

“An Unstoppable God”

Philippians

Downtown

May 9, 2021

Before we get into it...Happy Mother's Day to all you mamas out there. We hope you have a really blessed day today, and I just wanted to say up here that we're grateful for you. Mothering is often a thankless job, one that one day of recognition a year probably doesn't even begin to cover how much gratitude you deserve, but nonetheless, we love you and are grateful for you. Also, I know for some of you - for different reasons - today is a hard day. And I want you to know that we love you, too. And I hope our community can be a loving support for you on days like today.

Welcome! My name is Jake.

If you're new to the Bible or Christianity, we're glad you're here. We love Jesus and His Word and every Sunday want to teach from the Bible to hear what Jesus and His Spirit might want to say to us. Sometimes that means exegetical studies on particular topics in the Bible. Other times it means going through whole books of the Bible together as a church family. And we want to have a healthy diet of both so we can learn more about Jesus and be more like Him.

Also because we love Jesus and His Word, out of a love for you to know Him we're providing for you every week Scripture guides on our website and on your seats that unpack the text each week.

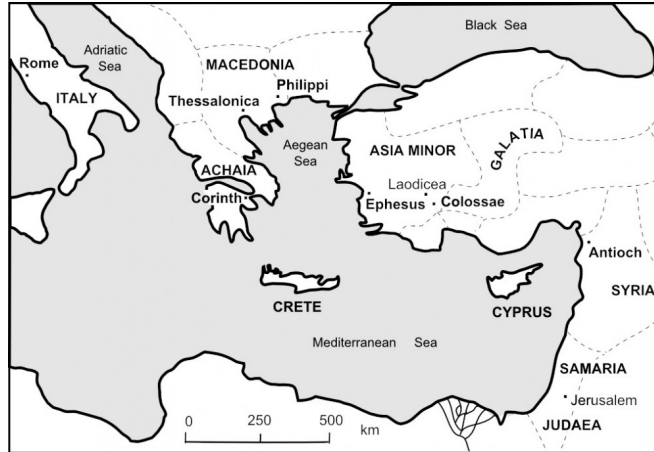
Our game plan is to take this summer to study this portion of Scripture together alongside the other 2 churches in our Family of Churches. Which, as a side note - and something I'm excited about - means you're going to get to hear from our pastors downtown during this series but also some of the other guys from the FoC will be with us from time to time.

This morning we start a new series: the letter to the Philippians. So if you have a Bible go on over to **Philippians 1** This book is over in the New Testament, towards the back of your Bibles.

And my goal for us today is to simply set up some context and the story behind this church that will set up the rest of our series.

And this letter is written around 62 AD by a man named Paul to a young church in the city of Phillippi - a Roman colony in ancient Macedonia. This was one of the very first churches that Paul plants.

And because this is the first sermon in a series, I feel obligated to have a map so here you go:



So there's Philippi near the top - it's by the water so there's a lot of trade and with that comes a ton of wealth, a booming economy, lots of people from all over ancient Greco-Roman world travel there. And it was places like these, large urban centers, that became strategic when the early church first started out. In these urban cores there's a ton of influence and reach made available that for people like Paul, these were some of the first places you would go plant a church and stick your flag in the ground for Jesus.

Now what's wild about this is, if you're still looking at the map, the early church in Acts 2 started in Jerusalem around 31 AD. Waaaay down here on the map. Jesus' life and ministry circled around this area, the end of his ministry, his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension all happened in and around Jerusalem. Jesus says to them go out across the planet, make disciples.

So the disciples get empowered by the Spirit in **Acts 2**, thousands of people come to faith in Jesus. But they're all staying in this one spot, just clumped up in Jerusalem. And then what happens - persecution. So in **Acts 8** the thousands of new Jesus followers get scattered all across the Mediterranean, and God actually uses that as a means for His people to get out there and make disciples and plant churches in and around the Empire.

