

Introduction

I want to begin by asking you a question: *How does it feel to be a Christian?* If you're not a Christian, welcome! We're so glad you've joined us today. I'd like to ask you the same question: what do you think it feels like to be a Christian?

I'm not asking, what do Christians *believe*? You know, we've been talking about that a lot in the book of Philippians, how Christians believe in Jesus Christ, that he is our Saviour, our life, our death, our identity, our goal. We believe that we're citizens of heaven, and we have an eternal hope that cannot be destroyed even though we might be persecuted now. We believe that there's important work to be done for the gospel. Throughout Philippians, Paul has been urging us to go all in for Jesus, to live lives worthy of the gospel. He's been calling Riverbank to pour itself into the work of Vision 2030 - into being a loving, united church that reaches out to Launceston and the nations with the amazing news of Jesus Christ.

But this morning I want to come at that from a different angle and say, how does that make us feel? How *should* the Christian life feel? What emotions go along with it?

While it may sound inspiring and grand and glorious to be living for the gospel, to be honouring King Jesus with our lives, I suspect if you're anything like me, *the Christian life often feels far from inspirational*. More often, it feels like a limping struggle. It can feel like a game of snakes and ladders where you take a couple of steps forward and then suddenly fall down and end up almost back at the beginning. Maybe it's a tragedy that fills your life with grief and sorrow just when you thought things were getting on track. Maybe it's a struggle with sin that feels discouraging and impossible. Maybe it's a sense of burden and pressure that comes from living in a world that constantly bombards you with bad news, with tragedy, with evil. Maybe it's a feeling of frustration and disillusionment because the church isn't what it could be, and you wish this or that ministry could be improved, or that this or that person who hurt you would acknowledge their sin.

Well, if you can relate to that, then I want to show you something interesting. When we look closely at our passage, we discover that Paul was actually writing this letter to snakes-and-ladders Christians just like you and me. Look in verse 2, Paul talks about broken relationships and conflict in the church. In verse 4, Paul talks about joy, because he knows that we so easily tend towards complaining and bitterness, towards discouragement and despair. And then in verse 6, Paul talks about anxiety, because he knows that even Christians are often crippled with worry - burdened, weary, troubled. In verse 8, Paul talks about the pressure of living in a cluttered world that is bursting with information and entertainment. A busy world where there's so much you could fill your mind with and your time with... so much of it alluring, and yet so much of it unhelpful and even evil.

These are the real-life situations and struggles that we live with as Christians, aren't they? We don't live out our faith in that shiny new playground that you see in the brochure for the brand-new suburb being built down the road. No, we live out our faith in the playground that was built decades ago in the dodgy part of town, with a creaky swing and a dirty slide and a patch of dirt where the sandpit's meant to be.

With all of that in mind, how do you think it feels to be a Christian? We might be tempted to say, 'It feels difficult. Tiring. Discouraging. Unrealistic.' Striving for the gospel? Building the church? Shining like blameless stars in a dark world? More like, *barely surviving*.

Well, look with me at verse 4. With all of those struggles in mind, look at what Paul says. It's an incredible command: 'Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!' Could he be any more emphatic than that? And then see how verse 7 talks about our hearts being guarded with peace, and again in verse 9 it talks about the God of peace being with us. How does the Christian life feel? God says to us, *Christian, I want your life to jump with joy. I want your heart to pump with peace*. We see these words come up again and again in the Bible to describe the Christian life. Joy and peace. Joy and peace. Joy and peace.

God is saying to us this morning: *I've saved you to live a life that oozes with joy and peace. You can live a life that overflows with joy and peace. How can he say this? Does he have any idea what it's like to live in this crazy world? Well, yes, he does actually... because he's been here. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has lived in this bitter, burdened, broken world. He didn't just vacation here. He didn't just book a room at the Silos for a weekend. No, he was born in a cattle trough, he lived in Palestine, and he was murdered by asphyxiation on a cross... to save us. And now he has risen again! He's seen the other side of death and he's ascended into the glory of heaven.*

That's the God who says to us, there's a way to live in this fallen world with joy and peace. Yes, even in the midst of the pain and struggle, there's a way to be always rejoicing. He isn't ignorant about how hard it is to live as a Christian on Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday, with crying babies and nagging bosses, with depression and panic attacks, with problems at home and struggles at church, with Bibles that seem hard to read and phones that glow so enticingly. *God understands*. And yet he promises that bit by bit, more and more, in your life, it's possible to experience deeper joy.

How? Well, that's what we want to think about now. In 4:1-9, Paul shows us three things that can steal our joy and peace... and in each case he shows us a better way. First, broken relationships. Second, burdened hearts. Third, bombarded minds. Let's look at these three things together.

The first thing that can steal our joy and peace is a Broken Relationship.

A Broken Relationship

Look at verse 2. There are these two women in the church, Euodia and Syntyche, and they've fallen out! They've had a disagreement. We don't know whether it was about the best way to do church, or a matter of theology, or a personal disagreement... but we know Paul takes it really seriously because he brings it up and names them publicly.

