

Surprised by Joy

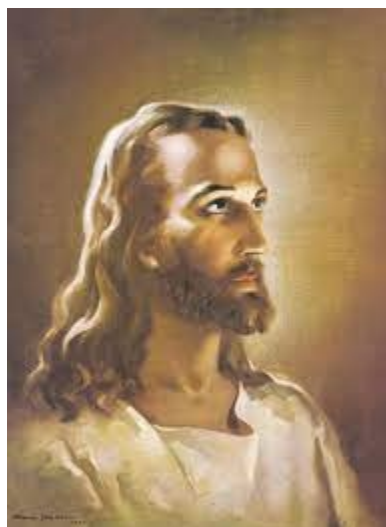
Philippians 1:27-30

Pastor David Woolverton

Good morning, everybody! Grace and peace to you in the name of God, our Father, and our Lord, Jesus Christ. It's good to be here with you, and it's good to share the word of the Lord with you today as we prepare our hearts for what the Lord has in mind. Will you join your hearts with me in prayer? Gracious heavenly Father, we give you thanks for this day. Please open us up to your word and open your word up to us. Father, teach us what you would have us learn as you conform our lives into the disciples that you have called us to be. All of this we pray in Jesus' mighty name. And all God's people said, Amen.

Well, for those of you who are joining us online, perhaps for the first time, or those who are here visiting with us perhaps for the first time, my name is David Woolverton. I'm one of the pastors here and it's my joy to share with you a message that the Lord has placed on my heart based on the series that we have been calling Surprised by Joy. What we're doing is we're looking into the New Testament letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippian church. This was a young church, a church that was birthed, probably by Paul himself, and was nurtured over the course of its young life, and this letter in the New Testament is further nurturing what the Apostle was doing. He is celebrating, certainly some very specific gifts that he received from this church. But he's trying to nurture their faith in the midst of a culture that was pushing back against what it meant to be followers of Jesus. And so, what we've been doing is we've been walking our way through this New Testament letter and gleaning not only the lessons that he had for the Philippians, but how those lessons that Paul was teaching that young church may apply to us in our culture today.

Last week, I introduced a very challenging message about our reputation. I'm going to pick up where I left off there and take us a little bit further. And so, I invite you to turn in your Bible or your Bible app to Philippians chapter one, starting with verse 27, and hold on to that. I want to set the stage for what the Lord has laid on my heart and share with you a visual image. I'm going to put this up on the screen.



