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My Hero Is in the Slammer

What do I know about a life that sucks? I'm well educated. I have no student loan debt. I've had great jobs in big churches. I have a successful counseling practice. I'm a published author. I'm healthy. I have a lovely, devoted wife and two perfectly healthy sons who are good students and excellent athletes. I have a nice house in a lovely part of Tennessee. I've also been hospitalized for depression.

I know what it's like to look at my life, understand that I'm blessed compared to a lot of people, tell myself that I have no real good reasons to be depressed, but suffer crippling depression anyway. My serotonin and dopamine levels aren't always impressed with my self-talk. So I take a prescribed antidepressant medication every morning to calm the chemical pond in my brain.

In 2006 I decided to play amateur psychiatrist/pharmacist and wean myself off an antidepressant. I was feeling great, so I decided to experiment with gradually decreasing the dosage. (I'm not stupid enough to

stop cold turkey.) I felt fine. I congratulated myself on my wise approach to the process, which had the added benefits of saving money and greater ease in losing weight. I was feeling so good that I ran a half marathon for the first time.

A week after the marathon, I crashed. The doctors hypothesized that the endorphins from the months of training for the marathon may have temporarily made up for the absence of the medicine. In my post-race exhaustion, the endorphins took a hike, and my depression awoke like an angry bear that did not appreciate being woken up. Here's a bit of free business advice: when you are launching a new business—particularly a counseling private practice—I don't recommend being hospitalized for depression. It's not great for marketing. I've learned my lesson. Now I take a Cymbalta in the morning like it's a Flintstone vitamin, and I get on with my day.

OK, now you know that the author of the book you're reading is on an antidepressant and once spent some vacation time in a psychiatric hospital. Am I crazy? No. Get the images of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* out of your mind. If you spent a week watching me closely, you'd likely never suspect that a fog sometimes rolls in and obscures my harbor. But like a diabetic or someone with high blood pressure, I have a powerful, threatening condition that I must monitor and manage. Sometimes taking a daily capsule feels like some form of codependency and/or a lack of faith or strength, and sometimes that feeling pummels my self-esteem. But I have mostly come to terms with it, and I am grateful (as is my family!) that the medicine exists and is only twenty dollars with my insurance co-payment.

Some people judge me but most have been very gracious in their understanding. My transparency about my battle seems to have helped many others to feel less shame about their struggle with depression or anxiety, which has allowed them to either seek help or feel better about the help they are getting.

So when I write about life sucking, I'm not writing from an ivory tower. I'm not looking down on my readers, shaking my head at their

dysfunction because I have it all together. I've actually become very suspicious of people who act as if they have it all together and deny any past or current brokenness. It's hard for me to trust people who insist they have no wounds or scars. Not that I think you need to walk around with your shirt pulled up so everyone can see the nasty gash on your belly. I just think it helps for you to know where I'm coming from.

WHAT DID YOU EXPECT?

There's another reason I've told you about my personal situation. For some reason we're always surprised when the world doesn't give us joy. I'm like those upper-middle-class women I mentioned earlier. I've got all the things that are supposed to make me happy, but still I often feel that my life sucks. Sure, in my case there's the matter of brain chemistry that provides its own set of challenges, but that's not the point. Even if I had perfectly balanced brain chemistry, the world still wouldn't be enough to give me joy.

How strange is it that when we ask *God* to bless us, what we want is simply more of the best that the *world* can give? We want God to bless us with more money, fewer difficulties, more success, less conflict, more opportunities, and more influence. Sometimes what we want and expect from God is not very different from what we would want and expect from a really good president or even a benign dictator.

Consider the crowds in Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday, when Jesus came riding in on a donkey's colt. They genuinely believed he was the Messiah, and they were right. However, they were just plain wrong about what to expect from him. With all those "hosannas" and "blessed bes" they were offering a trade. In effect they were saying, "Jesus, we'll believe in you and follow you, and in exchange, you'll exercise your divine power and authority to overthrow the oppressive Roman government and free our nation from its control, which ultimately will greatly improve our lives." The problem is that Jesus never offered such an exchange. When

the masses realized that Jesus did not intend to fulfill the job description that they had written for the Messiah, they turned on him. Five days later, “hosannah” had turned into “crucify him!”

Surely, even the disciples were disappointed that their fame by affiliation was slipping. You have to wonder if at least a part of Judas’ betrayal grew out of resentment when he realized that three years of traveling the countryside with Jesus wasn’t going to translate into a top-floor, corner office with a view overlooking Jerusalem. When Judas evaluated the big picture, he concluded, “This sucks!”

