Joy in the Journey
Colossians 1:12-14

Each summer we go back to a short NT book and pick up where we left off the last summer. So last week we started up with Col 1:11 and saw that God wants to give us more of His strength so that we can have greater endurance and patience in this life — whether our challenges are difficult circumstances or difficult people. Today, we will tackle Colossians 1:12-14.

Let's start by thinking about a very frustrating time in our life or the life of someone we know. It may have been a long time ago or it may be going on right now. What are some of the emotions and perspectives you had, or are having, during that time? What emotions or perspective seem to fade away ... or in my case disappear completely?

The one that came quickly to mind for me was November of 1997. We received this building as a gift from the Calmont Beverage Company on the last business day of 1995 — I still remember running the paper work over to the city clerk's office 10 minutes before closing time so the transaction would be completed in 1995 for the Semprebons. It would take another year to clean out the old warehouse, make plans and get them approved by the city & the state. Then we started a massive building project to convert the old Calmont Beer and Wine Warehouse into a building that we could use for worship and Christian ministry. Everyone put in a huge amount of volunteer time from the youngest to the oldest for over a year. By fall 1997 we were all exhausted. We had lost our rental space above the strip joint downtown and the temporary space we were using for worship at Barre City School was only available through the end of November. We had run out of money and we were way behind on just getting the basics done to pass state fire safety inspections so we could use just a small part of the building.

I must have been several laps beyond discouraged because two people — Rick Foley and Frank Wilbur — tried to encourage me the first of November. Frank tried to cheer me up by showing how far we had come — and that he heard a volunteer team from a church around Boston was coming up in 2 weeks to help over the weekend. Rick, one of the treasurers, wanted to let me know we just received a $15,000 gift for the building from outside the church. My response to each was the same. "Doesn't matter — it is no use. It is simply too little, too late." And I walked away from each — of course also greatly discouraging them. There was NOT even a shred of joy, hope, or faith left in me!

I remember the joylessness of that time so vividly because we did hit the minimum for the state by the end of November — we did meet in the gym for our first worship service that first Sunday in December 1997. Now, there was no paint on the walls, the heat wasn't straightened out, the sound was terrible, and there was just concrete for the floors. But all the fire safety stuff met state standards & we could use the building.
It is in this context of difficult people or difficult situations that this week’s challenge comes! There is joy in the journey from God. READ Col 1:9-10a. So how can we live a life worthy of the Lord and please Him in every way? READ Col 1:10b-12a.

PROPOSITION: God has given and regularly gives followers of Jesus many reasons to give joyful thanks to our Heavenly Father.

I. Joy
Last week I pointed out that because the early manuscripts of the New Testament contain almost no punctuation, it is impossible to tell whether the word “joyful” goes with ‘giving thanks’ in v 12 (as it is in the NIV or ESV) or it should go with ‘endurance and patience’ in verse 11 like the KJV. But since v 9-14 is just one sentence this makes little overall difference. We apply it to both.

A. In the midst of problems
God’s joy is not just in good times but it very much develops & is experienced in the midst of problems, frustrations and set-backs. Where we need endurance and patience is also a place that God’s joy can be found. We aren’t joyful for the difficulties or the problems themselves but with what God has done, will do, and is doing with them as well as all the other sources of joy God has given, will give and is giving us now in the midst of those difficulties. As one Christian scholar rightly observed, ‘If joy is not rooted in the soil of suffering, it is shallow.’ And another pointed out that it is easy to be joyful when things go well; “but Christian radiance is something which all the shadows of life can never quench.” There is a joy that accompanies the endurance and patience God calls us to as well as our giving thanks to God the Father when we experience God’s supernatural power. There is joy in the journey from God.

B. Behind true thanksgiving
“And giving joyful thanks.” Joy makes our thanks to God real and genuine. Our thanks is not just some required action, but it is a response to what God freely gives us and does for us.

By the way, in case you were wondering why the NIV & others put “joy” with “giving thanks” rather than with “endurance and patience” it is simply because each of the other participles in this series has a prepositional phrase with it. Don’t worry if you have forgotten your grammar, you will appreciate this picture by the end ...

... Go back to v 10 – Paul is praying that the Colossian Church and those in it will live a life pleasing to the Lord and please Him in every way. How can we please God since we fall short of perfection all the time? READ v 10f...