And then you get to **Acts 16** in about 51 AD, you see Paul and Timothy traveling to plant churches and tell people about Jesus and they arrive at the city of Philippi. And they meet a woman named Lydia who's a wealthy merchant in the city - and she's a devout follower of Judaism and Paul and Timothy tell her about Jesus and she becomes the first member/donor/leader of their church plant in the city. You read on in the chapter and they meet a slave-girl who is said to be possessed and predict the future - no joke you can't make this stuff up - she comes to faith in Jesus, so you've got the second member of the core team.

So you've got within a matter of a few days - your three core team members - a wealthy business woman, a formerly possessed slave woman, and a Roman prison guard. Can you imagine what their LifeGroup would have looked like? And you think your LifeGroup is weird. They've got nothing in common except for Jesus - and their little house church starts to grow and grow. And Paul eventually leave there to go to another city to do the same thing.

Now fast forward 10 years later. It's 61 or 62 AD and Paul is in prison, but this time it's in Rome waaaay over here on the map. Which for the record - I know that looks tiny on a map. But the distance from Jerusalem where all this began to Rome is around **1,400 miles - that's about the distance from Maine to Florida**. Now Rome is the capital of the entire Empire, and Paul is in trouble once again for telling people about Jesus and planting churches. This sort of becomes a common theme in Paul's life. Tell people about Jesus, go to jail for it, get out of jail, tell people about Jesus, repeat.

Now in this current imprisonment, think of it as being under house arrest, he's not in a dungeon or getting tortured and he can have visitors come and go and he can communicate via letters. But in this current situation he doesn't have any of his basic needs being met. The only way he can eat each day is if someone from the outside comes to him and gives him what he needs to live.

And the Philippian church waaaaay over here finds out about this. And they're thinking "Oh no, this is our guy. This is our pastor. This is the person who gave his life to start our church, through which god has changed our lives. He has sacrificed so much for us to bless us and lead us and shepherd us and teach us...we absolutely need to help and honor him and sacrifice for him" And then it becomes, "We gotta make sure his needs are being met in there."

So they decide to all sacrificially give money out of their bank accounts, and they all chip in to collect a bunch of money and they send one of their own guys named Epaphroditus to go all the way over to Rome to make sure Paul gets this money so he can have his basic needs met.

Now with all of this background in mind, we get to the letter of Philippians. In a lot of ways this letter acts as a big "thank you" for their financial generosity. And another big reason why he writes this letter is he wants to ease whatever anxiety and worry these people have about him and to say everything's ok and don't get side-tracked, don't stop being a church family on mission - keep getting after it.

And for four chapters - Paul is communicating this to his old friends in the faith. And as he writes this, this letter stands out in a couple of unique ways.

1 - No correction

Generally, most all of Paul's letters are correcting something gone wrong in the church either theologically or practically. For those of you all that were here when we did 1 Corinthians a couple of years back - remember all the correction Paul had to do? There was racial and economic divisions going on in the church? There was a guy sleeping around with his mother-in-law? And Paul's like "Hey you all cut it out, that's not how the people of God ought to act."

Or for those of you college students who came around to First Five, we did Galatians in the Fall. That whole letter is one fat theological correction. "You all are believing you can be saved by good works? Come on, followers of Jesus live by grace not by works."

And yet the book of Philippians stands out among all the letters because the tone is so warm and inviting. Every verse is just bursting with love and care for these people and us reading this some 2,000 years later get to witness the sort of love and affection Paul has for these people who he's walked alongside in the faith since the very beginning.

2 - Joy!!

And the second thing that's unique to this letter is that this is one of the most joy-soaked books of not just the New Testament but the entire canon of the Bible. That word joy - chara in the Greek and rejoicing which is a derivative of the same Greek word - charais - is repeated some 16 times over the course of four really quick chapters. Some commentators go so far as to say everything in this book is all about joy.

In fact, some of our favorite coffee mug verses are found right in this book. These are the sort-of verses people either put on their throw pillows or get tattoos of - or all of the above.

