

# Philippians 1:12-26 – Joy in Suffering

*Philippians*

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**Bible Text:** Philippians 1:12-26

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If you would, turn in your Bibles to Philippians one, Philippians chapter one. We will be reading verses 12 through 26.

But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from good will: The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice. For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.

For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you. And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith, that your rejoicing for me may be more abundant in Jesus Christ by my coming to you again.<sup>1</sup>

This is God's Word.

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 1:12-26.

Last week we saw Paul's joy in the fellowship that he shared with the Philippian Church. They had a very unique and pleasant relationship, a deep fellowship and that opening section is filled with the use of the word "joy." And then, again here, joy is front and center. But this time it is joy in the midst of suffering. And so that is what we are going to be talking about tonight, joy in the middle of suffering.

As I prepared to preach this sermon I was aware of two things that were very discouraging and they are discouraging me even as I stand here tonight. The first is this. I don't think I am very good at finding joy in suffering personally and I don't like to suffer and as much as I try to grow in grace and in Christ I still find that I don't like to suffer. I don't enjoy and, in fact, I want to avoid it at all costs. If the situation is risky or dangerous, my desire and my instinct is to flee from it and to avoid suffering in any way possible. That is the first discouragement.

The second discouragement is that most of the Christians I have known, most of the people in the pews, like most of the pastors, also do not want to suffer. They don't want to suffer at all. In fact, in a lot of cases their tolerance for suffering is much lower than ours. They don't want to sacrifice. We talk about it, sing about it, but none of us really mean it.

I made the joke recently and it wasn't a very good joke that in all my time growing up in ministry and being around people, I tell them, I have met many people who have left their church or have left the church I was a part of. I have yet never heard a parishioner come to a pastor and say, "Pastor, this isn't our favorite church. There are some things we don't like. But my family and I have decided that for the unity of the body and for the glory of the kingdom and the advance of the gospel, we are going to choose to suffer through those things rather than depart." I have never heard that.

What I have heard from parishioners dozens of times now is how their felt needs are not being met, their petty grievances, their little sufferings. And as soon as the church or a situation starts to require even the smallest amount of inconvenience such as hard to sit in pews or bad time or long services or I don't like the preaching or that person who looks at me funny, people are ready to flee.

We are like that because that is the way our culture is. And I am like that because it is the way our culture is. That is the way our sinful hearts are. In our culture suffering is evil. It is always evil, simple. It is a very simple approach to suffering. Our culture says suffering is bad. And whatever you need to do to make it stop, do it, even if it is not necessarily all that ethical.

So if you are suffering, if you are struggling with something, by all means take some drugs regardless of whether that is really the best way to handle the situation. We have an extremely over medicated society where when people are suffering, rather than deal through that, work through that or embrace that suffering they immediately run to medication.

Now, I know that sometimes medication is an appropriate solution, but even unbelieving people would tell you that our country is heavily, heavily over medicated and that people who cannot deal with things run to these things as solution. We flee suffering. We collect insurances.

Have you ever noticed how many kinds of insurance you have to carry with you just to be a normal person in our society? Again, I am not opposed to insurance. I am not encouraging any of you to default on your insurance, but it, I think, gives us a picture of what we are about as a society. We are just simply not a society about suffering, are we? We are a society built around pleasure and consumerism which is really the opposite of suffering and sacrifice.

And so our culture's stance is very, very simple and I think because we are part of that culture, whether we want to be or not, our stance tends to be very, very simple. We do not want to suffer. We do not want to be asked to sacrifice and we don't want to experience hard things. And we will flee or hide or ignore or drug ourselves out or whatever we need to do to avoid such situations. So that is our culture's stance.

There is also in the Church now a growing way of bringing that into theology and actually making that the standard belief in Charismatic and Pentecostal churches. We are told that if you are suffering, it is just because you don't have enough faith. So, again, suffering is a purely evil thing, very simply. And you should avoid it and, in fact, God wants you to avoid it now. It is not even something he ever designed or ever planned for your life. It is just there because of your sin and if you would just do the right things and have enough faith, you could get over it. So it is really your fault.

But, again, it is... just as with the culture that it came out of, suffering is always evil, suffering is always to be avoided and is avoidable if you do the right things.

In Joni Eareckson Tada's new book on suffering that she recently wrote she tells a story of going on a Christian radio program with a man who held these kind of views and she had a very—it sounded like a pretty good interview with him. And at the end of the interview the man turned, if you will, to the radio audience and he said, "Now Joni has not been healed, but if you have faith, unlike Joni, you can be healed." And that is how he ended the discussion. That is how now our culture's view and philosophy of suffering has entered now into the church and is actually being promoted as a theology of suffering that says, again, suffering is bad, pure and simple and should be avoided at all costs.

