

**Philippians 3:4-14**  
**March 13, 2016**

I have a little quiz to start with today ... true or false? Jesus Christ went to the cross to destroy death and give you the gift of eternal life. Because of what Jesus did for you on the cross your sins are forgiven, you are covered in the righteousness of Christ, and you are declared holy and just before the throne of God. On the day of resurrection, you will experience never-ending joy and peace as you stand face to face with your Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. If you said true to those questions, then you got all three right, and you scored an A. Give yourself a gold star.

Three more questions ... do you sometimes worry about the future? Are you sometimes unhappy about how your life is right now? Do you sometimes feel dissatisfied or discontent instead of being at peace? If you said yes to those questions, it would seem that when it comes to actually living out your Christian life, you are falling behind. One more question ... does it come as a surprise to you that we are all prone to falling behind? Life this side of heaven in a fallen world is an everyday struggle to put to death the sinful nature and rise to the new life we have in Christ ... to leave the old nature behind and walk in the newness of life ... to live by the Spirit ... to abide in Christ ... to bear much fruit. Jesus knew that we could never do any of those things by our own power, so He sent His Holy Spirit as our helper. The Bible is full of calls to faithfulness and promises from God that He will give us everything needed for our Christian walk and our sanctification.

Our text today is from Philippians and one of the major themes of this letter and this text is the power of the Gospel to make a real difference not only in your eternity, but also in your life right now. You can live a life of joy and peace no matter what outward life circumstances may come your way. You might call this God's version of the X Files, "Strange but True". In Philippians 4 Paul says, *Rejoice in the Lord always*. He tells us that we can be *content in any and every circumstance*. Is this actually possible? How can I rejoice during tough times? How can I be at peace when the storms of life gather on the horizon? Here's the strange but true part: do you know what was going on in Paul's life when he wrote this letter? What would have caused him to write such a remarkable thing? Was he on some sort of dream vacation? Had he just won the lottery?

In the very first chapter of this epistle, we find out that he wrote this letter while he was imprisoned in Rome. Paul understood how painful and filled with potholes life could be.

2 Corinthians 11:24-27

*I have ... been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.*

Paul knew both the outer challenges and the inner struggles we all go through.

Romans 7 ... *The good I want to do, I don't do ... the evil I don't want to do, that's what I keep on doing.*

He is led to the inevitable question ... who will deliver me? Who will rescue me from this body of death? Who will help me? And then he reminds us of the answer ... thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord! As Paul sat in prison, about to be put on trial for his life, he was somehow able to write these astonishing words ... *rejoice in the Lord always*. He would not let his outward circumstances nor his inner struggle with sin rob him of the inner peace and joy that he had through faith in Jesus Christ as his Saviour.

Yet how easily we let ourselves be robbed of our joy in the Lord. You wake up late because you forgot to set your clock to the time change. Your day starts with a murmur. You go to get your clothes out of the dryer and discover that you left a tissue in one of your pockets. The murmur grows into a grumble. You tell yourself it's going to be one of those days. Perhaps you are able to rise above life's small annoyances but what about the big ones that inevitably come along? You just got pink slipped at work. The doctor wants you to come back for more tests. So far he's only saying that he doesn't like what he sees. You sat in emergency at the hospital all day yesterday with your child. Your aging parents can no longer cope with life without daily help. Your own life is already too full and you can't handle any more stuff. Ok, Paul, I'm still supposed to rejoice? I'm not supposed to let things like this worry me? How is that

possible? What is the secret of being content in every situation? How was Paul able to rejoice in the Lord despite being repeatedly beaten and tortured and put in jail? “Rejoice in the Lord” is the blessed result that we are searching for. The wondrous reason is in previous chapter, Philippians 3.

I want you to imagine holding in one hand all the things that worry you or trouble you or cause you distress. Now I want you to imagine that you are holding in your other hand all of the blessings that come from knowing as Paul says, that Christ Jesus is your Lord and Saviour. Here you have all the blessings that are yours because Jesus died on the cross for your sins. Here you have all the blessing you have because He rose from the dead, and because He intercedes for you at the Father’s throne in heaven, -and because He is with you always, and because He will not allow you to be tempted beyond your strength, and because He will work out all things for good to you. Which hand outweighs the other? Do your troubles win or your blessings win?

Paul was given strength, courage, hope, and joy because he knew Jesus Christ as his Lord and he knew that he would one day see Him face to face. Whatever earthly trouble he faced could never outweigh the blessings that the Lord had put on him. He could write to the Christians in Corinth:

*Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

Paul knew that he had a choice to make. He could wallow in the mud and worry about stuff or he could live today in faith in the Son of God who loved him and gave himself for him. And he could look ahead to the day of resurrection when he would finally be with his Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ forever. How was Paul able to rejoice in the Lord always? How was he able to write these amazing words while sitting in prison? He knew that he could live by faith or he could live by sight.

