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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

**November 8, 2020**

**Choosing Joy**

**Philippians 1:18-30**

**Prayer:** *Father, we just again, we thank you for your grace, we thank you for your goodness, we thank you for the gifts that are so many, and so we -- again where the number one gift is your Son. The gift that we're opening this morning again is the gift of your word accompanied by the gift of your Holy Spirit. And so we pray that you would accompany us, that we'd have that gift, that present to open and that you would again make of it universal and permanent value, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, like many of you, I got a bit of a gut punch on Wednesday morning but it's not at all what you think. There are certain authors that I follow that I have a great deal of respect for who have a unique understanding of the gospel and what it means to live your life for the kingdom. And one such man goes by the name of Tim Challies. He's a pastor of a church in Canada. The church goes by the name Grace Fellowship and he's also an author and a prolific blogger. His blog for Wednesday, the morning after the election was entitled: "My Son, My Dear Son, Has Gone to be With

the Lord." This is dated November 4th, 2020. He writes:

"In all the years I've been writing I have never had to type words more difficult, more devastating than these: Yesterday the Lord called my son to himself -- my dear son, my sweet son, my kind son, my godly son, my only son. Nick was playing a game with his sister and fiancée and many other students when he suddenly collapsed, never regaining consciousness. Students, paramedics, and doctors battled valiantly, but could not save him. He's with the Lord he loved, the Lord he longed to serve. We have no answers to the what or why questions. Yesterday Aileen and I cried and cried until we could cry no more, until there were no tears left to cry. Then, later in the evening, we looked each other in the eye and said, 'We can do this.' We don't want to do this, but we can do this -- this sorrow, this grief, this devastation -- because we know we don't have to do it in our own strength. We can do it like Christians, like a son and daughter of the Father who knows what it is to lose a Son."

It's funny how the reality of life and death can so quickly reset and recalibrate the political and social angst that all of us are feeling. I read Tim Challies words and I see displayed what it means to fight, to choose joy in the very worst of circumstances. And we're looking at the book of Philippians. This is a book written by Paul in a Roman jail in a place not known for producing

joy. And we've been looking at Paul's description of the joy he's experiencing, and he too is focused right from the beginning on choosing, choosing to carve joy out of circumstances that seemed anything but joyful.

Our world just doesn't seem to be able to separate the idea of joy from the idea of happiness, and this is the way the dictionary defines joy. It says -- quote -- "the emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something exceptionally good or satisfying." I couldn't disagree more with that definition. I have a working definition of joy, and it's this, it's: Joy is a settled sense of contentment based on the knowledge that God is good and that he's in control. And I recently came across what I think is an even better definition by Kay Warren who says this, she says: "Joy is the settled assurance that God is in control of all the details of my life, the quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be alright, and the determined choice to praise God in every situation."

We may be tempted to think that a political setback can steal any joy we might have but I think if we think that we are simply not understanding the real joy that God wants for us. We look at the Jews in the book of Hebrews and they were rejected by their fellow Jews, they were persecuted by the Roman government, mistreated by

the Christian community and generally mistreated by everyone else and yet God makes clear that they still had joy. This is what he says in *Hebrews 10:32*. He says: *Remember the earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to taunts and afflictions, and at other times you were companions of those who were treated that way. For you sympathized with the prisoners and accepted with joy the confiscation of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves have a better and enduring possession.* So just picture this, picture you come home from work one day and you find that the locks on your house have been changed, you're barred from entering your own house and there's an official notice from the government that because of your faith you've now forfeited your property. This may not be happening here yet, but around the world this is a common experience for Christians all over the place. So ask yourself, could I accept with joy the confiscation of my property? I guess you can say that all depends on what your definition of joy is. I mean since losing your possessions could never qualify as something that's exceptionally good or satisfying, the world sees no way to find joy in that kind of circumstance, but God sees it differently. And so it becomes very critical to understand not only where joy is found but also what joy really is. And so far we've looked at three different aspects of the joy that