I grew up with this image of Jesus. Many of us have, and probably those of you who are watching online, you recognize this image. This was more officially called the Head of Christ, and it was done by the portrait artist Warner Solomon. Solomon did a number of other portraits and a number of other religious paintings, some of them of Jesus. But this one became very popular. My parents placed this portrait at the landing of our stairs. I grew up in the city and our house was a row house; it was disconnected from other houses, but it was a row house. And in the stairwell, you had two steps and then a landing and then you had the main steps going up. And this portrait of Jesus was smack at that lower landing. So, every time I would be going up steps or coming down from upstairs, I would see this. And what I learned as a kid was, no matter what I was doing, Jesus was always watching me. That was very informative in my early years - Jesus was always watching me. The fact that I'm such a good kid today is because I knew growing up that Jesus was always watching me! Whatever I did, I would see Jesus looking at me, with those compassionate eyes. This face is what I understood, as a child all the way through my adolescent years. This was the face of Jesus for me. When I thought about Jesus, when I prayed to Jesus, this is what I saw in my mind's eye. And I don't know if that's true for you, but that's what I remember. And so, when I would walk up the stairs, I would look at Jesus and I would smile. When I'd come down the stairs, I'd wink at him, literally. We had a relationship, and the relationship was really good. I prayed at the foot of this picture of Jesus many times. I would kneel on those first two steps, and I would pray. I would cry at the foot of those steps, looking up at this image of Jesus when I was struggling with something, I went to this image of Jesus, this portrait of the Head of Christ. And I poured my heart out and I sought the wisdom of the Lord right at the foot of those stairs. When I grew up and went to college, I was very clearly a follower of Jesus. As I turned my life around and turned my life over to Jesus, this image of Jesus began to morph a little, and in my study of the Scriptures began to show me God's image of His son. And it is so much bigger than what even this portrays. It wasn't until later that I realized that there are things embedded in this portrait of Jesus, that actually tells something else about the story. Now, if you've been in a Bible study with me over the years, you've seen me do this before, but there are hidden things in this face of Jesus. Three in particular. One of them is the chalice. For those of you who don't know what a chalice is, it's the cup of Christ. You know, if you know Indiana Jones, that third movie and they weren't looking for the Cup of Christ, you know, this little image of the chalice is embedded in this face of Christ, this portrait. In addition, there's the host. It's the round wafer that most Roman Catholics use as they celebrate communion together. So that wafer is also embedded in this portrait. Also hidden in the face of Christ, is a cross. To help you, because I know all of you are now studying this face of Christ, looking for those images. Once you see them, every time you see this portrait of Jesus, you will automatically gravitate towards these three images: the chalice, the host and the cross. Let me show you where they are. There's the chalice. And there's the wafer. And below his eye, his cross. Every time you look at that face now, that portrait of Jesus, you will see them. I want you to notice something. This is an artist's design, I would imagine. The shadowing that occurs in artwork is not always dark. Sometimes shadowing in artwork is done creatively with light. And so, these three images are embedded into this beautiful picture of Jesus. And for me, devotionally, it tells me that in the story that's behind this beautiful Jesus, there are images of pain, of suffering. The chalice, of course, represents the blood of Christ. The host is the body of Christ, that Jesus himself told us He broke for the sake of bringing the body together. And the cross; the cross is all about the story of crucifixion and what Jesus paid for us and for our sins. So, Solomon did other beautiful portraits, as did many other artists, and many of us have this iconic sense of Jesus being the gentle one, the peacemaker. So many of us grew up with the image of Jesus, with the gentle lamb around his shoulders. Some of us may have seen Jesus standing at the door

and knocking. There's an invitation of fellowship in that imagery, you know, he's inviting us into a relationship with himself, and all of that is appropriate and good. But this particular image, this beautiful face of Jesus, reminds me personally, that behind the story of the gentle Jesus is the story of sacrifice.

Hold on to that, because I want to take us briefly into that passage of scripture that we started last week. Starting in Paul's letter to the Philippians chapter one, beginning with verse 27. I'm going to share with you a reprise of where we were last week, and then I'm going to take us a little bit further. So, I'm going to put this up on the screens. For those of you who are following online and those of you who are here, please feel free to use your Bible and feel free to mark your Bible with lessons of life that you're getting, not just from me, but from the Holy Spirit, as the Holy Spirit speaks to you. Sometimes that happens. Before I share that, I want to give you an image, an image of our scars. This is so important. I'm sorry I missed this. So, the image of Jesus and what we just presented tells us that there are scars behind every face. Every one of us has scars, and our scars each have stories behind them. You can look in the mirror and realize that each of the scars that you see, maybe nobody else sees them, but the ones that you see, they all tell stories, don't they? Maybe your stories get a little romanticized, right? So, the scar that you have on your chin, you may say, well, that's an old war injury. Nobody needs to know that your war was with the kitchen sink, right? Or maybe that mark on your arm, that huge scar on your arm, you'll say, well, this was from a skiing accident. Nobody needs to really know that it was because you slipped when you were putting your skis on. You know, it gives us the sense of having a story behind it. But every one of our scars has a story. And more importantly, our scars are part of our story, our narrative. Not only do individual's scars have stories connected to how they occurred, but our scars really tell something about us and about our character. They tell about what God did to form and shape us into who we are. Whether we admit it or not, or whether we can see it or not, all our scars are part of our narrative, our story. And here's one more thing - our scars are also part of God's story. Many of you, if you've been tracking with me for any length of time, you've heard me say this multiple times, I'm sure. We serve a God who never wastes anything. God never wastes a hurt. A lot of those hurts in our lives have left scars. What are your scars telling you? When you frame it from that vantage point, Paul infers in his first chapter of Philippians is telling us about scars. This is what he says, starting in verse 27 "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the Gospel, without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you." That's where we left off last week. And Paul continues, "This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved, and that, by God." Then he says, verse 29, "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for Him. Since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had. And now here that I still have." When I read that the first time, I said Wow! Paul, wait a minute. Can you repeat that? Can we reframe that statement? So, I went looking. This was the NIV; I went looking to another translation, and the NRSV kind of makes it even more potent. This is what the NRSV says "For God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well." Now, wait a minute. Paul, are you saying that suffering is a privilege graciously granted to us? I've got to be honest with you. When I'm suffering, I'm not thinking that this is a privilege. Are you? It made me want to pull that word 'suffering' out as I was thinking about this verse, as I pull that word suffering out, I kind of played with it for a little while, and it dawned on me that there's different layers to suffering. There's the physical and then there's the mental and certainly emotional. Because sometimes the mental and emotional are separate. And there are spiritual sufferings. Any individual that has ever gone through seasons of pain, whether from chronic illness or from some traumatic event in your life, you know that there's often an interplay of each of these layers of suffering. Most of you have heard me share that over the last couple of months, my brothers and I have been walking with my mom and my dad as they go through these cancer issues and the treatments. Any individual who's

