

## CHOOSE JOY | ENJOY THE JOURNEY

In 1996, National Community Church was just getting off the ground. We averaged 25 people on a good Sunday. Total income as a church was \$2000 a month, and it cost \$1600 to rent the DC public school where we met. That left \$400 for our salary and all other expenses. If we're being honest, it was downright discouraging. We were coming off a failed church plant in Chicago, and NCC wasn't trending much better. This is a little embarrassing to admit, but I remember thinking to myself that when we hit a certain attendance, when we hit a certain income—WHEN we had 100 or 500 or 1,000 people, when our income doubled or tripled or quadrupled—THEN I would start enjoying life and leadership.

In retrospect, I fell into what I would call the WHEN/THEN trap and it comes in dozens of disguises. When I go to COLLEGE, when I graduate from college, when I pay off my college loans, THEN I will enjoy life a lot more. When I get a JOB, when I get a raise, when I get a promotion, THEN life will be good. When I start DATING, when we get married, when we have kids, when our kids are out of diapers, WHEN/THEN. I think a lot of people are waiting for the planets to perfectly align and solve all their problems, they're waiting for this magical combination of circumstances that will fulfill their dreams—THEN, and only then, will they experience joy. Please hear me, you can experience UNSPEAKABLE JOY right here, right now!

So I'm standing in the back of the cafetorium where NCC met way back when, and I will never forget this moment. It's August, which means two things. One, it's hot and humid and the school where we met didn't have air conditioning, and I used to wear a suit and tie! Two, Congress was on recess and school were out of session, so there was this one Sunday when thirteen people show up, and that may include Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I'm standing in back, I'm throwing a little pity party, and that's when and where I hear the still small voice of the Holy Spirit whisper these inaudible yet unforgettable words: "Mark, ENJOY THE JOURNEY."

Easier said than done, right? But that was a defining moment in my life and I made a defining decision that I would try to enjoy EVERY AGE and EVERY STAGE, not just of pastoring, but of parenting, of marriage, of life.

Question. Are you enjoying the journey?  
Or have you fallen into that WHEN/THEN trap?

Now, I don't want to pretend to have this all figured out. I still get discouraged. I still experience self-doubt. I still throw an occasional pity party. But I've learned two things about joy.

One, JOY is a PERSON and His name is Jesus. Joy is more RELATIONAL than it is EMOTIONAL. There is joy and then there is the joy of the Lord. And it's unlike anything else.

The world can't give it, and the world can't take it away. Why? It's RIGHT RELATIONSHIP with my Creator, with My Heavenly Father, with my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Two, JOY is a CHOICE. It's more VOLITIONAL than it is EMOTIONAL. It's not always the EASIEST choice. It's not always the OBVIOUS choice. But you can CHOOSE JOY anywhere, anytime, anyway. But you don't know my PAST? You don't know my PAIN? You don't know the CIRCUMSTANCES I find myself in or the CHALLENGES I face? I don't know those things, but I do know this. Joy isn't getting what you want. Joy is appreciating what you have. So here's the challenge in no uncertain terms. It's the title of this message: CHOOSE JOY.

Welcome to National Community Church. This weekend we kick off a new series called JOY. Along with our weekend messages, we'll unpack the book of Philippians verse-by-verse, Monday to Friday. If you don't subscribe to NCC DAILY, it's great way to jumpstart your day! [NCC.RE/DAILY](https://ncc.re/daily). We're also kicking off our summer semester of small groups, which include a DEEP DIVE and DISCUSSION GROUPS on this sermon series. Small groups are the COMMUNITY in National Community Church. [NCC.RE/GROUPS](https://ncc.re/groups). Here's my prayer for you at the outset of this series.

I'm praying Nehemiah 8:10—"May the joy of the Lord be your strength." I'm praying James 1:2—"COUNT IT ALL JOY when you face trials of many kinds." I'm praying Psalm 51:12—"Restore unto us the joy of our salvation." I'm praying Philippians 4:4—"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, rejoice!"

Ready or not, here we go.  
Philippians 1:1

*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: GRACE and PEACE to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

In Judaism, there is a hermeneutic called PARDES. It consists of four levels of learning, four stages of study. You'll see them on the screen. Level one is PESHAT. It is the plain reading of Scripture. You don't need a seminary degree to rightly divide the Word of Truth or to hear the still small voice of the Spirit. That said, PESHAT is like the tip of the iceberg. It's the 13% above water.