In Philippians 1:21 Paul throws this hammer of a verse down and says,

Philippians 1:21

“For me to live is Christ, to die is gain.”

That’s a great one. Put that on a coffee mug and drink it.

Or how about this one, the was a kids song for me growing up:

Philippians 4:4

“Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.”

Or there’s this one coming out of Philippians 4:13:

Philippians 4:13

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Like, if you’re ever going to play professional sports, you gotta get this one right there on your bicep. If you don’t...are you even a Christian? It’s a joke yall. It’s. A. Joooko.

All of these and so much more are pouring out of Paul as he’s writing his letter to the Philippian church reminding them not to worry about him but to keep fighting for the faith together. Keep making Jesus known to your neighbors, no matter what’s going on with me, and no matter what’s going on with you - keep getting after it because there is so much joy in store just waiting for you to experience.

So just think about that for a second. Paul is in the prime of his career so to speak. He’s traveling all over, planting churches, raising up leaders, and now all of a sudden: prison. Locked up. His career is shot. He’s isolated from his friends and waiting every single day that someone might stop in and provide him with what he needs.

He’s starting down potential death either due to lack of provision or judgment from Caesar.

And yet. Paul is filled with so much joy.

Which for the record. I don’t know about you, but for me personally, I’m incredibly good at the opposite. I am incredibly good at being full of discouragement, criticism and complaint when life stinks. I’m incredibly at noticing what is wrong, what isn’t working, and what needs to change. It takes far, far less to get me worked up and angry or complaining. Like for example, just let my schedule get interrupted unexpectedly, much less be sent to prison, boy do I gripe and complain.

And quite simply it begs the question...HOW? How is that even remotely possible? How can he have this posture and attitude?

How on earth is Paul able to be so joyous? Ay yo Paul, do you know where you are tho? You’re in prison!” How is it Paul can be filled with so much rejoicing?

So that’s a theme of this letter and question we will seek to answer in this series. And we get part of that answer in the first few verses, so let’s read them together. **Philippians 1:1-11:**

Philippians 1:1-11

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

I love that. He calls himself a servant - other translations say “a slave” of Christ Jesus. It’s almost like he’s winking at the Philippian church saying “Jesus is ultimately who owns my life and is in charge of my life, not Rome. Not Caesar.”

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: **2** Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. **3** I thank my God in all my remembrance of you,

See, there’s that word “thank” - he’s joyful when he think about these people. He goes on:

Always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy,

There it is again: joy. He’s got nothing but love for these people. Why? Keep reading:

Because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

That word partnership is the word - κοινωνία - same word often used to talk about biblical tight-knit community who is committed to and cares after one another. It’s the same word used to describe the closeness the early church had in Acts 2. And he’s saying he’s so joyful when he think about them, not just for the money but that they’ve been on Team Jesus with Paul ever since the first day he and Timothy landed in Philippi 10 years ago.

And then he moves on to say this, if you have a paper Bible this is one you’ll want to underline”

And I am sure of this,

In other words, he’s so confident in what he’s about to say. You can take it to the bank. This is a promise that he is saying over these friends of his:

That he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Now I want us to rewind a moment and zone in on verse 6:

He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion

Completion is the Greek word ἐπιτελέω. Some translations read it as “perfection,” the root word there is “telos.” In English think of it as “end goal” or “finish line.” In other words Paul is saying that because of their love for one another and God’s mission, Paul knows in the core of his being that God is working in them and through them and will finish what He set out to do in them. . . .**no matter what**. To bring them into full maturity. That’s God’s end game for you. To transform you into a person who hates sin more and more, and who loves Jesus more and more. To be a person who is committed to their church family, to be a person who is committed to Jesus and His people and His mission for the long haul no matter the consequence or the circumstances. To be a person that at the very end of time will look just. Like. Jesus.

That's what Paul wants for them. That's what God has promised over them. That's what we want for us as a church - that God might finish the work He set out to do in us.