I hate to confess how well I understand where Judas was coming from. I wasn’t singing praise choruses in the psychiatric hospital. Yes, I know about the disciples singing in jail in the book of Acts. You’ll notice my name isn’t listed there. While in the hospital I more readily identified with some of the protest psalms of David—verses seldom quoted by worship leaders or printed on the screen while the congregation sings a praise chorus. Passages like Psalm 22:1–2: “God, God . . . my God! Why did you dump me miles from nowhere? Doubled up with pain, I call to God all the day long. No answer. Nothing. I keep at it all night, tossing and turning” (MSG). As repetitive as was my question, “God, will you not hear me, heal and restore me?” were my questions “God, how did I get here?” and “God, why did you let this happen to me?”

FIELD OF DREAMS GETS PLOWED

But if Judas represents one way to react to the realization that life sucks, the apostle Paul represents another way, a better way. If ever there was a man who had reason to expect a different kind of life from the one he got, surely it was Paul. And yet joy echoes through everything Paul wrote—even the letters he wrote during confinement. Paul of Tarsus had a dream of going to Rome as a preacher. In the year 62 AD, he finally made it to Rome—but not as a preacher. He was a prisoner of the empire. No doubt he had pictured himself in the great city as an

open-air evangelist, telling people the good news about God's love for them. Instead he found himself in Roman custody, chained to a rotation of irritated guards.

This wasn't in the script. Where were the rewards for radical obedience to God? Yes, Jesus promised that his followers, especially the obvious ones, would be persecuted. Sure, everywhere Paul went he provoked either revivals or riots. But God could have prevented this if he had wanted to. What good was accomplished by having Paul on the sidelines and not in the game? Can you think of anyone during the first century who was a more blistering testimony for Christ than Paul?

After forty-nine years, I know myself pretty well. I can safely say that if I had been Paul (and it's a good thing for Christendom that I was not), I would have evaluated the gap between my impressive résumé of outstanding Christian service and my current incarcerated reality and concluded, "This sucks!"

PAUL'S SURPRISING HABIT

Paul was in that Roman prison when he wrote the letter that we now call *Philippians*. It is this ill-placed inmate who exhorts the *Philippians* to "Rejoice in the Lord. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (*Philippians* 4:4). The writers of yesteryear didn't use a bolder print, all capital letters, underlining, larger font size, italics, or exclamation points to emphasize a phrase. Instead, they used the literary technique of repetition. (For example, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty." (*Isaiah* 6:3) or "Truly, truly, I say to you . . ." *John* 16:20 NASB). Paul is here using that same literary technique of repetition for emphasis. "Rejoice. I will say it again: Rejoice!"

In addition to emphasis, this use of repetition countered the skeptical reaction of his audience to his first exclamation. Facing great difficulty themselves and with their leader in prison, the *Philippians* would likely greet his joyful advice with disbelief or resistance. The repetition is

Paul's way of saying, "Yeah, you heard me right; rejoice, I tell you!" This exhortation to rejoice in the Lord comes from a man for whom suffering is not only a part of his past, but a fixture in his present, and a certainty in his future. Incarcerated in Rome, awaiting trial before Caesar, Paul is not able to visit the Philippian church. Instead, he must rely on reports, either from a short list of approved visitors like Epaphroditus and Timothy, or by receiving written correspondence from the church. Paul was also permitted to write, and he certainly could not be stopped from praying, but undoubtedly at times he felt his ministry was as confined and limited as he was. Nevertheless, as is evident in this letter to the Philippians, his needle seems rather set in a groove of ironic rejoicing.

How serious does Paul take this idea of always rejoicing? You'll notice that "Rejoice in the Lord always" is a command; that word "rejoice" is the Greek word *chairō* and Paul uses it in the present imperative tense—like the old Nike slogan, "Just do it." Paul calls not for a Teflon coated heart that real and valid pain can't stick to, but for a heart that is anchored in reassuring truths and therefore possesses a joy that holds steady whether circumstances are favorable or adverse. How much joy is oozing out of Paul's letter to the Philippians? In one form or another, he uses the word *rejoice* seven times. He uses the word *joy* six times. In a letter that doesn't even take up five pages in your Bible, that's a lot of joy!

Was Paul just in a really good mood when he wrote this letter? Was he bipolar and writing on a manic day? I'm sure Paul had his bad moments and his better moments, but the authenticity of his positive attitude shines through despite the various contexts and issues of the letter.