1. By bearing fruit in every good work
2. By growing in the knowledge of God
3. By being strengthen with all power
4. By giving thanks
Each of these is a participle (bearing fruit, growing, being strengthened and giving thanks) and the first three each have a phrase that modifies it: “bearing fruit in every good work”; “growing in the knowledge of God”; “being strengthened with power”; “giving thanks” ... it is missing the modifying phrase the other 3 have. So since we cannot know for certain what “in joy” modifies by physical form or the placement of the word, they place it with giving thanks to fit the pattern we can see. NOW THAT IS NOT THE EXCITING PART - I just wanted to show you how things come about and why I have taught “in joy” with both possibilities.

The exciting part is this list of things that please God. Listen to them again (repeat them). Did you notice that unlike righteousness, these are all very doable because it is not about how we compare to others, or how we stand in relation to some set goal nor does it require a special ability, personality or skill – these areas are all ones God is empowering us in and we are simply to increase in them by responding to what God has already done. We are allowing God’s work, to work in us. God doesn’t have you or I on a performance basis with someone else – God doesn’t work on the elimination basis that so many of our games, sports and interviews do. Instead God gets great pleasure as He helps us in something and then we improve a bit in that area. We are under grace, not a perfection standard – rightly understood will cause us to want to put more effort into doing what pleases God - “bearing fruit in every good work”; “growing in the knowledge of God”; “being strengthened with power”; “giving thanks in joy” or in more natural English “giving joyful thanks”.

C. In the presence of God

Turn in your Bibles to Isaiah 35. Joy is something that we will experience just being in the presence of God provided we are cleansed by the blood of Jesus and have God’s righteousness applied to us through faith. READ Isaiah 35:10. We don’t just get joy by God giving us a gift we want – but joy will overflow in us just by being in His Kingdom, just by being with His angels, and just by being in His presence. Some of you know that my brother died of a very rare cancer almost 11 years ago – cancer of the cartilage between your ribs. This was crushing for my sister-in-law as they had a good marriage. Ten minutes before my brother died, my sister-in-law called me from the hospice room totally overwhelmed because she knew his last breath would be very, very soon. It was too much for her to bear. Then God did a special miracle of encouragement for her to get her through. She was suddenly filled with an incredible sense of joy, warmth, and well-being that was indescribable. She later said she felt better than she had ever felt in her whole life. In fact, she felt guilty that her beloved husband was soon to be gone and here she was experiencing a level of love, joy and warmth she had never felt. Before my brother’s chest went down on his last breath, my sister-in-law blurted out, “He’s gone”. She knew that because, at that moment that overwhelming sense of being in the presence of joy, love & warmth disappeared. We don’t know if God just gave her a sense of the angels or the Holy Spirit there to accompany my brother to heaven – he was a strong believer in Jesus – but that helps
me remember that the very presence of God brings overwhelming joy to those who are His children through Jesus’ Christ death and resurrection. (back to Colossians 1)

II. For us

A. We have a loving Father

We can have this confidence of joy because God becomes our father – not just as the one who created us – but who genuinely loves, cares for and positively develops us! READ v 12a. Through faith and commitment to Jesus Christ, God becomes our loving Heavenly Father. God adopts us into His family and becomes our loving Father. And there are a lot of special benefits of having the true God as our Heavenly Father which brings us joy.

B. Qualified us for heaven

So the Lord adds three more reasons why we can regularly be thankful people to God our Father and find joy in the journey of life despite its pain & problems. READ v 12-14.

The first reason we can always be thankful & know joy in the midst of problems is that God has “qualified us” to share in His inheritance. Now the specifics of that inheritance are not described here, but the initiative of God and the undeserved nature of that gift is very clear. When I was younger, I had several opportunities to do something special in the life of someone famous or important or popular – like when I was chosen to be the back-up caddie for Arnold Palmer when he came to the country club I worked at. But I never seemed to QUALIFY – who is going to let sickness or anything else keep them from caddying for the most famous golfer of that time – there is no need for a back-up. But later in life, there have been times when another person gave me a special pass or an opportunity opened up unexpectedly for me to directly encounter a famous person or important event which I would never qualify for on my own. That is a pure gift. Formerly I was an outsider, now because someone else qualified me, I was suddenly on the inside. That brought joy!

What a great picture of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. He qualifies us for an everlasting inheritance from God. We don’t deserve it, we can’t earn it – it is a freely given gift. Regardless of the difficulties we face right now, God has already qualified us for greater blessings for all eternity in a perfect paradise. There is joy in the journey from God.