I love how he talks about this. Have you ever started up a task or a project that you never got around to finishing? Picking on myself for a bit, I've got several dozen notes on my computer with project ideas and things I want to write about that just sit there, neglected. I'm a dad with three kids and there are house projects and areas of the yard I want to clean, and everytime I see them I think "Oh shoot. I really need to do that...one day." And I procrastinate and it never gets done. And the reason is, I don't think the work to be worth my time and effort or else I would complete it.

But that's not how God is like. He has not forgotten about you. He didn't start a project and then find something else to better spend His time. He is invested in making sure you look like the image of His Son Jesus that He went to the greatest lengths imaginable to make sure it would happen. He is faithful and present in every single moment of your life. And He is actively using all of your circumstances to work on you, to bring you to completion so that one day you will look just like Jesus, free from sin and full of life forever and ever.

If you do just a quick skim of the Bible - page by page of Scripture is shouting this starting at page 1 of the Bible.

In Genesis, we see He makes the world and everything in it out of an overflow of love and joy and creates humans to specifically enjoy Him and all that He made. And our earliest grandparents mess things up - they sin and mar God's perfect creation - bringing destruction, and heartache, and every bad thing into the world.

- But does that cause God to stop? No. He immediately gets to work. Covering their shame and promising a victory over the work of the serpent and moving on a plan to make right everything that sin had made wrong.

When his people were enslaved in foreign land. Suffering oppression and hopelessness at the hands of an evil and powerful ruler - Pharaoh.

- Does that cause God to quit? Not even close. He rescues them. Flexing on Pharaoh - as if to say, "let me show you who the real King of the world is - and He walked his people through the sea, leading them by fire at night, feeding them with bread from heaven and eventually bringing them into a land to call their own.

And when His people - throughout their history - from wandering in the desert, to the judges and the kings - forgot him. When they turned their backs on Him to go their own way. When they complained, and sinned, and followed other gods.

- Did God quit on them then? No. He didn't throw in the towel. He didn't give up on his promise to reverse the curse of sin.
- Rather, in love, He rebuked them through Prophets to call them back to himself, and spoke his promises afresh to finish what he started in the very beginning.

When Jesus, God-enfleshed, the one promised to redeem the world, was hanging on a cross - where He could have easily said, "this is not worth it" and commanded the nails to leave his hands and feet, gotten down and walked away.

- Did he quit then? No, he stayed for every excruciating moment until his lips cried out, "it is finished." And He walks out of the tomb as a victorious declaration that the Kingdom of God is breaking in, and that the day - the day Paul calls here "the day of our Lord Jesus Christ - the day when every enemy, every sin, every bad thing, every result of the serpent's work will be fully and finally eradicated - that day is coming.

Because our sin cannot hold God down. Our situations cannot hold God down. If the grave and death itself could not hold God down, then not even Paul's chains can hold down the God of the Universe. There is nothing and no one that can stop God.

And Paul is so convinced of this down to his bones that he is able - even in a prison cell of all places to compel the Philippians to say, "This is all part of it! You think these chains are any match for God?! God's not forgotten about me - God's actually using me right now. Nothing will stop Him from doing what He's set out to do. He will save His people. He will save you. So in the midst of your concern, church, lean on that promise knowing that God is unstoppable."

And this sort of confident unstoppable joy, as we're going to see in this letter becomes infectious. More and more people are actually motivated by Paul's vision of life that they go out singing with joy to make Jesus known in their lives, in their homes, and in their cities.

And my question for us this morning is - **what if God has that some sort of joy in store for us too?** What would happen if you were so beyond convinced like Paul is here? That beyond a shadow of doubt you knew that whatever life threw out you - whether you're suffering right now, or whether you're unemployed, or whether your marriage is not where you want it to be, or your relationship with your kids is not where you want it to be, or life is just right now not what you signed up for - if we modeled this sort of joy-filled perspective that Paul has in his prison cell?

