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This Sunday at MRC we continued our series in Philippians looking at Paul's example in prison from v12-26.

Regardless of the type of suffering we experience there are only 2 responses – (1) either to turn to God in humble trust and faith, or (2) from him as we harden our hearts to him and his sovereignty. We saw that Paul is very much turning to God in the midst of his hardships - leading us to the lynch-pin verse of the section - v21.

For Paul life is fundamentally about Jesus

Because Paul has Jesus at the foundation of who he is, at the core of his identity and joy. He knows that to live is Christ. And because Jesus' resurrection gets him through death, and because in death he gets more of Jesus - so to die is gain. Because Paul's joy is found in Christ and the advance of the gospel (v12) and of his people (v25).

...it's not found in personal comfort.

For Paul Jesus comes before comfort. He might be in prison (probably in house arrest in Rome - see Acts 28) but he's rejoicing as the gospel rings out as a response - inside the prison because that means the palace guard get to hear of Christ and outside the prison because others are emboldened to speak for Jesus. Paul is a footnote, Jesus is what matters. Very often for us comfort comes first and Jesus comes second (think of how we give or serve etc). Were scared to give our all to him as we're scared where we might end up. We don't experience the kind of joy Paul talks of, because we keep putting ourselves first. It's also a challenge to us when we think 'when these circumstances just get sorted... Then God can use me...' As wherever he is Paul is looking for Jesus at work.

...it's not found in personal reputation

The other extraordinary thing that happens is Paul's opponents are encouraged to speak more boldly out of rivalry and bad motives. As we said on Sunday we don't know who these Christians were (- not the enemies of ch 3) - perhaps some of the factions in his letter to the Romans have further grown. We do know Paul's response is that he doesn't care. Their ministry and gospel proclamation may be founded in bad motives but as long as Jesus is preached - he doesn't mind. It's not about Paul's empire or Kingdom it's about Jesus and his gospel being proclaimed.

We noted how this was a helpful word for us in a world where reputation matters a lot (and hence we often keep quiet when we should speak up), or where churches can easily seek to grow mini empires and kingdoms. Regardless of who people are and why they are preaching as long as Christ is preached it doesn't matter. As we finished we noted that a key question for us is how we would finish v21. What, for us, is our reason for life? Where do we find life? To live is? Money? Success? Popularity? Health? Friendships? Rest? For many of us (all of us?) Jesus is simply too small. He's ok. He's pretty good. But as we diminish him so other things grow in his place. And that's why joy is elusive and distant.

As always, feel free to use and adapt these questions as you see fit.

How is your joy at the moment? Why or why not?!
How does our culture value comfort? In what ways do we see this at work? How has Covid affected this?
How does Paul view his current situation? How does this apply to us?

Read v21.
What does the verse actually mean?
Why is Paul happy to die?
How would you finish the 'to live is.....' sentence?

How does Paul value Jesus above comfort?
What does he care about? Why?
How does this apply to us?
What would you say to someone who said that God could not use them because of a hard life situation?

How does Paul value Jesus above reputation?
How might we be tempted to build kingdoms and empires?
Why are these verses so challenging for us in our culture?