CANDID CAMERA

When Paul wrote his letters, he was not trying to meet a publisher's deadline or fulfill the obligations of a book contract. Paul didn't have a literary agent steering him toward more marketable content. No publicist was lining up a book tour, speaking engagements, signings at Barnes

and Noble, or interviews on Christian radio and *The 700 Club*. Nobody was telling Paul that if he spun these letters just right he could develop a series of small books that would outsell the *Left Behind* convoy.

No, I'm confident that Paul never imagined that anyone besides the Philippians would be reading his letter. While Paul chose his words carefully, and while I believe that he was writing under the inspiration of God's Spirit, I don't think Paul ever said to himself, "I've got to be careful here. After all I'm composing Scripture that will one day be translated into hundreds of languages and dialects and offered in the KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, NAS, NIV, LT, NLT, and BLT." Paul wrote with no other audience in mind except the one the mailman was delivering the package to. That the content of his letters is totally relevant and applicable to an ancient tribe in Botswana or to a Gen-X church in Boston is a testimony to the staying power of truth.

As you read the letters of Paul, you are not reading the words of a religious spin doctor or the calculated verbiage of a politician's speechwriter. You are reading the words of a man writing from his heart and his gut. It's like finding a stack of your parents' love letters in the attic several weeks after your mom's funeral. You are eavesdropping on an intimate conversation. You are watching a video clip of a hidden camera in Paul's cell. You are sitting in on the class of a brilliant professor who is not seeking to impress his students with his superior intellect, but nevertheless astounds them with his exceptional understanding and his ability to explain the vital verities of life.

In his book, *You Gotta Keep Dancing*, Tim Hansel included some excerpts from his journal entries. He mentions that allowing others to read your journal provokes awkwardness akin to having someone look through your underwear drawer. In Paul's letters, especially Philippians, we are tossing about the apostle's laundry, and after reading the entirety of Paul's letters, the poor guy has no secrets left. With every passage from Philippians that we peel off and lay over the top of our own lives, please keep in mind that this letter is the candid photo of a man engaging God in the crucible of life.

Paul's positive attitude is what makes his prison epistle to the Philippians all the more extraordinary. Much of this book you're reading will draw from the remarkable attitude and teaching found in Paul's short but powerful letter. The book of Philippians contains the most worn, underlined, highlighted, and marked-up pages in my personal Bible. When I need an attitudinal front-end alignment—which is often—I turn to Philippians. When I catch myself drifting toward discouragement, hopelessness, resentment, and self-pity, I swim back to the anchored dock of Paul's short letter. I am not outwardly cynical, but as a subtle whiner and a sneaky complainer I am a repeat offender. I often have to turn myself in to Philippians for rehab.

PAUL'S STRANGE WISH

There must be a lot of people like me running around out there—people who can't shake the idea that the universe owes them more than they're getting. How else can you explain the runaway success of Rhonda Byrnes's bestseller *The Secret*. It may have been the most brilliantly marketed collection of fluff and error I've ever read. The secret of *The Secret*, in a nutshell, is this: just fix your mind, thoughts, and wishes on health and wealth, and the universe will overnight it to you in a gift-wrapped package. Byrnes calls it “the law of attraction,” yours for only \$24.95.

So, if you're a big magnet, what is it that you hope to attract? I can tell you what Paul wanted to attract. It wasn't wealth, weight loss, a job promotion, or healing from psoriasis. In Paul's words, he wanted “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Philippians 3:10–11).

I'm totally on board with Paul's first two desires. Knowing Christ and experiencing his power—that sounds like great stuff. But what about number three, the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings? Are you kidding me? What kind of present on your Christmas wish list is that?

Give me a gift like that, and I'm on my way to God's customer service desk trying to exchange it for a package of Christian blessings. Was Paul a masochist or a glutton for punishment? No, the attraction of the suffering was the fellowship with Christ it produced. Paul wanted the intimacy that comes when two people share a profound experience. Who can connect with a parent who has lost a child quite like another parent acquainted with such grief? For a cancer patient, whose fellowship is more meaningful than a close family member who has survived cancer?

Several years ago I felt terribly misunderstood and unfairly judged by someone in my church. How could my altruistic motives, genuine efforts, and substantial sacrifice of time on behalf of this person be perceived through such a distorted lens? When I didn't meet this person's expectations, I went immediately from hero to villain. I wished I could have just shrugged off the e-mail attack, which was copied to several of my colleagues, but it was hurtful and maddening.

