

# PRACTICING JOY IN HARD TIMES

**PASTOR CHARLIE BERTHOUD**

**PHILIPPIANS 1:27-30**

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“Practicing Joy in Hard Times” | Philippians 1:27-30 | Pastor Charlie Berthoud

For the next five Sundays, we will be reading someone else’s mail. Two thousand years ago, the apostle Paul wrote a letter to the church at Philippi. Our focus in this Easter season, through May 17, is the little letter which emphasizes living with joy even in hard circumstances.

Had Paul known that people would be reading and pondering his words 2000 years later, he might have written differently. The letter as a whole touches on several different topics and it can be challenging to get the flow.

The letter is part of a long relationship, and there is plenty of particularity in it, and at the same time, there is plenty in it to help us figure out what it means to be followers of Jesus today, what it means to be Easter people. We’re using several verses from Philippians in our Prayer of Confession during this season.

It’s important to remember that Paul wrote this letter from prison, with the very real threat of execution hanging over his head. Nonetheless, he writes a letter full of joy, with the words joy or rejoice appearing about 16 times, depending on your translation.

I have several short sections of Philippians to share today. Right from the beginning, rather than complaining about his own challenging circumstances in prison, he begins with a joy-filled prayer for the church at Philippi, with gratitude for them, grateful for the ways they are working together to serve God. He writes:

I thank my God for every remembrance of you, always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

And he continues, praying for the community. As you may know “Learning God’s Love and Living God’s Love” is our calling, our focus here at Covenant. In Paul’s words, it sure sounds a lot like learning and living God’s love.

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with **knowledge and full insight** to help you to determine what really matters, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having **produced the harvest of righteousness** that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

In reading Philippians, it’s important to know, that Philippi was located on a major trade route, and it was a military outpost of the Roman Empire—to us it’s modern day Greece.

Paul knew that claiming Jesus as Lord was a threat to the Roman Empire, and Paul being in prison is one

example of the power of the empire. He regularly reminded the followers of Jesus that they were called to a new way of life, primarily as citizens of God’s kingdom, to seek first that Kingdom, not the kingdom of Herod.

So later in chapter one, Paul urges followers of Jesus “live a life in a manner worthy of the gospel” although the word “life” here could also be understood citizenship.

It’s like Paul is saying: “Live your **citizenship** worthy of the gospel.” Remember you are not primarily citizens of any earthly kingdom, but of God’s kingdom.



Paul concludes chapter one mentioning unspecified opposition and generalized suffering—both of which may have to do with the empire question. In 1:27-30 we read:

Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel and in no way frightened by those opposing you.

For them, this is evidence of their destruction but of your salvation. And this is God’s doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ but of suffering for him as well, since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Philippians has four chapters. In chapter one we learn that Paul has a deep connection with the church in Philippi, that he is in prison, that he and the church face opposition, and are suffering in some way.

From the context Paul encourages them to live with JOY.

In the beginning of chapter 3 he writes:

Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord....Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers....

Then to start chapter 4 he encourages them to be courageous:

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

And in one of the best known parts of Philippians Paul writes:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Do not be anxious about anything.... And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

I need to clarify a few things about joy. In the way Paul is using the term joy, it’s not the same thing as happiness.

Happiness is predicated on circumstances. We're happy because we got a good parking spot, or our team won the game, or we got an extra cookie.

Joy is intentionally looking at the big picture and while recognizing that things might be hard right now, somehow, someday they will be OK.

Being joyful isn't just putting on a happy face. I don't want to be that annoying perky person who says "let's turn that frown upside down!"

If you have a friend going thru a hard time, please do not tell them "Pastor Charlie says you should be joyful." Life can be very hard. And there are times when the last thing we need is someone telling us to "be joyful." Sometimes we need to just stop, close the door, curl up, and cry. Or complain. Or scream.

Remember Paul also says "Weep with those who weep." Tears and sadness are appropriate in many circumstances.

But it's not healthy to stay there forever. At some point we have to get up and do our best to keep going, and that's when we can consider practicing joy.

Remember, when Jesus was born, the angels sang a song of "good news of great joy for all the people."

Joy is a good focus for Easter, when we acknowledge the reality of crucifixion but know that resurrection is coming.

I found this definition of joy helpful:

Christian joy is a deep, lasting inner satisfaction produced by the Holy Spirit, rooted in faith in God rather than external circumstances. It is a profound, spiritual delight in God's goodness, often experienced as a "good feeling in the soul" that persists even during trials, sadness, or suffering.

That quote is actually from the Google Artificial Intelligence system.

Karl Barth wrote that **"joy in Philippians is a defiant 'Nevertheless!'"**

Joy means remembering that even on a cloudy day, the sun is still shining.

I can't say for sure, but it seems to me that Paul had Psalm 118:24 in mind when he wrote Philippians.

This is the day that the Lord has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

I learned a lot about joy forty years ago, when I graduated from college and then spent a year in Nicaragua, with a church-based human rights group.

Already a very poor country, Nicaragua was engulfed in a Cold War era war, after breaking free from the Somoza authoritarian rule. I was part of a group of about 30 US citizens, and together, at the invitation of Nicaraguan churches, we were documenting human rights abuses and working for a more just US policy toward Nicaragua.

Before the war, things were pretty grim, and they got much worse with the war. Food was scarce. We joked about having rice and beans for breakfast, beans and rice for lunch, and leftovers for dinner.