So both in our culture and also now growing within the church is this very negative approach to suffering, very purely negative approach to suffering. Sufferings is always bad. Suffering should always be avoided. Suffering should always be escaped at the earliest possible moment.

The problem with that is that biblical Christianity does not let us stay there. It doesn't teach that. What it has to say about suffering is much more nuanced, much more complicated, much more difficult.

First of all, we can't deny the value and importance of suffering because at the heart of biblical Christianity is a man, Jesus, who chooses to suffer. He is very clear. No one takes his life from him. He chooses of his own to embrace suffering and not just a little, but a lot.

But there is also great story, stories like Joseph's story where Joseph is sold into slavery and at the end of that story he says, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. All this suffering, me being in prison, me being sold into slavery, God intended it. It wasn't a punishment. It was part of a good plan."

So if your view of suffering is that suffering is always simply, purely evil and to be avoided, what do we do with Joseph? And, maybe most important of all from the Scriptures we have, "What do you do with Job?"

Job doesn't suffer because he lacks faith. Job suffers, if you read the book, precisely because he has faith. Satan says to God, "There is nobody on earth like Job. He has got so much faith. He loves you so much, but if I get after him, he will change his heart."

And God, of course, allows him to do that to glorify himself.

And so, again, if you see suffering as something that is purely, simply bad with no redemptive qualities and to be avoided at all costs and you can't make sense of that view when you come to Scripture. The Bible has just this much deeper, fuller, more complicated view of suffering.

In our passage that is what Paul is, I believe, doing and spelling out for us. He is, to put it in our terminology, working through or processing what is happening to him and telling the Philippians what he is learning, what he is seeing and what he believes in the midst of his suffering. He has been falsely accused. He was almost killed in Jerusalem by a mob. He was falsely accused. He has been dragged all over the world, shipwrecked and now he is under house arrest in Rome. And remember this was a very shame oriented culture. So it was a public shame for him to be in this position. And that probably wore on him every day. So it was a very acute form of suffering and he is now working through that in our text. And what is shocking to find and what is important to find is that Paul, in the midst of this storm, as his boat of life, if you will, is being shaken and thrown about the waters, finds joy and holds on to joy through his suffering and actually finds in his suffering God working for good and gives us so much a better, deeper understanding of how God uses suffering and its purpose in a believer's life and how we can endure it.

So, first of all, I want you to look with me at what I believe the first statement in our text is. It is this. Paul says to us, "I have joy in my suffering, because suffering is a vehicle for the gospel."

It begins, really, with verse 12.

“But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me...”<sup>2</sup> suffering, false accusation, imprisonment, “... have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel.”<sup>3</sup>

It is a little hard to express in English, but the original is full of a sense of surprise. Paul is saying to them, “This may shock you, but this thing that we in our culture look at as such a shameful thing that I should be in prison, this thing that seems so wrong has actually turned out to the furtherance of the gospel. It is very counter intuitive. You would have thought that a free Paul, a Paul wandering around that part of the world, sharing the gospel freely, not in prison, that that would have been a more effective ministry strategy. You would have thought that having a key member of the early Church in prison would have brought shame on the Christian Church and, therefore, should be avoided at all costs. And yet God’s ministry plan, as we see so often in Scripture is so different than ours. God is going to use Paul’s suffering as a vehicle for the spread and growth of the gospel around the world. And so Paul begins by saying that. It has actually turned out for good.

This is a very strange way to think. Have you ever thought this way about your suffering, that you have been given certain kinds of suffering for the express purpose of advancing the gospel in those areas? I wonder if it would be interesting. I am sure it would be, to sit down with Joni’s parents, Joni Eareckson Tada’s parents and ask them, “When you first heard that Joni had jackknife dived off a [?] and had—as you probably know, if you know the story—broke her neck and she would probably never walk again. She would be wheelchair bound for the rest of her life. Was your first reaction that God is going to use this to change the whole disabled community in America?”

I doubt that was the reaction or the thought. And it wasn’t the thought with Paul either. He didn’t see his suffering, at least at first. And you see that in the text as something that was going to further the gospel. I think he believed that by being free he could do so much more.

What was God thinking? And yet the suffering becomes the vehicle and he expresses that surprise here, the surprise that the suffering had become the very vehicle through which God was going to grow his Church.

So one of the reasons we cannot adopt this sort of simplistic, negative view towards all suffering, all suffering is because of someone’s specific sin or all suffering is just evil and avoid it at all cost, is that suffering is a vehicle for the furtherance of the gospel. That continues in verse 13. Here is what... how it worked.