Paul is discussing and in each case we find Paul making a conscious choice like Tim and his wife Aileen made as well. He said we can do it like Christians, like a son and daughter of the Father who knows what it is to lose a son. So they have much in common with Paul. And Paul first focuses in on the joy that he's received thinking about the blessing that the Philippian church has been, I mean, he's sitting in a jail cell and he's hearkening back to how the Philippian church got started. It basically started when Paul cast a demon out of a woman and that started a riot and both Paul and his companion Silas wound up being beaten and thrown into a Philippian jail. Then Paul and Silas are beaten, bloodied, they're placed in stocks, and what do they do? They make a choice. Scripture says they sang. *Acts 16* says: *About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God and the prisoners were listening to them.* And so we ask, how could it be that these beaten, bloodied and now tortured prisoners could be singing? Well they were singing because they made a conscious choice to be joyful. They were singing because they counted it a privilege to suffer for the kingdom. So we spoke about this principle that's at work and that is that life for all of us is going to consist of difficult times at times and we're going to be challenged by circumstances to believe that God really does love us and care for us. Perhaps many of you sensed that this week. But each and every time we are challenged like that, we face what the scripture

describes as a binary choice which is described by *Hebrews 12:15*. We already spoke of it, says: *Make sure that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no root of bitterness springs up, causing trouble and by it, defiling many.* I mean God is calling us to make a choice but it's not a choice that's made in a vacuum. What God is saying is that the choice of grace or bitterness represents not only two different pathways but two completely different sources of energy. Anyone who spent any time wallowing in bitterness knows that it too really is a source of energy but it's a deadly source, sort of like a toxic sugar high. It will give you a burst of energy, it'll give it to you with the left hand and it'll take it away with the right. Bitterness and self-pity is poison. It's a poison though that can taste delicious as it cripples and kills you. And because bitterness derives its energy from within you it weakens you as it convinces you that it's giving you strength. And in addition it's highly addictive. The more you indulge in it, the more bitter you will become. Deciding to choose the grace of God is also not a decision made in a vacuum. Instead it's a choice that you make to tap into an unlimited energy supply that also changes you as you use it for the better. Again Tim and Aileen Challies put it perfectly. They said: "We don't want to do this, but we can do this -- this sorrow, this grief, this devastation -- because we know we don't have to do it in our own strength." They're making a choice. None of us can choose the circumstances

that we find ourselves in but every one of us can choose how we respond to those circumstances. And if we choose bitterness it will suck the strength right out of us. If we choose grace, we tap into God's unlimited source of strength. Tim and Aileen made a choice. And so did Paul and Silas. From their perspective, the events of the day were straightforward. They both stood up for the truth of God and his word and at the end of the day they were bloodied and beaten sitting in a dank cell stretched out and tortured in stocks and yet they still trusted in the grace of God. They made that choice but they could have just as easily chosen bitterness and you know, the scripture gives us an example of what that could look like.

There's a conversation that's recorded in Luke 24 that takes place right after Jesus' resurrection. It features two believers who are right on the cusp of choosing. They make this choice between bitterness and grace. We see the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus and he's speaking to these two distraught disciples who think that he's dead and gone and they're really in the process of choosing bitterness. We get distraught over politics. They saw their king, their Lord, their Messiah stripped naked, nailed to a cross and executed. So if anyone had a strong temptation to choose bitterness over grace, it would probably be these two fellows. This is the account. It's in *Luke 24*. It says: *That very day two*

of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself -- this is the risen Jesus now -- drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" You know if we were looking at that today we would describe that sentence as snarky. It literally is. You can see it's just on the verge of bitterness. And he -- this is Jesus -- said to them, "What things?" And they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see." And he said to them, "O foolish



ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going farther, but they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?" Jesus remarks at how foolish and slow of heart they were and he castigates them not for being mistaken but for choosing to be mistaken, for choosing a path of bitterness instead of one of grace. I mean they even went so far as to tell Jesus that even though there was ample evidence that their savior had risen from the grave, after all their tomb was empty and they had witnesses who described a confrontation with angels saying that Jesus was alive, it still wasn't enough to overcome their choice to disbelieve. So Jesus lovingly takes them to task. And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" And beginning with Moses and the Prophets,

he opens up the Scriptures to them and so what God is doing here he's explaining that what he has done at the cross was so spectacular, so mind-bending that Jesus himself had to explain to them that the king of the universe had not only won a spectacular victory at the cross, he had won it completely even though it looked as if it was a devastating defeat. They saw Jesus as only a man who had bitterly disappointed them. So Jesus takes them deep into the scriptures to show them that he was God himself who had come down to earth and taken the form of flesh and lived a perfect life and then offered that perfect life up as payment for sin on the cross. He showed them that what looked like ultimate defeat was in fact the greatest of victories. I mean Jesus is literally showing them the differences between grace and bitterness. And the disciples said, *"Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the scriptures to us?"* Jesus showed them treasures that were previously unable to be seen. They'd been teetering on the very brink of bitterness when Jesus physically intervened to redirect their course. But you know what Jesus showed them in scripture is something that we have access to any time, anywhere, in multiple translations, in multiple formats. But we still have to make the choice. And that choice is to go to God's grace instead of bitterness.