Have you ever experienced a conflict or frustration with someone at church? If you have, you'll know how these relationship tensions can cloud our vision so that all we seem to be able to think about is that person sitting over there, and what they've done to us, or how annoying they are. It festers and grows like an infected wound. It might seem minor, but it quickly steals your joy and poisons the unity of the church.

We've talked about unity a number of times as we've studied Philippians. In 2:2, Paul called us be 'like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.' And now, Paul is taking the theory and applying to a specific example. Euodia and Syntyche, I plead with you, sort it out. 'Be of the same mind.' Is there a specific broken relationship that you need to address? A buried

hurt, a festering grudge, a person you avoid? I plead with you: stop waiting for it to just go away, or for the other person to act first. Sort it out.

Well, how? *If broken relationships steal our joy and peace, how does Jesus restore that joy and peace?* The world says, if people steal your joy, cut them out of your life. But Jesus shows us a better way. Jesus says, the way of joy is to fight for reconciliation and unity... even with people who you don't naturally get along with. How is this possible? It's there in verse 2: 'Be of the same mind *in the Lord*.' And then he goes on to remind Euodia and Syntche of everything they have in common. They're Paul's colleagues, co-workers for the gospel, fellow leaders in the church, and their names are in the book of life. Their unity isn't built on being the same age and liking the same music... it's built on their shared identity as Christians, and their shared goal of living for Jesus.

Notice how Paul doesn't take sides. He pleads with both of them equally, and he even assigns a mediator to help them. We don't know who this 'true companion' was, but it was probably someone close to Paul, someone from his ministry team.

Paul is asking for more than just *not* arguing. Look at the example of Paul in verse 1. 'My brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, my dear friends.' What type of relationships are you creating here at Riverbank: dear friends or mere acquaintances? When someone rubs you up the wrong way, do you tend to actively avoid, or actively love? One way leads to bitterness. The other leads to joy.

You say, 'Well, the broken relationship I'm thinking of isn't someone in the church. How can I build our relationship around the gospel if they're not Christian?' Well, look at what Paul says in verse 5. 'Let your gentleness be evident to all.' What is this gentleness? It's a word that means *not* retaliating as expected, not insisting on everything. Being kind when persecuted, yielding even when they're in the wrong, forgiving even when they hurt you.

That doesn't come natural to us as humans, does it? It's something we have to learn from Christ, the one who made himself nothing, became a servant, and humbled himself even to the point of death, for us! Joyful Christians are gentle to everyone, not because they're push overs, but because they've been shown a better way! They've experienced the joy of God's forgiving love.

Okay, so that's joy-thief number 1: broken relationships.

But now, in verse 6, Paul shows us a second thing: **our joy and peace can be stolen by a Burdened Heart.**

A Burdened Heart

Look at how verse 6 begins. 'Do not be anxious about anything.' I love that this is in the Bible. God knows us so well, doesn't he? How many of us are prone to worry, to stress, to lie awake at night tossing on our beds? Prone to feel burdened with problems, with the future, with a fear of death, with our children's struggles, with relationship stuff, church stuff, work stuff. Prone to feel like it all rests on our shoulders and we're basically on our own. Half the time we don't even realize our hearts are burdened... meanwhile the people around us notice us becoming more irritable, more bitter, more withdrawn.

How does Jesus restore joy and peace to our burdened hearts? He invites us to pray. When? In every situation. How? By presenting all our requests to God, with thanksgiving.

I read a poem this week, about two birds who were talking to each other.

'Said the robin to the sparrow:

I should really like to know

Why these anxious beings

Rush about and worry so.

Said the sparrow to the robin:

Friend, I think that it must be

That they have no heavenly Father

Such as cares for you and me.'

The theologian Norman Harrison once said this: 'The world worries, and has ample reason for doing so. It faces tremendous problems, with no real solutions for them.' Isn't that sad? But to those who trust in Jesus, Paul says, there isn't a single thing that you need to worry about. Why? It's there in verse 5: 'The Lord is near.' Jesus didn't stand at a distance. He jumped into the mud pit with us! He understands our fears, he cares about our worries... and through him, we can bring everything to our heavenly Father. His ears are eternally open, his hands are continually active, and his power is infinitely great.

Verse 7 contains one of the most precious promises in the Bible. When we pray, casting all our burdens on him, remembering to give thanks for all the blessings we have... the peace of God which transcends all understanding enters our hearts and our minds and *guards us*. God's peace guards us, like Arnold Schwarzenegger standing outside the door of our hearts with a machine gun, shooting down every fear and worry that threatens to come near.

Oh weary one, have you prayed? Do you carry all your burdens to your friend in heaven, and dump them at his feet? Soon in Tasmania, there will be an exchange program where you can take an empty bottle into the depot and receive 10 cents in return. But the heaven exchange program is way more incredible: give God all your problems, and he will give you all his peace. *He will recycle your worries into wonders, your burdens into blessings, and your problems into peace.*

Alright, so far we've looked at broken relationships and burdened hearts. **Now finally, the third thing that can steal our joy and peace is a Bombarded Mind.**

A Bombarded Mind

Young people, you know what a bombarded mind feels like, don't you? Netflix never runs out of suggestions. Your Instagram feed is eternal. Snapchat never stops pinging. TikTok entertains you with relentless intensity. You could consume content non-stop forever... unless perhaps your device ran out of battery, or your body shut down from overstimulation and lack of sleep.