C. Rescued us from bondage

The second reason we can always be thankful is that God has rescued us. READ v 12-13. We have been rescued despite being rebels and what a dramatic rescue operation it was! God took great initiative to move people, situations & break through our hard hearts, just so we could have the opportunity to hear and understand the good news of Jesus – then He brought us into, or transferred us to, a far greater place!
• We have been rescued from darkness ... and been brought into the light. Instead of stumbling around aimless in the dark, we now have light to see the right way to go in life for eternity.
• We have been rescued from slavery ... and brought into freedom. We were slaves to our sin, our fears & our own helplessness. Now we are liberated to faith, hope & love.
• We have been rescued from condemnation ... and brought into forgiveness. We deserve the condemnation of God because of our sinful, selfish thoughts, actions & attitudes. But through Jesus that condemnation has been taken care of and we come cleansed & forgiven into God’s presence.
• We have been rescued from the power of satan... and brought into the Kingdom of Jesus – the beloved Son of God. Jesus Christ did not release us from bondage to wander aimlessly after. When freed, Jesus moved us into His own kingdom of light and made us victors over Satan’s kingdom of darkness.

D. Sins are forgiven

The third reason we can always be thankful is that God has redeemed us and forgiven our sins. READ v 13b-14. The word “redeemed” was commonly used of buying slaves or prisoners their freedom by a payment. Being forgiven is to be released from the consequences of our wrong. Redemption and forgiveness of sins are two different but complementary aspects of our salvation. So when we surrender in faith to follow Jesus alone, we are purchased and we are pardoned by God Himself paying a price. That price is Jesus willingly dying on the cross in our place even though He had never sinned. There is great joy in the journey just looking back at all God has done!

III. For our future

While these participles are mostly in the past tense - that is they have already happened, there are some hints here of the joy-filled aspects we get to be part of for all eternity! There is joy in the journey of life because of what God has already done, but there is also joy from seeing what God securely has in store for us in the future!

A. Share in all God has

In the future, we get to share in all God has created. God has qualified us to share “in the inheritance” In the future we will experience that inheritance to its fullest. An inheritance is something handed down to you from your family. Imagine receiving some of what God has created! No wonder “gold” in heaven will just be paving material on streets.

B. Be with God transformed people

In the future, we get to be with God’s transformed people. As v 12 reminds us, we are going “to share in the inheritance of His holy people.” Jesus will have finished the initial transformation so all of our actions, thoughts and attitudes are actually holy, not just righteousness credited to us. Do you realize that everything about me or others
here in this local church that bug you, will not bug you in heaven. Either we’ll change or you’ll change or a combination of both in that area.

We get glimpses of that when some come to Christ today. A number of years ago, a 50ish plus gal came to the church – she had just come to Jesus and was hungry for the Word of God. Then she tragically died 6 months later in a car crash. I saw her transformed, but it wasn’t until I did the funeral that God opened our eyes to the depth of that transformation. Everyone at the funeral was either an old acquaintance or relative of hers or someone from the church who had only known her for those 6 months. The acquaintances couldn’t believe she was doing the good things we spoke of and those from the church couldn’t recognize the description of her from earlier in her life! If that is the transformation God can do now, imagine how special it will be to be with countless people all transformed by Jesus. Total joy just being there!

C. Be part of the glorious Kingdom of Jesus

In the future we get to be part of the glorious Kingdom of Jesus. V 12 ends with “in the Kingdom of light” or “in light” which is then described as “the Kingdom of the Son He loves” in v 13. Having come to faith in Jesus, we are presently in the light spiritually, but the future light we will be in is beyond description. In fact when the stars themselves start to burn out – we will shine even brighter because of the light of Jesus reflecting off us!

D. Rescued for good

(Exodus 6:6-8; Psalm 107; Acts 26:15-18)

In the future, our rescue will be complete. We will be rescued for good. Whether we are talking about God’s rescue of His people from slavery in Egypt in Exodus 6 or speaking of the rescue of God’s people from tough situations in Psalm 107 or the rescue Jesus has done in our own lives through the cross like the apostle Paul’s personal testimony in Acts 26 - - - the terms and images are similar! We are brought out of a seemingly impossible situation and brought into a most secure one.

God gives us many very objective and astonishing gifts which allow a joy and thankfulness to be in our lives no matter what our earthly circumstances. In this broken world, keep allowing God’s joy to come into your life! Keep growing in your enjoyment of God!

Don’t be like me & refuse to let God’s joy in... even if you have to temporarily lean on another’s faith.