



Sunday, April 25, 2021

Sermon – The Not-So Hidden Secret of Happiness

Ryan Farrell (video)

Hello again Living Hope Church. My name is Ryan Farrell. I'm the associate pastor at Geneva Campus Ministries at Bay Park Baptist Church here in Kingston, Ontario, where I'm joining you in spirit this morning. I was able to come virtually back in December and share with you from God's Word and here I am again, unable to come in person, but happy to share God's word with you in any way that I'm able to which happens to be virtually through my cell phone this morning. I am so excited to share a message with you that I have worked on and revisited numerous times throughout the COVID season. And every time I revisit this message, the Lord speaks to me from the passage of fresh. I'm so excited to share with you from Philippians 4:10-20 this morning as we listen to what God might be trying to say to us.

10 I am very happy in the Lord that you have shown your care for me again. You continued to care about me, but there was no way for you to show it. 11 I am not telling you this because I need anything. I have learned to be satisfied with the things I have and with everything that happens. 12 I know how to live when I am poor, and I know how to live when I have plenty. I have learned the secret of being happy at any time in everything that happens, when I have enough to eat and when I go hungry, when I have more than I need and when I do not have enough. 13 I can do all things through Christ, because he gives me strength. 14 But it was good that you helped me when I needed it. 15 You Philippians remember when I first preached the Good News there. When I left Macedonia, you were the only church that gave me help. 16 Several times you sent me things I needed when I was in Thessalonica. 17 Really, it is not that I want to receive gifts from you, but I want you to have the good that comes from giving. 18 And now I have everything, and more. I have all I need, because Epaphroditus brought your gift to me. It is like a sweet-smelling sacrifice offered to God, who accepts that sacrifice and is pleased with it. 19 My God will use his wonderful riches in Christ Jesus to give you everything you need. 20 Glory to our God and Father forever and ever! Amen. The Word of God, thanks be to God.

I'm trying to be a frequent blood donor. People often ask me, though, if I have a fear of needles. I don't. The thing that bothers me is actually the anticipation of the needle itself. Those milliseconds before the poke. I wince at the pain-to-come more so than the pain itself. But here's the thing: in the moments before the needle pricks your skin you're supposed to hold a fist and tense up your arm so the blood vessel pops. But it's extremely important that you relax your muscles right before the needle goes in. If you're holding in tension then givin' up your blood is gonna hurt. But if you relax and let go it won't be nearly as bad.

Paul loses it all. Paul had it all. He was a true renaissance man, if one could exist well before the renaissance. He could walk the streets of Rome or Jerusalem dressed in pomp like a young executive strolling down King or Yonge St in his tailor-fit suit. Young Jewish men wanted to be like Paul. If he was alive today fanatic followers would flock to his Instagram or Twitter feed. They'd "like" pictures of him hanging out with the High Priest and his social activist tweets railing against those wacky Christians. Paul had it all.

He admits it himself. In his letter to the ancient Philippian church leaders. Imagine Paul writing this out as an email addressed to the First Fellowship Bible Christian Church of Philippi. “Mind you, I’ve got good reason to trust in the flesh. If anyone else thinks they have reason to trust in the flesh, I’ve got more. Circumcised? [Check!] On the eighth day. Race? Israelite. [Check!] Tribe? Benjamin. [Check!] Descent? Hebrew through and through. Torah-observance? A Pharisee. Zealous? I persecuted the church! Status under the law? Blameless. [Check, check, check!]” In checklist fashion Paul rhymes off his social, political, and religious capital like he’s penning an early century dating profile. Paul had it all.

Until he didn’t.

It happened quicker than a tossed-aside celebrity in cancel culture. Paul fell from glory. Well, not quite. More like Paul fell into glory. This Type A, religious executive, high achieving, perfect Jewish boy met and encountered Jesus Christ one day and his life would never be the same. More on that later. For now, let’s recognize: Paul lost it all. And by lost it all, I mean, Paul lost. it. all. Like the first half of a country song Paul’s wife left, his dog died, and his tractor broke. Except it was more like his elite crew ostracized him. His religious system spewed him out. His fame and status crumbled to the ground. Paul goes from being one of the most loved and venerated men in Israel to one of the most hated and despised.