Verse 13. Because of the suffering vehicle, “...it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Philippians 1:12.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 1:13.

So here you have a whole group of people, these elite guards who we know from history very elite group of men, very close to the royals, if you will, to the upper classes of Roman society. They are being constantly, as they rotate every four hours or so guarding Paul, they are being constantly exposed to the gospel. That is how God was using this suffering as a vehicle for bringing about his will.

Sinclair Ferguson makes the point that when this part of the letter to the Philippians was being read, the Philippian jailer and his family must have been sitting there smiling, because they knew all about how this worked, how having Paul in your jail could end up being more than you bargained for. And certainly although Paul here is under house arrest, the same thing is happening. These very elite men who are very close to the inner levels of Roman power are hearing the gospel because of Paul's suffering and this is not a group of people he normally would have ever had access to. And yet you see how the suffering becomes the vehicle for the gospel.

Then, again, verse 14. Again, suffering is the vehicle.

“And most of the brethren in the Lord... are much more bold to speak the word without fear.”<sup>5</sup>

Not only is a people group being reached that would not have been reached, but the believers are seeing this and it is encouraging them to speak out.

We have seen in recent months a lot of unrest in the Middle East and one of the calculations that rulers in the Middle East have made over the last several months is that if we come down hard on certain members of the revolt, we will quell, we will put down the revolution that is taking place in our land. We will stop the rebellion. And what we have seen is actually the opposite. And you see it throughout history that as people have been tortured or killed or silenced the crowds have actually grown. People have become bold by those people who have pioneered and have suffered for them. And they become inspired and actually the next day you will often see there is more people out and they are more radical than ever. That is exactly what is going on here. The believers are watching Paul suffer and rather than be intimidated and be more quiet now about their faith, they are actually getting excited and they are speaking out.

This, again, is something that could not have happened without suffering. Suffering is God's vehicle here to grow his Church, to inspire them to build his people.

Then verse 15 and 17 we learn—and I won't read all those verses that... Again, his suffering has actually—and this is strange—but his suffering has goaded some who preach for poor motives, but has gotten them excited to preach Christ even more. They are doing it for the wrong motive which is to through extra weight on his shoulders, but nonetheless, his situation of suffering is actually kind of encouraging them indirectly to preach more. And so they are. And so in all these different ways the suffering becomes the vehicle for the gospel going forward.

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<sup>5</sup> Philippians 1:14.

Now this doesn't in any way condone the false accusations made against Paul or the injustice that is being done here. And we are not suggesting that this suffering was easy to go through or that we should go after suffering just for suffering's sake. But what we can't ignore from Scripture is that suffering is God's vehicle, many, many times to bring his gospel into greater and greater fullness.

So, first of all, he has joy in suffering because he understands that suffering is—and for him right now—God's vehicle for bringing the gospel more clearly into people's lives. And the crescendo for all this is the end of the section, verse 18.

“What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth...”<sup>6</sup> whether it is me talking to the guards or these false, not false teachers, but pretentious teachers doing their work, “Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.”<sup>7</sup>

His joy has not been stolen from him because even though the suffering hurts and it is not what he would have desired, it is the vehicle for accomplishing gospel ministry.

Second reason now that joy has not left him in that he is a joyful man in the midst of suffering and that is the second statement, if you will, this text makes is this. Paul says, “I have joy in my suffering because my suffering cannot take from me the things that matter most. For me to live is Christ. You can't take that away from me. And to die, the one thing you can take away from me, is actually gain. So I am untouchable in a sense. And for that reason you cannot take my joy and my suffering because you can't take anything I really have to have in life. The one thing I really have to have, the only thing I really have to have,” Paul says, “is Christ and I have him and therefore my joy cannot be taken away from me.”

You see it first in verses 19 through 20. Look with me, real quick, at those verses.

For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.<sup>8</sup>

Now this is very, very important. The deliverance that he mentions in verse 19 that he is certain will come is not deliverance from his suffering situation. He is not saying, “I am confident because of your prayers in the Holy Spirit that I am going to be found not guilty by the Romans and set free.”

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<sup>6</sup> Philippians 1:14.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Philippians 1:19-20.

We know that because at the bottom of 20, "...whether by life or by death."<sup>9</sup> He says, "Whichever happens."

The deliverance he is talking about is deliverance from the trial of suffering. You see that in the middle portion.

"According to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body."<sup>10</sup>

In other words he is saying, "The real trial is not simply the suffering itself, it is how I respond to it. And my confidence is that because you are praying for me and because I have the supply of the Holy Spirit, while I suffer I will not deny Jesus. I will not start living like an unbeliever because of my suffering."