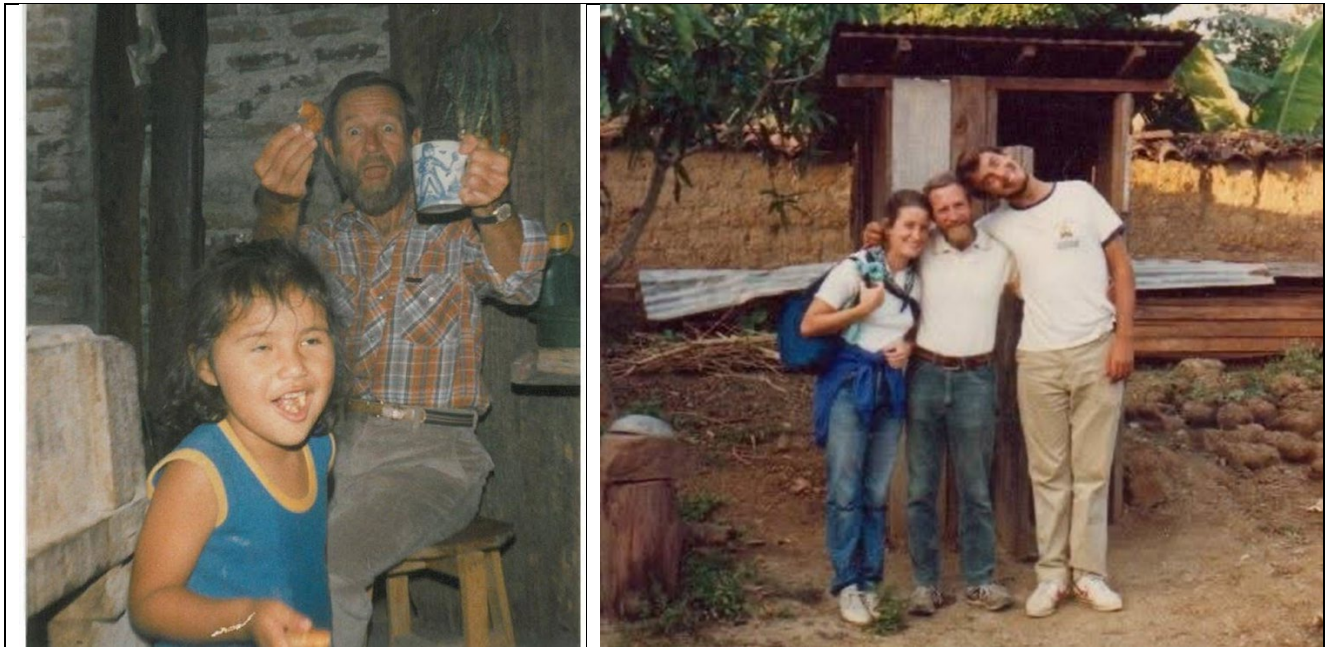
Water was available sporadically in the capital. Toilet paper was virtually non-existent, so we had to improvise, and given the various intestinal challenges we faced, it was hard. I will spare you the details.

One of the most haunting things was the specter of landmines, which were placed on many rural roads by the contras, the counter-revolutionaries. Every time we climbed in the back of a pickup truck, we did our best to think positively.

Despite all these challenges, one of my strongest memories of that time is the joy in the Nicaraguan people and in our group of gringos.

I don't have many photos from that time but a few reflect the spirit of joy.

Every so often our neighbors in the town of Estelí would come across flour and sugar, and we would make donuts, which were eaten with joy.



We shared lots of laughter, including plenty of potty humor, even taking photos by the outhouse...

We gathered for protests and we sang songs about hope and changing the world. We had parties with music and dancing with passion, even in the humid Nicaraguan evenings. (I'm glad there are no photos of me dancing.)



I look back in awe at the joy in that really challenging context. I was the youngest in the group, and I'm grateful for the wisdom and faith of other folks in our group and of the Nicaraguans, who apparently made the choice to make a "defiant nevertheless" in the face of those challenges.

It was like we collectively decided to say every single day, "This is the day the Lord has made, and despite the poverty, the war, the fear, the chance that we might die, we will rejoice and be glad in it."

The title of this series is Practicing Joy.

This week, I want to invite you into a simple task, a simple spiritual practice. At least three times a day say to yourself, or say together with your family:

This is the day that the Lord has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Let's say it together.

Or maybe you tweak it a bit and say:

This is the day the Lord has made. I will rejoice and be glad in it.

Life is hard, and life can be scary.

Practicing joy is not easy. We need encouragement from each other, so I'm glad to be part of a vibrant community like this, where we sing and pray, we meet in small groups to study Philippians and care for each other, we enjoy coffee and donuts, we go on strolls and play board games together.

We need each other to cultivate Easter joy.

And we need to look around us for good examples of joy.

I volunteer regularly with the River Food Pantry, making deliveries of food to people who are home bound. Some are dealing with chronic health issues, some don't have a car. I don't know everyone's story, I just

deliver to 3 or 4 people on most Wednesday afternoons. Some are pretty quiet, which I understand as they're dealing with things beyond my experience.

Most people are thankful. And there's one person to whom I've delivered several times who is special.

When I call to let her know I'm at her building, she thanks me profusely. When she comes to the door, we chat, and she's always upbeat and positive, asking about me and wishing me well. Sometimes she helps me connect with other building residents who are getting deliveries. Before I leave, she thanks me again, and says things like "God bless you, Charlie."

I don't know her story, but I'm sure she has plenty of challenges, and yet somehow she is full of joy. And very appropriately, her name is **Joyce**.

So, if someone with serious health issues and food insecurity can be that joyful, I can probably put a smile on my face and offer an encouraging word to someone and pray that God's light and love would flow through me.

The resurrection of Jesus that we celebrate in this Easter season does not mean that life will always be easy and happy. But it does mean that we can look to the future with hope and that we can live with joy today.

Let us pray.