So Paul first makes the choice to choose joy in recalling the start

of the church at Philippi. His second choice for joy was in the ongoing growth of the Philippian church. He said this in verse 3: *I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.* So he commends the love he sees expressed by the Philippians as a love that's now properly bound by knowledge and discernment and he prays that that love will grow. He says: *And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.* Paul's joy is that the Philippians, they're not known just for their love, they're also known for love bounded by knowledge and discernment. And we spoke at that time of how critical it is to have a Proverbs 3:5 understanding of scripture in order to be able to choose between grace and bitterness. *Proverbs 3:5* says: *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.* See the choices that we make when things become tough or difficult are really directly related to whether or not we have a Proverbs 3:5 understanding of life. I mean here's what God is telling us. God is telling us that life is going to give you all kinds of false data. He says your

understanding is going to tempt you to fill in the blanks with very, very limited information. So God says don't go there. God says go there and it will only lead to bitterness. And what he says, instead he says invite me into every single area of your life because you may not realize it, I'm already there. That's precisely what Paul did. And we saw that in Paul's attitude towards his imprisonment. He constantly refused to lean on his own understanding and so he constantly saw things from God's perspective. He goes on to say in verse 12, he says: *I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.*

I mentioned we are introduced to this split screen vision of Paul's, of seeing eternity and his present day circumstance almost simultaneously. On the one side you have the awful reality of a Roman dungeon; on the other side you have the split screen of the unfolding of God's plan that's taking place right before his eyes and that's where his joy is coming from. I mean Paul realized he wasn't just sitting in a Roman dungeon. He realizes that he was communicating to the soldiers the very same gospel that he had been proclaiming outside, and it turns out that those soldiers actually were part of the process of spreading that gospel throughout all of

Rome. He saw the church as growing just like Christ said they would, like mustard seeds. He also began to see what Jesus spoke about in the parables, that there were actually birds nesting in their branches, that the advance of the kingdom of God was literally changing the world. I mean Paul got to see that this vision of Christ was taking shape right in his own life, and everywhere that Paul looked, he saw the same split screen vision of *Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.* And it was that split screen vision that enabled him to do what? It enabled him to choose, to choose to squeeze joy out of anything and everything that was happening to him. And he did that by once again relying on his split screen vision of earth and eternity, putting each in its proper place -- quote -- *As we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.* See that life in eternity was so real and so present that it allowed Paul to look straight through circumstances that were truly awful to see a future that was so bright that nothing would dim it. And by refusing to lean on his own understanding, Paul was able to realize a principle that radically enabled him to endure -- quote -- "wasting his life away in a Roman jail." Paul leaned not on his own understanding, and so he acknowledged God in such a way that he realized that God wastes nothing. He knew that God was able to take any and all circumstances and use them in ways

far beyond what we think. He also knew that him being taken out of the picture would force the church to rely not on Paul but on the Holy Spirit. And he knew that some people would be preaching in his place out of sincere motives to advance the gospel while others were actually thrilled that he's now out of the picture, they were anticipating their own personal ministries growing in his absence, but here's the amazing thing. Amazing thing is he really didn't care. What he really cared about was that the kingdom was advancing. He says in verse 15: *Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice.* You see what he's doing here? He's choosing I will rejoice. This is his third choice and he's choosing to be joyful. That's why Paul was able to endure the seeming absolute waste of a Roman prison cell.

And He goes on to say in verse 19: *For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as*

*always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. These are not idle words. This is not hyperbole. Paul is seriously looking at a death sentence. And he's looking death in the face and he's basically saying it's up to you, God. Whatever you want. If you want me to depart this life to be with you, hey, that would be great. If you want me to stay and encourage the brothers here, that's fine too. See Paul is simply sold out to God and to his kingdom. He goes on to say in verse 21: For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress -- and what? -- and joy in the faith. So now Paul is literally fighting for the church's joy. I mean he recognizes that either choice will be God's choice and that no civil authority in Rome or anyone else is going to have anything to do with that, which is also helpful for us to remember during this political season. And he's also perfectly okay recognizing that if God chooses to leave him on earth, it's for the purpose of encouraging the church's progress and faith and that for a specific reason, for their joy in the faith, so that they too could glory in Jesus Christ.*