ever dealt with cancer or a significant health concern, as well as those who are caregivers, you have front row seats for what it means to play out the suffering that is physical and mental and emotional and even spiritual. And depending on the layers of what you're dealing with, you may have all of those at play. Each and every one of them in their own right leaves scars, because pain and suffering always leaves scars. What we do with those scars is really between us and the Lord. But what Paul is getting at, and this is the stuff that's written by a man who had been in prison. He's in prison right now, as he writes these words. He's been stoned almost to the point of death. He's been beaten almost to the point of death. He's been mocked. He's been he's been through the mill like none of us could ever imagine. And he's writing these words about it being a privilege, a gracious privilege. What?! It's because there is another form of suffering that he's talking about. And that's suffering that's missional. Missional. And from Paul's perspective, what he means by that is, every time a follower of Jesus takes a stand for the faith and mission of God, there's going to be resistance. And many times, in our world, even today, that resistance is going to bring about suffering and pain. When we introduced this series, we talked about some statistics; that the millions of people, followers of Jesus on our planet today that are living in situations where being a Christian, being a follower of Jesus, would literally make their life painful, often to the point of death. We in America really have no clue what that feels like. The reality is globally, Paul's words mean a ton. And those words give people hope. They also give us hope. They remind us that we're part of a bigger story and a bigger plan. Every time a follower of Jesus takes a stand for the faith and mission of God there's going to be resistance and sometimes that resistance is internal. It's within ourselves. But we're not alone. Take, for example, the apostle Peter. I'm going to put this up on the screen. I just want to give you an illustration that one of Jesus's pinup boys, one of the heroes, Peter the Apostle - screwed up. Jesus says to his inner circle of 12, he said "What are people saying about me? Who do they say that I am?" Peter boldly says, "You are the Christ, the Son of God." And Jesus looks at him and he says, "Flesh and blood did not reveal that to you. The Holy Spirit himself gave that to you." And so, in his mind, I can picture Jesus going, maybe these guys are ready. So, he downloads to these 12 disciples the following. And from that time on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed, and on the third day, be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Never, Lord. This shall never happen to you!" Jesus turned and said to Peter "Get behind me, Satan. You are, you are a stumbling block to me. You do not have in mind the things of God, but only human things." Then Jesus said to his disciples, if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross. And follow me for whoever wants to save his life will lose it. And whoever loses his life from me. So, Peter and all of his good intentions is resisting inside himself the incredible missional movement of what needs to happen to Jesus and through Jesus for the greater mosaic of what God was birthing. Peter was resisting it. But you see Jesus, and then later, Paul, understood that at the center of this grand mosaic picture that was being presented was the cross. The Cross, which back then was the epitome of major suffering, agonizing pain. Jesus was facing into that cross for a purpose that was bigger and greater than what anybody, including his disciples, could appreciate or even know. But Jesus knew it. And because He knew it, His view was larger. The Apostle Paul gets that picture. He writes elsewhere in the New Testament Galatians, he says, "May I never boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world." Do you hear the bigger picture? Do you hear how even missional suffering has now taken on a different dimension? Most of us don't get that. Most of us, in the midst of our pain, if we follow that metaphor of the mosaic that I introduced a couple of weeks ago, we focus just on the individual tale of our pain, and we don't always see the bigger picture. Well, of course, because pain and suffering make us focus. It draws us in to that fight or flight or freeze experience of being human. The only way that we begin to see the redemptive power of our pain is to step back and to view the greater picture that's being created and how God, the God who never wastes anything, will somehow give purpose and meaning to what we're