So Paul lives out most of the rest of his life as a nomad. He travels from city to city. Cares for sick and marginalized people. Encourages and pastors underground churches. And he is poor And he’s so poor. Man, is Paul ever broke. And his job? Thankless. Some churches betray him. Slam the door on him for speaking the truth. Townspeople often pick up stones and play a deadly game of dodgeball. Finally, unsure of what to do with this enigma of a man, the Roman government captures Paul. They move him into an affordable bachelor pad that looks something like this. Minus the altar, which is clearly a later addition from Ikea.

And it’s from 2 Philippians 3:4-6, The Kingdom Translation by N. T. Wright. 1 Mamertine Prison Picture. 2 this “office space” that Paul types out his ancient day “email” to the Philippian church. Or Living Hope Church for that matter! He writes these words. “I’ve learned to be content with what I have. I know how to do without, and I know how to cope with plenty. In every possible situation I’ve learned the hidden secret of being full and hungry, of having plenty and going without, and it’s this: I have strength for everything in the one who gives me power.”

We will lose it all.

How could Paul possibly say that!? I mean, come on Paul. With everything you’ve go through? You’re tellin’ me you’ve learned to be content no matter what? If Paul’s anything like you or I there’re moments when his old synagogue buddies cross to the other side of the street and he questions if he’s even loved or dignified. If Paul’s anything like you or I when he sees his followers plunge and the smear campaigns in the headlines his heart sinks. When his family shuns him out and his religious beliefs were thrown into a flurry he questions his very identity. If Paul’s anything like you or I he cries in that Mamertine Prison. Maybe punches a hole through the drywall. Curses out his guards. Yells at God in the car when no one can here. Maybe buys some ice cream and eats it straight from the carton while binge watching Netflix. OK. Maybe not those last few things. But maybe he does get upset at some point. Pacing back and forth in that prison.

We want to have it all. We want to amass an RRSP. Check. Maintain a picture-perfect marriage. Check. Work in jobs that affirm our value to society. Check. And hang our hats in comfortable homes at the end of the day. Check. We want health, wealth, status, and, most of all, some predictability. Now, don’t hear me wrong. Not sayin’ any of these things are bad things. Just saying that we—like Paul, and basically every other human being that’s ever existed—we want to have it all. We want our lives neat and tidy and pre-packaged in the cookie-cutter assembly line of our societal ethos.

But. But if Covid-19 has taught us anything at all, it's this. Our health, wealth, success, plans, and even social connections teeter on a precipice. Think of how much emotional and physical energy is exerted to stay in control of our lives and livelihoods. We tirelessly work to keep it neat and tidy. And then, in the end, it's not some great brute-strength force that sends it all spiralling down. Instead it's an tiny virus invisible to the naked eye. It's like in every action movie ever when a car

Philippians 4:11-13, The Kingdom Translation by N. T. Wright. 3 steadies and hangs over the edge and one ever-so-slight shift in weight sends it tumbling off.

Here's the thing: like Paul, we might have it all, or want it all. Until we don't. We will lose it all, it's not a matter of if but when. And when it happens it a matter of how it's received. Jesus' power to let go is Paul's secret of happiness. In his "email" to the Philippians from his jail cell Paul wants to let his friends in on a little secret. "I," says Paul, "know the hidden secret of happiness." I imagine that the Philippians had sent a message to Paul in much the same fashion we might vent to our friends. "Paul, we've been kicked out of the synagogues! Our families want nothing to do with us! Many of us are losing jobs through no fault of our own! Help!! Paul, why are you so chipper and positive all the time? How can we be happy when there's so much brokenness in and around our lives?" And Paul says, "Well, I'm so glad you've asked! The secret of happiness is this: I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength. I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength. One of the most quoted Scripture verses of all time.