He goes on to say in verse 27: *Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. This is the vision of the church that gave Paul such joy as he's sitting there in a jail cell. But then in the next verse, he ups the ante. Verse 29 says: For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have. So Paul takes us to believing place where the church almost never goes and that's the choices that we make in the midst of suffering. We tend to see suffering as the exception to the rule. God sees it as part and parcel of a complete relationship with him. In Romans 8:16 he says: The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs -- heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. 1 Peter 4:13 says: But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. James 1 says: Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds. You know why God seems to draw this direct link between joy*



and suffering? Well God tells us why in the second half of that verse in James. He says this. He says: *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.* Okay, so what's steadfastness? Well steadfastness comes from choosing grace instead of bitterness and then sensing the actual presence of God walking with you through trials and tribulation and suffering. Suffering's the place where theory becomes practice. It's where you learn sometimes with the force of a thunderbolt that God really, really loves me and he's not some theoretical construct but a living presence right here, right now in the midst of my struggle. I mean I wish that came through good times and pleasure but it just doesn't. Good times and pleasure takes me to places where God is often an afterthought rather than my main focus. Remember Paul here, he's writing to the Philippians in a place where good time and pleasure are distant memories, but it still doesn't stop Paul from experiencing joy. And the reason why has to do with his choosing grace and finding the steadfast presence of Jesus.

You know when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thrown into that fiery furnace by Nebuchadnezzar, the crowd was astounded to see that they were untouched by the fire but they were astounded by something else and that something else was that there was a fourth

person that they saw in the midst of that fire. Well that fourth person was Christ, the pre-incarnate Christ. And he was visibly demonstrating that when we go through the fire, he goes through that fire with us. We know that Paul was beaten, whipped, stoned, starved, shipwrecked and imprisoned and every time Paul knew that he wasn't going through that alone. He knew that when he was being beaten, God was right there beside him. When he was being whipped, God was accompanying him and it was the same for Paul being stoned and starved and shipwrecked and imprisoned and each time he went through those trials he became more and more and more steadfast because he recognized he didn't have to rely on his own strength, because he recognized that God was getting him through this.

Have you ever had an experience like Paul's? Have you ever been able to look back at a trial knowing that God has gotten you through it and it's now behind you? I can think of dozens of times when I rejoiced and said, "Man, am I glad that's over." But there's another critical part that takes place every time you go through a trial, and that other part has to do with the knowing part, it's that Greek word "ginosko" which is "knowledge gained by experience." It is knowing, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. I've said it many times, you can study a hundred different books about how to wrestle, you can know every single technical name of every single hold and takedown there is,

you can even watch all kinds of videos about how to execute each move, but until you get into the ring, until you actually wrestle, you're never going to know how to wrestle. God knows that you can't learn wrestling by studying books on wrestling, you actually have to wrestle, and guess what? Wrestling is painful. You can learn all kinds of wonderful things about God from books and from conferences and from scripture itself, but some things, particularly the things relating to God's actual presence, those things you only learn by going through them. The same is true for the joy that comes from the trials and the testing that produced the knowledge through experience you can't get anywhere else. It's the knowledge that God's grace is sufficient and that he's a good God and that he is still in control, and that's precisely where that joy in a jail cell came from for Paul. Abiding in Christ means growing to know him enough to trust him even when circumstance begins to shout otherwise. But it all comes down to the choices that we make. When you grow to know Jesus well enough so that no matter what your circumstance is, you know, you know for certain that God is good, you know that he's in control and you have that as the bedrock, bottom line confidence, then you have the ability to make a conscious choice to praise him regardless the circumstance. Paul made a conscious choice to embrace joy and in so doing what he did was he opened up the tap of grace and he shut down the tap of bitterness. That's why we say God's joy is able to

float above circumstance. I mean circumstance can certainly drown happiness but it can't sink something that's riding above it. And no one knew that better than Jesus and he set the example for all of us. And that's why suffering is a part of following Jesus. In *1 Peter 2:21*: *For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.* God himself entered into the greatest horror a human being could ever embrace. He who knew no sin became sin for us and then he had to face his Father bearing our sin. And yet in the worst possible circumstance Jesus was able to find joy. How so, I mean in *Hebrews 12:2*, it says: *Keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that lay before Him endured a cross and despised the shame and has sat down at the right hand of God's throne.* Jesus found joy in horrific circumstances by doing the same thing that we need to do when we find that our circumstances are filled with trial and tribulation. He exercised the very same control, the same confidence and choice that we exercise when we seek to find joy. And in spite of the very worst experience a human can go through, Jesus found joy. And he found joy first because his testing had produced in him steadfastness. He had that settled assurance that God was in complete control of his life throughout his crucifixion. As a rest he said in *Matthew 26*: *"Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of*