Think about what Paul’s life was like before he became a Christian. In his former life as a Pharisee, whatever confidence he had in the midst of both the trials of life and the shadow of death was built on who he was and on what he was able to do himself. You could call it “do it yourself salvation”. In that former life he had lots to worry about. His parents gave him a good start ... circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin. He had no real worries there. He was part of the chosen people. But ask any race car driver and he will tell you that a good start is no guarantee of a good finish or that you will even reach the finish line. There was the law, the commandments of God *and* the traditions of the elders *and* the prescriptions of the Pharisees. Every lap of the race brought another round of dangers.

In Old Testament times the phrase “a Sabbath day’s journey” came into being because the Pharisees didn’t want to risk breaking the commandment against doing any work on the Sabbath? Somewhere someone asked the question, “how far can you walk on the Sabbath before walking becomes working?” Someone else sat down and did the math, based on the arrangement of the Israelite’s camp in the wilderness in relation to the location of the Tabernacle. What was the farthest anyone would have had to walk to get to the Tabernacle and home again on the Sabbath? That distance became a Sabbath day’s journey.

In Paul’s former life as a Pharisee, whenever he went somewhere on the Sabbath, he would have to count his steps to be sure he didn’t overstep the limit. Imagine trying to live the life of a Pharisee following all the other laws and all the rules, not only for the Sabbath, but also for tithing absolutely everything that you received even the spices growing on your kitchen windowsill, keeping away from all unclean foods, having no physical contact with a Gentile, or anything a Gentile might have touched. Paul had lived life like that for many years, always being so careful, never being entirely sure if he had kept every rule every time. Paul had prided himself in being the best Pharisee anyone could be - but it gave him no lasting joy and no peace. It gave him no certainty of his standing before God. He lived every day in the shadow of doubt. What if he had overlooked something? With that possibility in the back of his mind, his days were continually filled with uncertainty. Everything would worry him. In the midst of that worried life, Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus and in one flash of light, his life changed forever. His whole life as a Pharisee was lived under the perception that God was a cruel taskmaster, waiting for sinners to step over the line of the law so He could punish them. It was also lived under the perception that since his life was the best he could do, he was *probably* ok, but he never knew for sure.

Many people today have an understanding of religions in general and of Christianity in particular that leads them to conclude that it has nothing of real value to offer them. They just plain don't want it! If all religion is going to do is make my life more miserable and more complicated, who needs it! I've got enough stress in my life. I don't want anything to do with a God who is always looking over my shoulder. A new Canadian study and book has come out recently ... *The Meaning of Sunday: The Practice of Belief in a Secular Age*. The book is based on interviews conducted with people who don't go to church. The author asked them: "Why not?" And Canadians gave him eight main reasons. I'm not going to talk about those reasons as such, but I want you to understand what is at the heart of many of them:

- Will religion help me understand my life?
- Will it add to my wellbeing and contentment?
- Will it fill an important need?
- Does it help me connect with other people and with God?
- Is it important enough to be a good use of my time?
- Will it affect my attitudes and outlook in a positive way?

He wrote, "Demand for greater involvement is not strong" in Canada. Simply put, fewer Canadians identify with a religious tradition, or desire to attend worship services regularly". The reason behind it flows from this: why should I get involved in something that is becoming more and more irrelevant to life today? It's not going to make me feel better, it will only make me feel worse. Like trying to sell someone a mattress that you can't get a good night sleep on, religion is *uncomfortable*.

Two things happened to Paul that day on the road to Damascus. Under the relentless brightness of the light of God, he could see just how sinful he really was. He had been living an illusion. Homemade righteousness is no righteousness at all. He was a sinner and deserved only hell but he also saw something else, something he had never seen before. He saw God's grace and mercy. He saw that God loved sinners. Suddenly all of God's word began to make sense in a whole new way.

Old Testament Jacob had been a liar and a cheat and God had mercy on him. God saved him. Old Testament David had been an adulterer and murderer and God had mercy on him. God saved him too. God loves sinners. Jesus came to die for sinners. Under God's love, life is better, now and forever! It's not God's goal to make us uncomfortable, but to give us the ultimate in comfort. All Paul's attempts to save himself through the meticulous keeping of the law were garbage. The sum total and value of life lived apart from knowing Jesus Christ is death. The fruit of knowing salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ is eternal life. Now Paul began to understand that in Jesus, the prize of eternal life was certain. It would one day be his. It changed his life that day.

Christianity is not about slavery to a merciless taskmaster. It is about the gifts of God for people who are otherwise lost. Jesus went to the cross to destroy death and to give you the gift of eternal life. Because of what He did for you on the cross, your sins are forgiven and you are covered in the perfectness of Christ. You are declared just and holy before the throne of God. Because He rose from the dead, you can be certain that you too will rise. On that day of resurrection, you will experience joy and peace and you stand with your Saviour. That is what your future will be. That is the prize you have already won. As a child of God through Jesus' suffering and death on the cross, you know your future. That can change you in the present, in the here and now. You have the promises of God. Nothing can separate you from the Love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

To the Christians in Corinth, and to us, Paul writes:

*For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God. Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set His seal of ownership on us, and put His Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*

You have that Spirit. You have that deposit. You have that guarantee. When you live in the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith, then you live in the power of the resurrection. You don't have to live in worry and doubt and fear any more. You have hope ... and joy ... and peace.