given you to further the gospel. Do all you can to stay in unity with your fellow workers. Learn to appreciate the gifts of your brothers and sisters and work together with them to promote the faith of the gospel.

3) Do not give in to fear. Keep the soil of your heart fertile so you can remain steadfast. Do not be like those whose hearts consisted of “stony” ground where the seed of the gospel could not flourish. This describes a person who does well for a time but “when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles” (Matt 13:20–21). Heed the warning of Hebrews 10:37–38 and continue walking in faith, not drawing back in fear, as the Lord has no pleasure in this. Wright says this of Christians: “They mustn’t be intimidated into retreating into a private ghetto where they can ignore the rest of the world and nurture their own faith away from it” (95).

4) Develop a willingness to suffer for Christ and for the sake of the gospel, viewing suffering as a gift. When the Lord instructed Ananias to pray for Paul upon his conversion to Christ, He also told Ananias, “I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake” (Acts 9:16). Paul’s hardships did not come as a surprise to him, and he encourages the Philippians to look at his life as an example of how a follower of Christ is to suffer.

Christians in America do not understand persecution as well as much of the world, but Scripture reminds us over and

over again that suffering is part of the Christian life. Jesus himself tells us, “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Whatever suffering we are called to endure, by abiding in Christ we can be more than conquerors through Him who loves us (Rom 8:37). The Apostle Peter was no stranger to persecution and much of the fourth chapter of his first epistle focuses on suffering. Paul himself says clearly, “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Tim 3:12).

Ministries like The Voice of the Martyrs and Open Doors keep before us the suffering church around the world. May we daily hold them up in prayer. Recently I was in Tunisia, North Africa, and viewed the ruins of ancient Carthage. We walked through an arena where Christians were torn apart by wild beasts for sport before an audience in AD 203. There is coming a day when the Lord will wipe away from His people’s eyes every tear that has been caused by suffering of any kind (Rev 7:17, 21:4). As Christians, our trials are not just suffering but *redemptive* suffering because our Lord works even our suffering “together for good” (Rom 8:28). We can learn lessons about ourselves and about the faithfulness of God that only tribulations can teach us. Suffering on its own can cause us to mistrust the faithfulness of God, but redemptive suffering (abiding and trusting the Lord in it) can strengthen our trust in the Lord’s faithfulness. We can come to know Him in a deeper way through suffering.

We will see later in this epistle that there is a fellowship Jesus shares with us in suffering (3:10). A key truth that makes a Christian’s suffering redemptive is knowing Jesus is with us and that he feels and understands our pain. Hebrews 5 teaches

that Jesus is our high priest, but it also tells us He identifies with us when we suffer: “Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him” (Heb 5:8–9). Jesus was perfect but one of the things that perfected Him as our high priest, as the one that we can come to continually, is that He suffered while on earth the same things we suffer today. Jack Hayford, one of my great heroes in the Foursquare Church family, comments on these verses:

We all need someone who understands our feelings, our vulnerability both to emotional and physical pain. We need someone who identifies with the utter weakness of our flesh, especially before the ferocious onslaught of fear, doubt, anger, and lust—temptations which tear at the heart and rip out our hope. Into this need for understanding, Jesus comes, above all else, wanting us to know that He does understand. His suffering has made Him the ultimate source to whom we can turn for understanding (*Divine Visitor*, 68–69).

In his classic devotional *My Utmost for His Highest*, Oswald Chambers refers to this aspect of our fellowship with Jesus when he says, “Unless we can look the darkest, blackest fact full in the face without damaging God’s character, we do not yet know Him” (July 29). When we find ourselves in the midst of suffering, we sometimes hear things from the Lord we could not hear at any other time. Our theology must

make room for suffering, or it will not be complete. A new level of strength and revelation of God's faithfulness comes as believers find God's grace in suffering that can even bring a deep sense of joy, or "longsuffering with joy" (Col 1:11). After being arrested and beaten for preaching the gospel, Peter and his companions "departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41). I believe Paul uses the phrase *fellowship of His suffering* (3:10) to capture the source of this joy, as seen in our next signpost.

JESUS JOY SIGNPOST #8

Jesus Joy comes in tribulation if we abide in Him, sharing in the fellowship of His suffering.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. Can you give an example of Proverbs 16:9 where you made a plan for your life but God directed your path a different way?
2. Can you give an example of Romans 8:28 where God worked something together for your good that did not seem good at the time?
3. "To live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21). Why does this attitude take away fear and add joy to one's life?
4. How would you teach someone to overcome the fear of death?
5. Can you articulate your doctrine of suffering?