angels?" And when he was ushered into Pilate's presence he said in *John 19*, he said: *"You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above."* Jesus said that because he knew who was in complete control of every event of his life including his torture and execution. Because Jesus knew that God was in control, he was certain that the outcome was in his Father's hands and therefore in spite of the fact that he was going to experience complete and utter abandonment by everyone, including his Father, he was okay.

The psalmist in *Psalm 22* took us into Jesus' very heart when he said at the cross: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.* See this is where we go when we feel abandoned by God. Because in spite of his real, his absolutely real abandonment, Christ had the quiet confidence that ultimately everything was going to be all right. His confidence in his Father was based on his steadfast trust in the absolute control that God had of all things, including the cross itself. And he expressed his steadfast confidence in the very same Psalm by saying in verse 3: *Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried and were rescued; in you they trusted and were not put to shame.*

You see, because of the control that Jesus knew that God had, he had the confidence to make the choice to praise his Father in every situation including the cross. Jesus focused his discipline on his priorities toward the kingdom and when he was faced with the most monstrous of choices, he was able to look through the present by means of the past to secure the future. And again, he did it with joy, for the joy that lay before him he endured the cross. See, when the cross was looming as a present day reality for Jesus, he looked at it right there in the present and he understood its connection to the past, to a past that went way back before creation even began and then he looked forward to a future where a risen Christ would see the fruit of his labor and that vision, that choice to see that vision is what gave him the joy. It was a textbook definition of how you find joy in the worst of circumstance. I mean Jesus like Paul, like Tim and Aileen, he first, number one, understood his Father's control; number two, he placed his full confidence in that control; and number three, it empowered his choice to trust. We too find joy in painful circumstances by abiding in Christ in the same way that he abided in his Father.

Sometimes when my kids were in pain or in struggle, try to help walk them through the process and I would pick out a time in the past when things were particularly difficult or painful and I kind

of re-walk them through and I remember saying to them, remember how difficult that was, how awful that was? Do you remember how much you thought that you were adrift and that God was nowhere to be found and you remember how it turned out, and how regardless of whatever way it turned out, you found out that God was there and that he actually was in control in the midst of it? And if he was guiding you then and there, isn't it reasonable to think that he'll be guiding you right now in the present or later in the future even though it might not feel like it? That's what where the confidence comes to choose grace over bitterness.

And this brings me back to that awful post that I read at the beginning of this message. It may be difficult for us to relate to Paul sitting in a Roman jail cell 2,000 years ago, but it's all too easy for us to relate to this, to feel the force of the horror that Tim and Aileen Challies are experiencing this very week. They exemplify how we walk through even the most horrific of circumstances. We hurt and we feel and we cry until we can't cry anymore. But then we trust. We trust because we've been there before, maybe many times before, maybe just a few times, maybe for the very first time. Each of us is going to have opportunities to experience the reality of a God who says: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.* And all

of that was captured in two sentences uttered by Tim Challies which says again, "We don't want to do this, but we can do this -- this sorrow, this grief, this devastation -- because we know we don't have to do it in our own strength. We can do it like Christians, like a son and daughter of the Father who knows what it is to lose a Son." It may seem strange or even cruel to some to suggest that that is a statement of joy, but it is. It's a statement of choosing grace over bitterness. And again to go back to Paul's words in verse 29, he says: *For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.* We are all of us engaged in that same conflict right here and right now, but understand something, we are not alone. We are surrounded and empowered by a God who loved us enough to die for us, with a confidence that God will get us through and the unlimited grace of God to help us make a choice for grace and against bitterness, and we have Jesus himself as our example. *For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.* Let's pray.

*Father, I just I pray right now for Tim and Aileen Challies and just the horror that they're going through and I can't speak for them but I am almost certain that they feel your presence in a way*



*they've never felt before. I pray for that, Lord, I pray that you would guide them through this awful circumstance, that they would understand and know that you are in control of all things and on the basis of that confidence that they would make the choice to choose grace instead of bitterness. Lord, I pray that for each and every one of us, may we make that choice guided by your grace. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*