The second level of study is called REMEZ, and it literally means "hint." According to Rabbinic tradition, every word of Scripture has seventy faces and 600,000 meanings. Remez is turning the kaleidoscope to reveal the cues and clues within the text. The third level is called DERESH, and it means "search," as in Google search. Deresh is connecting the dots between Old Testament and New Testament. It's letting Scripture interpret Scripture.

The fourth level is called SOD, and it means "secret." This is where we need the Holy Spirit's help. The same Spirit who inspired those original writers works on both sides of the equation. We talked about this during our last series. The Holy Spirit quickens us

with His Word. We don't just read the Bible, the Bible reads us. The goal isn't getting through Scripture. The goal is getting Scripture through us!

What I want to do week one of this series is SET THE SCENE. If CONTENT is king, CONTEXT is queen. There is a fundamental principle in hermeneutics: *text without context is pretext.*

There is some difference of opinion as to WHEN and WHERE Paul writes this letter. Best guess? Paul is writing from a prison cell in Rome, somewhere around 60-62 AD. And He's writing to the church at Philippi. The city took its name from Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. It was one of his military strongholds in northern Greece, but his primary interest was mining for gold and silver. According to ancient records, those mines produced an annual revenue of a thousand talents.

Fast-forward a few centuries, and Philippi is conquered by the Romans in 31 BC. So Paul is writing to Roman citizens. They speak the Latin language. They wear the Roman dress. Their coins have Roman inscriptions. The city itself was patterned after Rome, and it sat on the Via Egnatia. I'll show you a map. The Via Egnatia was a major military road in the Roman Empire. It ran east and west, and this is the road Paul would have travelled on his second missionary journey, which we'll come back to.

This is where I want to deresh. Paul is not writing to strangers. He's writing to friends. As he writes this letter, he can see their faces and they can hear his voice. You can feel this deep-seated affection in verse 3: *I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

It's been a decade, but as Paul writes this letter, he's having flashbacks to his first visit to Philippi and it produces this flashflood of emotion. What I want to do is retrace Paul's steps. Everything Paul says in this letter has to be seen against the backdrop of the events recorded in Acts 16. I want to talk about how Paul got to Philippi in the first place.

Before I show you a map, let me put this in perspective. In the first century AD, the average person never travelled outside a thirty mile radius of their birthplace. Some scholars suggest that Paul logged as many as 10,000 miles on his three missionary journeys. That's like walking from DC to LA four times! The Apostle Paul is one of the most travelled people on the planet in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

Alright, let me show you the map.

Like his first missionary journey, Paul's second missionary journey starts in Antioch. Antioch is home base for Paul and Barnabas. Antioch is their home church. At some point, they decide to go back and visit the cities, visit the churches they had been to on their first missionary journey. Their first stop is Tarsus, which is Paul's hometown. So they probably get a home cooked meal. Paul sleeps in his old bed. Then they travel west through Derbe

and Lystra. This is where they add Timothy to their team. And that's where we pick up the itinerary in Acts 16:6.

*Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.*

We read right past this, but this had to be frustrating. Paul and Silas plan on preaching the gospel in Asia, but the Holy Spirit prevents them. Asia was PLAN A. Verse 7.

*When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to go there.*

We read right past this, but this had to be confusing. If Asia was Plan A, then Bithynia was Plan B. At this point, the compass needle is spinning. Where do we go? What do we do?

I know many of you grew up on GPS, but some of us are old enough to remember Rand McNally maps and AAA Triptiks. And that gives us a unique appreciation for what's happening here. If you don't stick to the itinerary, there isn't some GPS voice with a British accent who will make midcourse corrections for you. You are off the map. You are off the grid. Verse 8.

*So instead, they passed through Mysia and went down to Troas. That night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.*

This is when and where and how Paul gets to Philippi.  
They set sail across the Aegean Sea.  
They land in Annapolis, I mean Neapolis.  
This is where Paul picks up the Via Egnatia in verse 12.

*From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.*

Let me zoom out and make a couple observations.  
If you're taking notes you can jot these down.

One, if you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans.  
Two, what we see as a DETOUR is often the DESTINATION.  
Three, someday we'll thank God for CLOSED DOORS as much as open doors.  
Four, God wants you to get where God wants you to go MORE THAN you want to get where God wants you to go, and He's really good at getting us there.

Let me make this personal.