One afternoon, when I was walking to my car still stirring the rancid stew of unfair treatment in my mind, I felt as if Christ sidled up next to me and said, "Ramon, I sort of know what it feels like to be blindsided by unjust condemnation. I've had some experience with being misunderstood and judged. Want to tell me about it?" In the car, I mumbled my version of the story and cycled through my spectrum of feelings. Then I considered Jerusalem's Jekyll-and-Hyde worship turned rejection of Christ. In that moment I felt a comfort and a sense of closeness to Christ that is difficult to describe. It is a powerful human sensation to feel deeply understood by another. I felt understood and drawn into the presence of him who experientially understood me.

Keep in mind that Paul isn't suggesting we seek opportunities to suffer for the sake of closer friendship. I doubt that Paul would have commended the religious eccentrics throughout the ages who ripped their own flesh with whips to punish themselves for sin or to win extra points with the suffering Savior. To those misguided souls who during Passion Week have had their hands actually nailed to a replica cross, I think Paul would retort with irritation, "When I said 'I've been crucified with

Christ' that is *not* what I meant!" Paul neither delighted in suffering nor went shopping for it.

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul speaks of a "thorn in the flesh" (v. 7 NASB)—an affliction that has provoked speculation from Bible scholars and preachers for centuries. Was it a chronic physical ailment or an emotional weakness? Regardless of the thorn's true identity and symptoms, Paul reveals that on three separate occasions he fervently prayed for this affliction to be removed. It was not. Paul writes that God answered, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (v. 9).

I know myself. If that was the answer I was given, I would have come back with, "Is there anyone else there I can talk to?" That's one of the problems with God—there's not anyone over his head to complain to or to appeal a ruling. Paul's repeated request for relief from pain in no way diminishes his legend in my eyes. On the contrary, Paul's acceptance of his unhealed condition inspires and challenges me. It is an afflicted man who urges the Philippians to "Rejoice in the Lord always" (Philippians 4:4). Always. It is easy to rejoice in the Lord when things are going well (though it brings up the question, is one rejoicing in favorable circumstances, or in the Lord?). It is quite another feat to rejoice in the Lord when life sucks. What keeps Paul from being knocked off-center by his crummy conditions? His intentional focus upon the glory, the goodness, and the love of God and his grand purposes.²

In contrast to our pill-popping world that seeks a filled prescription for our ailments, Paul seems determined to respond rightly to his suffering rather than eliminate it. I am unfamiliar with that bent of thinking. I'm not saying I run from my problems; I just want them to flee from me! I'm an escape-hatch seeker and an ejection-button pusher. Any part of my life that I feel is subpar is unacceptable. I want my best life now! But God's promises are different from the promises of the self-help industry.

A CLOSING THOUGHT

I have a quote laminated on a small card and taped to my car's dashboard: "Your attitude is either your best friend or your worst enemy." It's a reminder that I can choose who drives. Too often my attitude is akin to a suicide bomber that blows up my joy. As if it wasn't enough to detonate my own day, the shrapnel too often hits my wife and sons. (I usually shield nonfamily members from the fallout. Have you noticed that most people won't put up with your junk like family does?) I sometimes overreact negatively to the slightest of provocations, or I withdraw so everyone will leave me alone. Then when I come home I wonder why nobody's rushing to the front door squealing with delight, "Daddy's home!"

Throughout this book we will be challenged by a man whose physical condition, environment, and circumstances make many of our complaints seem petty. On the other hand, I realize that many of you have faced or are facing extraordinary stressors, physical afflictions, losses, abuses, or emotional pain on a level with which Paul was not acquainted. But I plead with you not to disqualify Paul from having the right to speak into your story.

In the introduction to his biography, *Sacred Journey*, Frederick Buechner reveals the main reasons he was sharing his personal epic. "My assumption is that the story of any one of us is in some measure the story of us all."³ There is both delight and plight common to the human condition, a mixed blessing that we all understand, an in-the-same-boat reality that transcends continents, cultures, centuries, and conditions. Moreover, there is an ancient wisdom that transcends all four, and an imprisoned prophet willing to share it. I hope that you'll grant him an audience.

Notes

² John Piper is an extraordinary thinker and writer in his thorough treatment of the matter of finding our delight in the glories and mysteries of God. I commend to you Piper's *Desiring God* and *When I Don't Desire God*.

³ Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 6.