And if you have suffered, you know that almost immediately that is a temptation, to throw down our faith, to throw down the things we believe in and to panic and to run to everything else except Christ and to sin and to sin greatly because we are exposed.

That is the real test, Paul says. "And I have this great confidence that because of your prayers and the Holy Spirit, I will pass my test. And the outcome, life or death, that is not the problem for me. The concern for me is will I magnify Jesus with boldness while I suffer?"

Now that is so strange to me and to you because when we are suffering all we want to do is get out of it and when our kids are suffering all we want to do is get them out of suffering as quickly as possible. And the last thing we are thinking about is: Jesus, I want to magnify you in my suffering.

We are thinking about how to get out of it. Where is the end, not about the middle. But yet that is what Paul is focused on. Why? Because, as I said at the beginning, because Christ is everything for him. He is not threatened by the suffering. He is threatened by this own heart. He wants to magnify Christ.

And so when we pray for each other, it is certainly not wrong to pray that so and so will get well or they will pass through whatever kind of suffering God has given them and they will come out on the other end. But more than that we need to be praying like this, that they will magnify Christ with boldness while they suffer, while it is going on.

None of us wants to do that. And because we don't want to do it ourselves we are... at least we are consistent, we don't want others to do it either. So we pray for them. Please, Lord, deliver them from such and such. And that is not God's will. He often chooses the people with the most faith and gives them the most misery and pain and suffering and illness for that very purpose.

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<sup>9</sup> Philippians 1:20.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



You see what that radio host didn't understand was that Joni had more faith, probably in her finger, than he had in his whole body. She had to, to survive every day under the providence of God's hand and what he had allowed in her life. And it was just for that reason that God hasn't healed her because by being there she magnifies him in a way that could not be done in any other form.

That is what Paul means later in this book when he says, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."<sup>11</sup>

It is another quote we throw around all the time, but look at the context. The context is I can suffer anything through Christ who strengthens me. I can endure anything through Christ who strengthens me. And, again, you see it in verse 21.

"For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain."<sup>12</sup>

And then, following, "But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor."<sup>13</sup>

I know I have said this a lot, but I will say it again. The purpose of our lives and the purpose of our church is just two things. It makes it really simple, doesn't it, two things. Worship and service.

Do you remember the old hymnal? It will help you remember, worship and service. We are not here to have our felt needs met. You are not here because there is other people your age here. You are not here so that you will be accepted. You are not here to be comfortable. You are here to do two things tonight and every time you come to church. And, really, in your family and through the world, two things only. It is the whole purpose of your life. Worship God in everything and serve. That is it. That is it. Worship and serve. That comes out of texts like this.

Paul says it doesn't matter. You see, if I die, I get more worship. I go to Christ and my life is nothing but pure unmitigated worship. If I live, I get to serve God's people more, so I get to serve more. So either way it is a win, win.

And he even struggles here with which it will be and he comes down in the end, you know, in this last verse to say, "I think right now God wants me to serve and so I will endure."

But notice the clarity with which he is thinking. He is not saying, "Look, this isn't the life I signed up for. Why am I having all this suffering?" He is saying, "No, I am here to worship and serve and I am in joy because I have not lost those two things. I am worshipping and I am serving and I am probably doing more of it than I used to, than I normally do because of the suffering actually." And so he is full of joy and hope.

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<sup>11</sup> Philippians 4:13.

<sup>12</sup> Philippians 1:21.

<sup>13</sup> Philippians 1:22.

Such a clear presentation, isn't it, of what he is living for, stripped down of all the stuff that we live for, convenience, pleasure, so simple. I live to worship and serve Jesus Christ. And there is no suffering that can take that away, so therefore there is no suffering that can steal completely my joy in the Lord, joy in the midst of suffering.

Three things I want you to take with you as we leave and I will take them, too, because, as I said, I am far away here on this issue and have much growing to do. The first is this. Suffering is complicated. Spend a lot of time thinking, praying and listening before you speak to someone else's suffering or before you form a definite and clear opinion of your own. Remember that the book of Job is pretty big and at the end of the book after all these men have been talking about suffering for like, I don't know, almost 40 chapters, right? At the end of the book God says, "You are all full of hot air." And they all have to repent because they are all wrong and they all messed the whole thing up.

So before you form an opinion about suffering, before you decide that someone else is suffering because they are sinning or you come to some judgment about your own suffering that is just pure evil, there is nothing redemptive about it, God has no gospel purpose in it, before you kind of come to those gut reactions that we all tend to, think and pray.