When I was in seminary, Lora and I tried to plant a church in Chicago. We had a core group. We had a bank account. I even had a 25 year plan! I was pretty proud of that plan. Plus, my professor gave it an A s it's gotta work, right? Wrong! Chicago was PLAN A, but that church plant failed. It was disorienting. It was discouraging. It was embarrassing. And it's one of the best things that ever happened to us. Why? Because that's how God got us from Chicago to DC. DC was our PLAN B, but I think it was God's PLAN A. Are you picking up what I'm throwing down?

Philippi wasn't Plan A.  
Asia was Plan A. Bithynia was PLAN B.  
Philippi was PLAN P.

There is a Proverb I've learned to love. Proverbs 16:9. In his heart a man PLANS his course, but the Lord orders His footsteps!

If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.  
But here's the good news.  
What we see as a DETOUR is often the DESTINATION.

I love the way Corrie Ten Boom says this. "When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away the ticket and jump off." What do you do? "You sit still and TRUST THE ENGINEER."

Corrie Ten Boom and her family were arrested by the Nazis in WORLD WAR II because they were hiding Jews. Her father and her sister died in the concentration camps. Somehow, Corrie survived. A movie was made about her life in 1975. It was called *The Hiding Place*. It was after watching that movie that a five year-old kid named Mark Batterson put His faith in Christ.

If you want to make God laugh, tell Him YOUR PLANS.  
What we see as a DETOUR is often the DESTINATION.  
Someday we'll thank God for the CLOSED DOORS as much as the OPEN DOORS.

This week, we begin to PUNCH LIST 20,000 square feet of Kid's space at our Capitol Hill campus. I can't wait for you to see it. Honestly, you have to see it to believe it. But I will show you a couple pictures. Here's a few shots of the inside—you've got main street, the playspace, the loft. And we're giving the building a facelift. We're taking the blue out of the blue castle. The bottom line? We're going to impact thousands of kids in that place, in that space. Can I let you in on a little secret?

The Capital Turnaround was not PLAN A. If you reverse engineer how this happened, it started with a CLOSED DOOR that scared the living daylights out of us. We had met at Union Station for thirteen years when the movie theaters shut down. I honestly wondered if our best days were behind us.

Praise God for closed doors! Why? Because it was those closed doors that prompted us to look for property. We ended up assembling six properties with a block of frontage on 695. We went through a charette. We were ready to build on that property when CSX announced that they were going to build a double decker train tunnel under Virginia Avenue. I was frustrated out of my mind. It was a FIVE YEAR delay, a FIVE YEAR detour. Our plan was totally derailed, pun intended. But it was during that DELAY, come on somebody, it was during that DETOUR, can I get an amen, that an entire city block, right across the street, are you kidding me, came on the market and we bought it for \$29 million! Well?!

The city block we call the Capital Turnaround was not PLAN A or PLAN B. It was PLAN C or D or Z. I have no idea. I lost count because of all the detours, all the delays, but here's my point. Praise God for CLOSED DOORS.

There is a promise that I pray all the time.  
Revelation 3:7-8.

*These are the words of Him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.*

We love the first half of that promise, right? We love it when God opens doors, but you can't pray half a promise. Why? Because most OPEN DOORS start out with a CLOSED DOOR.

I want you to put up that map one more time.

If God doesn't close the door to Bithynia, He doesn't go to Philippi. And if Paul doesn't cross the Aegean Sea and visit Philippi, I don't think he visits Thessalonica or Athens or Corinth. I'm not sure he doubles back to Ephesus. Are you picking up what I'm throwing down? I'll say it one more time for good measure.

God wants you to get where God wants you to go MORE THAN you want to get where God wants you to go, and He's really good at getting us there!

Maybe you feel like your life has taken a DETOUR. Maybe you feel like there is a DELAY of game when it comes to your dreams. Maybe you're frustrated with the CLOSED DOORS. I have tremendous empathy for what you're feeling. I've been there and done that. Here's my advice? TRUST THE ENGINEER. And while you're at it, ENJOY THE JOURNEY.

Let me connect one more dot.  
Acts 16:13

*On the Sabbath we went a little way outside the city to a riverbank, where we thought people would be meeting for prayer and we sat down to speak to some women who had gathered*

*there. One of them was Lydia from Thyatira, a merchant of expensive purple cloth, who worshipped God. As she listened to us, the Lord opened her heart, and she accepted what Paul was saying. She was baptized along with members of her household.*

This is major tipping point, a major turning point in the book of Acts. This is a day when decades happen. Lydia becomes the first convert to Christianity on the continent of Europe. How does it happen? This may be PLAN P for Paul, but God turns a DETOUR into a destination, God turns a CLOSED DOOR into a divine appointment on a riverbank outside the city of Philippi. And the rest is history!