What might change in your heart if your perspective changed to be like this? What might happen in your LifeGroups and in Columbia if we were so enamored by this sort of vision? To know that God is on the move in your life, even right now? And to know that God is even using your current circumstances as an opportunity for you to sing even louder your praise to King Jesus who loved you and went to the greatest lengths imaginable for you?

So as we begin this journey of joy through Philippians, let me just encourage you with this: **God is not done with you today.**

And there is nothing on earth that can separate you from the promises of God whether that be unemployment, or singleness, or a separation, or a divorce, or a missed opportunity, or whatever. God is for you and is working everything in your life to give you more of himself and shape you into the person - in the image of Jesus - you were meant to be.

So hear me, God is not done in your marriage. You might feel like you are, but God is not. God is not done with your kids. God is not done with your struggle or your pain. And most of all, God is not done with you.

That's what we're going for in this series. We want to have this vision for our lives and one another that is brimming over the edge with hope and joy with what God is doing in our midst. After the last year we had when the world is slowly waking up and slowly climbing back to normal - when because of the last year we had we're seeing a spike in mental health issues and screen addiction and loneliness - what if we used

this moment as an opportunity to be this unique, compelling, beautiful counter-narrative to the world around us? Where we know God is at work at every single moment and choose joy. To choose the good. To choose the true and the beautiful.

And I know for many of us, to be those kinds of people it's not as simple as flipping a switch. To be these kinds of people is something to cultivate. And it's probably not going to come naturally or easy to us. So something we want to invite y'all into during this next three months is our corporate practice that we're all going to be doing together.

If you're new with us - this is something we started doing a little over a year ago for our longer sermon series: highlighting a particular practices for our Family of Churches to walk through together in LifeGroups.

And our corporate practice for this series is practicing biblical gratitude together.

Maybe you've never thought of gratitude as a practice, but here's what it is **-Biblical gratitude is recognizing and expressing thanks for what Jesus is actively doing in us and through us** . So that we can be people like Paul who, even in the midst of less than ideal circumstances can choose joy and give thanks to God knowing that He's using whatever's coming at us to make Him known in and through us.

So in LifeGroups this week we've got a video for you to watch to dive more into this so that we can access this same sort of joy Paul has in this letter.

When you get together with your LifeGroup each week we're going to talk about how we've been doing with this practice and how you've seen Jesus begin to change you through this process by His Spirit. And the beautiful thing is, Scripture says when we share our joy our joy increases.

That's our hope for us this summer. **That we would be a people of joy**. Who knows God is at work in us and through us and will not be stopped no matter what. And it begins in many ways by cultivating a posture of gratitude. And it's our hope that if we leverage this and turn gratitude into a habit, that the fruit of it would look a lot like what we'll see in the Philippian church. That our family would be loved, that God's name would spread throughout our city, and that we would see His kingdom expand throughout Columbia and beyond.

Pray.

Becoming a person of joy who knows this God doesn't necessarily come easy or naturally. So something I want to invite us into for the next few months is our corporate practice for this sermon series.

Something we started doing a little over a year ago for our longer sermon series, we want to highlight a particular practice for our Family of Churches to walk through together in their LifeGroups.

And our corporate practice for the next three months is practicing gratitude.

Maybe you've never thought of gratitude as a practice, but here's what it is -**Biblical gratitude is recognizing and expressing thanks for what Jesus is actively doing in us and through us**. So that we can be people like Paul who, even in the midst of less than ideal circumstances can choose joy and give thanks to God knowing that He's using whatever's coming at us to make Him known in and through us.

1 - Practicing gratitude together

We'll be walking through specific ways to choose joy. To see God at work in our lives. To choose to see Him on the move in our lives and the lives around us. And it's our hope that by doing this, consistently, it might have the net effect to take root in our lives so that we may lift our eyes to Jesus and choose to fix our eyes on the joy found in Him.

1 - list out each day what to be grateful to God for

2 - write out gratitude verses and place them throughout your home as a visual cue to lift our eyes up and thank Jesus.

3 - share with others

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