I have told this story before and it was a form of suffering that it fits with this sermon. It was a form of suffering God wanted me to go through. It was shortly after my mother died that I was talking with a very sincere believer who very insistently told me that my mother died because she lacked faith, that if she had only had faith she would be alive, that God did not want her to have cancer. In fact, her cancer was because of her sin. And had she believed in God, she would have been free from that suffering. That is where we are going as a society, toward making these snap decisions about suffering and illness.

I think of missions. This is one place where you see it very clearly. If you know anything about the history of missions you know that up to about 100 years ago when you went on a missions trip, when you became a missionary you left your home and you never returned. And half those people died of exotic illnesses in the country they went to because there was no modern medicine. It was very common for missionaries to go and lose half their family or their whole family and never, never to see their family again. It was not because they lacked faith. It was actually faith that brought so much suffering into their life that they might boldly speak for Christ in the midst of agony because Christ is glorified in that way just as Job brought glory to God by resisting the temptation of Satan and never in the book of Job does he turn his back on God and so at the end of that book God exalts Job. He rebukes him, kind of puts him in his place but he also says at the end of that book, "In none of these things did Job sin." And God was glorified because as the pressure was put on Job, Job praised the Lord.

So don't make snap judgments about your own suffering or others. For God has many purposes going on in suffering, many, many purposes, first of all.

Second of all, I believe suffering is always, for us as Christians, it is always an opportunity for the gospel to go forward in your life or in the life of someone else. How does the suffering you are going through right now equip you, uniquely, to minister to other people? And I would add the more severe the suffering the more specific the equipping.

There is no question that someone like Joni can be wheeled into a room and have immediate credibility especially with other disabled people because when she talks about finding joy in the Lord and accepting God's providence in your life, it is believable, isn't it? It would be to every one of you. God opened up, by adding that suffering to her life, this whole field of ministry.

I would say the same is true for all of us in other kinds of suffering that we have. You have broken relationships. Guess what? There is people around you who have terribly broken relationships who you can mourn with, who you can pray with, who you can encourage.

And we could go on and on.

It is also, of course, a way for you to see yourself. And this gets in to some of the deep parts of what the Bible says about suffering. The Bible says that suffering and/or prosperity does not make you who you are. It reveals who you already are.

And so not only is suffering a way for the gospel to go forward in other people's lives, it is a way for you to get a feel for who you really are because when you are under a lot of pressure, when life is really difficult, what do you? And the way you respond to that tells you a lot about where your struggles are, where your sin is, where you need to be praying about what you need to be praying for and how you need help from others. It is very, very revealing.

Do you run away? Do you watch a lot more television? Do you eat? Do you do medications? What do you do? Do you try to control everything around you, put it all in place? What are all the little coping mechanisms that you have that show that your trust really isn't in God or reveals where you really are in your soul. Suffering is a moment for reflection and a moment to think deeply because it is such an opportunity for the gospel both in your own life and others.

And, lastly, most important of all, the key to keeping your joy in suffering is Jesus. It is Jesus.

We said at the beginning of this series that the topic here is joy and fellowship in Christ. And I add that part because I want to be so clear. It is probably kind of redundant for some of you, but I add it to be extra clear that this is not happy go lucky joy. This is not pretending like everything is ok, bubbly joy. This is a joy that is built on a rock solid

foundation and if I am his and he is mine. Or, to put it on Paul's words here, "To live is Christ, and to die is gain."<sup>14</sup>

That is where joy comes from. It does not come as you look out the sides of your ship as you are bouncing up and down in the storms of life. It comes when you know that the person on board, as we talked about this morning in Sunday school, the person on board is the author of life and is the one who sent the storm and in his own time will calm the storm. And when you know those things, when you see those things, you can rejoice and have peace and you can think deeply about your suffering and you actually, I believe, begin to see how that suffering is actually pushing forward the gospel in your life and the life of those around you.

So your homework is: Go live and as you live I don't have to assign it. You are going to suffer. But when you suffer, look to Christ and see how he will use that, how he will transform that to expand his kingdom.

Let's pray.

*Father, we confess, one and all, that we on many occasions have avoided suffering, have avoided tension or lack of comfort at the expense of what could have been good for our soul and the soul of another. We confess our addiction to comfort and to quiet. Father, we pray that you would forgive us of this sin. Forgive us for coming here and singing about a man, the Lord Jesus, who died and gave himself and suffered and chose suffering and then going out and living the lives where we avoid suffering at any cost. Forgive us for that hypocrisy, Lord. Help us to find instead our joy in you so that whether we prosper or we struggle, we might rejoice in the Lord. For we pray it in his name. Amen.*

Please stand.

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<sup>14</sup> Philippians 1:21.