Let me close with this.

Paul is writing this epistle from a prison cell, but it's not his first rodeo. Paul was in and out of jail almost everywhere he went, including Philippi. Here's how it happened.

One day, Paul was on his way to the place of prayer when a girl who is demon-possessed starts trolling them, starts baiting them. Eventually, ENOUGH IS ENOUGH. Whatever you TOLERATE will eventually DOMINATE. At some point, you've got to turn around, look the problem in the eye, and exercise your spiritual authority. That's what Paul does. He casts out the demon, but there's a catch.

Acts 16:16 says, "She was a fortune teller who earned a lot of money for her masters." When you start messing with people's money, it's about to get real up in here. The entire city ends up in an uproar. Paul and Silas are stripped and beaten. They end up in the inner dungeon with their feet are clamped in stocks.

Verse 25.

*Around midnight, Paul and Silas feel asleep.*

I wouldn't blame them if they did. They had to be exhausted. But that isn't what it says.

*Around midnight, Paul and Silas were complaining.*

I wouldn't blame them if they were. They had to be awfully frustrated at this point. They were being obedient to the vision God had given them and it lands them in jail. They could have played the victim card. They could have thrown a pity party. But that isn't what they do.

*Around midnight, Paul and Silas were PRAYING and SINGING HYMNS to God, and the other prisoners were listening.*

If that isn't CHOOSING JOY, I'm not sure what is!

Long story short, this jailer ends up getting baptized in the middle of the night. As Paul pens this letter, these are the moments that fire across his synapses. These are the memories that flood his heart with faith, hope, and love!

I've already issued a few exhortations. I've challenged you to CHOOSE JOY. I've challenged you to TRUST THE ENGINEER and ENJOY THE JOURNEY. Here's one more. PROPHECY YOUR PRAISE.

Gratitude is thanking God AFTER He does it. And that's great. But sometimes you need to STRETCH YOUR FAITH, sometimes you need to EXERCISE YOUR AUTHORITY, sometimes you need to PRAISE GOD BEFORE IT HAPPENS. That's what Paul and Silas do. They prophesy their praise and look at what happens. Their praise causes an earthquake that results in a jailbreak.

I'm not sure what circumstances you find yourself in.  
I'm not sure how else to say this.  
Sometimes you need to WORSHIP YOUR WAY OUT.  
Sometimes you need to PROPHECY YOUR PRAISE.

Whatever you don't turn into praise turns into PRIDE.  
Whatever you don't turn into praise turns into PAIN.

I want to invite our worship team to come.  
We're going to prophesy our praise!

I'll close with this.

On July 23, 2000, I ended up in emergency surgery in the middle of the night for ruptured intestines. I spent two days on a respirator. I should have died. I lost twenty-five pounds in a week. I had to wear an ostomy bag for six months. I had to have another surgery to repair it. I have a scar all the way down the middle of my abdomen. I have a two pack!

It was the hardest year of my life, hands down.

I wouldn't want to go through it again, but I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. I learned some lessons that can't be taught any other way. And this is one of them. I learned to prophesy my praise! I remember lying in my bed. I felt so weak. I felt so scarred. But I made a choice. I decided to enjoy the journey. It wasn't easy, but I decided to CHOOSE JOY. I remember this line of lyrics from a Darrell Evans song—*I'm Trading My Sorrows*.

*I am pressed but not crushed  
Persecuted not abandoned  
Struck down but not destroyed  
I am blessed beyond the curse  
For His promise will endure  
That His joy's gonna be my strength*

I put this song on REPEAT.



I must have listened to it 417 times!

*I'm trading my sorrows, I'm trading my shame  
I'm laying them down for the joy of the Lord  
I'm trading my sickness I'm trading my pain  
I'm laying them down for the joy of the Lord*

Can I tell you something?

He's the God who gives beauty for ashes. He's the God who gives the OIL OF JOY for mourning. He's the God who gives the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.

Would you prophesy your praise?!

Don't let what's wrong with you, wrong with your circumstances, keep you from worshipping what's right with God. The hardest praise is the highest praise. It's called the sacrifice of praise.