It's on coffee mugs and inspirational posters and social media bios. But, do we really get what Paul is saying here? "I can lose it all, my life can tumble over the precipice, and I can be starving in the shabbiest bachelor pad ever, I can be jobless, disdained, forgotten, hated, and remain content and happy only because of the power of Christ." We started with Paul as the primary example of a man who had it all until he didn't. Yet there was another man who had even more than Paul, lost it all, and found himself even lower. There's a man who truly fell from glory. Rather, he consciously and intentionally gave up his glory. We know him as Jesus Christ Son of God, True God from True God. But in early Israel he was no more than the son of a blue collar family that the larger society shunned and spurned.

And here's the beautiful thing about Jesus. When he was on the cross, donating his blood for the forgiveness of our sins, he fully let go. Oh, sure, he struggled. He tensed before the needle prick. He collapsed to the ground. Body failing out of sorrow. But by the time he said on the cross, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," every muscle in his body, aflame with fire and pain, somehow... relaxed. His soul did not grasp for his former glory. He traded it all in, gave it all up, for our sake. And he was happy. He's the God that lost it all and still had joy. And when Paul shares his not-so hidden secret of happiness with the Philippians from the Mamertine Prison he's not unleashing his inner motivational speaker or self-help guru. He's simply imitating his God. He's able to tell the Philippians he's truly happy not because life started to go better, he's getting back on his feet, or the second half of the country song is picked up. He's happy because the same power that was in Jesus—enabling him to let go of it all, to un-tense and welcome the prick—that same power of Jesus is now in Paul.

And he's telling the Philippians, "It's in you two!" And he's telling Ryan, "You three!" And _____, "You four!" Jesus' power to let go is our secret to happiness. Life is gonna suck the blood out of us. We cannot keep it neat and tidy. We're gonna get poked. We're gonna lose it all. But through the power of Christ, can we release and relax. Let go and give it up to God. If we tense up and tighten our grip we only to amplify the pain. Paul's not-so hidden secret of happiness was that his joy was not anchored to the circumstances of life that ebb and flow but the unchanging nature of God. Often we say, I'll be happy when _____. If _____ happens, then I'll be happy. You fill in the blank. But Jesus is saying the opposite. He's saying, "If only you'd let go of _____ through my power then you'd be happy."

In India they used to catch monkeys by tying hollowed coconuts to trees with nuts and food inside. They'd drill tiny holes in the coconut that were just the right fit for the monkey to reach in. Too small for the monkey to pull out the nut once his hand was clenched. All these silly monkeys needed to do was let go of the nut and they'd be able to pull their hand out and escape. And most often they didn't. Paul begins to close out his "email" to Phillippi by pointing out that Jesus is already helping them to let go! "...it was good of you to share in my troubles... not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only...you sent me aid more than once when I was in need...I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent."

This Philippians faced economic instability, social stigma, and the pains of hunger. Yet through Jesus' power to let go they scrounged together what they could to give away. Rather than scrambling for the capital they were losing they released the tension and gave of themselves. I don't know about you, but I can be a monkey. And I'm not just talking about money, that's just one area. There are other ways in my life I haven't learned the hidden secret of happiness. Of letting go through Jesus' power. Instead I'm stuck, stuck, stuck in my rut clutching the nut. How can I find happiness with so much brokenness in my life? Through Jesus' power of letting go.

My biggest takeaway from Philippians 4:10-20 is that, through the power of Jesus at work in me, I can be content even when Covid-19 sends my life spiralling off the cliff. I can accept that I'm gonna bleed and life's gonna get messy. But with Jesus I will have the power to let go. Moments when I'm feeling least generous with my time, talents, and resources... they're the seasons when I most need to let go of my bank account, my ideals, my will, and loosen my grip altogether. 'Cause friends we don't need to grasp onto anything when Jesus is the one clinging onto us.