going through, even when we cannot see it in the moment. That's where the faith really takes shape. When we're willing to trust the God who calls us by name and has adopted us into his family. That even in our seasons of pain, we can believe that God will redeem it somehow.

So what Paul is getting at, he's trying to tell these believers, trust the Lord, resist your own resistance when it happens. Why is that important? Because in addition to the internal resistance, there's external. There are going to be people who push against you, he says to the Philippians. In fact, his words now give greater depth. Remember those words? The NRSV, "For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well." What's this all about? Well, here's the harsh truth of what Jesus brings to the scene. Every time love enters somebody's arena, that love causes resistance. Certainly, we have the Jesus who is the Jesus of peace. We get that many of us are going through seasons of turmoil, We pray for peace that surpasses understanding. Certainly, Jesus does that. But hear me. We live in a world where when you introduce Jesus, you're introducing a battle. Jesus will cause division. He will cause people to have to make a choice as to who they will serve and to whom they will place their loyalty. You can't have two masters, he says. So, we have to live in the world, but not of the world. We must make choices, and the choices will cause fathers to be separated from sons, mothers from their daughters, mothers in laws from their daughters in laws. Members of their households would become enemies because choices will have to be made. And those painful seasons of suffering and brokenness are all part of a missional plan of greater invitation - an invitation to love. It sounds paradoxical, but the point of what Paul is making to the Philippines is never underestimate the power of what Jesus brings into the arena of your world. Don't miss the moment. Anytime love gets brought into the scene, the love of Jesus, the missional love of Jesus, it's going to involve pain and suffering. Not because God is causing it, but the invitation to love and to be a part of a mission, in fact, is that you have to choose. In our day and age, like I said, we're pretty safe in America, at least right now. We won't face the kind of global issues as followers of Jesus that some of our sisters and brothers are facing. But we need to be aware that there are many layers to suffering, and one of those very critical layers is the missional suffering that comes simply by choosing to be a follower of Jesus. But the word of hope that is coming from Paul's words here that impacts us in a variety of different ways, is the reality that there are some of us who are suffering. We feel the scars - physically or mentally or emotionally or spiritually. Certainly, that's a part of who we are. Whether because of chronic illnesses or because of traumatic illnesses or, it is sad to say, some individuals have experienced abuse in churches over the years. They have painful scars from that. Spiritual abuse is a part of the layers, but if we truly understand the greater missional purpose that the Lord has, then we can trust that our God who never wastes anything will never waste our pain as well. Because our scars tell a story, every one of them. Who are we today and what has God shaped us into because of or in spite of all of those scars? And our scars are also part of God's story, where God in his infinite love and mercy, somehow, someway redeems it all, that everything is going to be brought into the arena of God's love. Everything. Because that's who God is. And if I truly see myself as a child of God then in the midst of my suffering and pain, I'm going to plant myself firmly in my understanding of God's faithfulness and the fact that I'm adopted into his love and that there is nothing, *nothing* that can separate me from the love of Jesus Christ. What story do your scars tell? And what story does God want to use your scars to tell? You may just be amazed by how all of your pain, and all of mine, in the greater mosaic, will be an embedded image in the beautiful face of Jesus. And once we see that shown, that's all we'll see when we look at the face of Jesus. Let us pray. God, we trust you to be the redeemer of our pain and the one who makes sense out of our brokenness. Especially when we can't see it for ourselves. And I thank you, Lord, that as exemplified by Sallman's portrait of Jesus, sometimes the shadowing is light and not dark; to remind us that even as we are in a dark place and a dark time and a dark day Your light will shine, and nothing will overcome that. We love you, Lord. Thank you for loving us. We will praise you in the storm. Amen.