Life in the technological age is a bombardment of content. And it causes different Christians to react in different ways. Some of us look at the world and see a bin full of rubbish. This is the Christian who rejects the world as evil and would rather rent a cave on Airbnb and retreat to the desert. Others of us look at the world and see, not a rubbish bin, but a pot of gold. This is the Christian who sees the world as an alluring array of delicious delicacies... and they dive in headfirst.

But here's the thing: both of these approaches deprive us of deeper joy. The one who sees the world as a rubbish bin fails to see that our world was made by a good and loving God. They forfeit

joy because they feel oppressed and attacked by the world. They fail to see that there's beauty and truth and joy to be found not just in Scripture, but in so many other things... like literature, movies, music, food, art, and sport.

On the flip side, the one who sees the world as a pot of gold fails to realize that our good world has been poisoned and damaged by sin. As they fill their minds with unfiltered content, they consume not just good, but also *evil*. It's like guzzling Tic Tacs without realizing that half of those little white things aren't actually mints, but human teeth. They start calling good things 'evil' and evil things 'good.' And over time, they find that God becomes more and more boring. Their prayer life shrivels up. Their interest in spiritual things is gobbled up by the glitter-explosion of the here and now.

Okay then, how does Jesus restore joy and peace to our minds? Read verse 8 with me: 'Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.' This is the alternative way to view the world, the better way that leads to deeper joy. We filter the world through the lens of Christ to know what's true and what's not... what's pure, and what's not... what's lovely, and what's not. For example, we learn to enjoy and celebrate sex, but we resist the pressure to accept every sexual practice as good. We enjoy good shows and books and movies, but we think carefully about the quantity and quality of our consumption. The list could go on.

How is this possible? Because we make God and his Word our compass. As it says in verse 9, we follow the wisdom of Paul's teaching and the example of his life.

How are you going with this? Could it be that your joy is being stolen because you've believed the lie that everything in the world is evil, worthless, and out to get you? Or could it be that your joy is being stolen because your mind is polluted and numbed by a barrage of things that are untrue, and impure, and unlovely? Could it be that you've been setting your mind on earthly things, not on things above?

Conclusion

Well, there we go. Three things that threaten to steal our joy and peace: broken relationships, burdened hearts, and bombarded minds.

Would you like to live an unhappy life? Would you like to be bitter and resentful? Would you like to feel overwhelmed and burdened? Would you like a shriveled and dry faith where God seems underwhelming and irrelevant? Well, if you follow these three simple steps, you can have the unhappy life of your dreams.

First, hold grudges against other people, focus on your differences, and always insist that you're right. Only go to church if you want to, and only talk to the people who you really like.

Second, feed your worries and fears by meditating on everything that could possibly go wrong. Tell yourself that you're all alone in this world, and that everything rests on your shoulders.

Third, fill your mind with everything the world throws at you, and don't think too much about whether it's true or helpful. Feed every lust and desire that pops into your head. Don't worry about reading the Bible, or paying attention in church, or ever really soaking and meditating on Jesus and what he's done for you.

Or you could choose a better way: the way of deeper joy. It's summed up in these amazing words: *Rejoice -- in the Lord -- always*. How does it feel to be a Christian? Paul says, actually, it can feel surprisingly peaceful. Strangely joyful. Mysteriously calm... even when the circumstances of our lives tell us we should be bitter and anxious and depressed. Like a tree that sways in the storm but never breaks because it's roots are planted deep and strong. You and I can begin to grow deeper roots in our own lives when we realize that we are *in the Lord*. Always! Your life, your identity, your future is hidden and secure in the Lord. And so you can stand firm in the Lord, v1, and be of one mind in the Lord, v2, and even rejoice in the Lord always, v4.

Rejoice in the Lord, that in the midst of hurting and strained relationships, the Lord loves us and has written our names in his book of life. Rejoice that Jesus has shown us how to have loving, forgiving, healing relationships... especially with other Christians. Rejoice that we can be united on a deep, spiritual level, and that we can pray for each other and spur each other on when life gets hard.

Rejoice in the Lord, that in the midst of worries and pressures, the Lord is near. Rejoice that the one who controls the universe bends to hear our prayers. And so we can bring all our requests to him, and we can do so with thanksgiving. Thankful that our heavenly Father cares for us and promises to work all things for good.

Rejoice in the Lord as you enjoy every good thing from his hand. Rejoice as you meditate on the spiritual blessings that are ours in Christ. Fill your mind with the excellencies of Christ and his love and the hope of heaven. But also rejoicing as we enjoy God's good world and good creation.

I'm not saying Christians experience joy and peace all the time! You know that's not true! But *this is what God calls us to decide on and fight for: that we would rejoice in the Lord always*. This is what God wants to pour into our lives. And one day, that is what we will experience perfectly, completely, continually, forever. *inexpressible joy*.