

Even If I Don't Know What's Next [Philippians 1:1-11]

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Big Idea: When the future is unclear, God's faithfulness is our anchor.

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// INTRODUCTION [10-week journal]

I'll never forget March 2020.

- I had been here at ACAC for two months, and the plan for a successful succession was all in place.
 - Meeting with staff, departments, and key leaders.
 - Preaching schedule laid out for the next several months.
 - Celebrating and honoring the pastor who had been here for 36 years.
- ***My calendar was full of certainty.*** Then everything shut down.

Within 48 hours, COVID-19 shut down everything that was planned. No services. No gatherings. **All that certainty was gone**. I was left in a moment of complete disorientation because what I thought I was walking into suddenly and drastically changed. The question I faced was, ***"How do I lead when I don't know what's next?"***

I know I wasn't alone in that feeling. Some of you had weddings postponed. Graduations canceled. Businesses shut down. You lost jobs. Loved ones, all of a sudden, you couldn't visit. Futures you'd been planning that suddenly became question marks.

What made it so disorienting wasn't just the pandemic itself, but all the uncertainty. How long is this going to last? We learned quickly, and in a very real way, that we control far less than we think we do.

And it wasn't just disorienting; ***it stole our joy.***

- Statistics show that in 2020, anxiety and depression rates tripled from the previous year.
- Mental health hotlines saw call volumes increase by over 1000%.
- Prescriptions for anti-anxiety medications jumped 34% in just the first few months of the pandemic.

We weren't just uncertain... we were anxious, depressed, isolated, and joyless.

Remember all the Zoom calls during that season? I do. I also remember seeing the exhaustion, fear, and heaviness of people. The joy was missing. Because when certainty disappears, joy often goes with it.

Here's what's interesting... Even though we're past that season, we're still feeling the aftershock of it. Because once you've experienced how quickly certainty can disappear, it's hard to ever feel completely secure again. Jobs feel less stable. Relationships feel more fragile. The future seems less... well, certain.

But here's the thing... we are MADE for certainty. Everything in us craves it. We're wired to want control, have predictability, and lean on security. It's not a flaw, it's just part of being human.

Think about it. **We live in a culture that's built an entire economy around our desire for certainty.**

- We have apps that predict the weather 2 weeks out, so we can plan the perfect weekend.
- We have retirement calculators that tell us exactly how much we need to save now for a secure future (down to the dollar).
- We have a GPS that not only tells us how to get where we are going but also reroutes us to get around traffic.
- We have AI that can predict what we're going to type even before we finish the sentence.
- We have smart homes that anticipate our needs, health trackers that monitor our bodies 24/7, and algorithms that know what we want before we do.

We pay for all kinds of insurance... health, life, car, home, and even pet insurance... all to create a sense of certainty that we'll be ok if something goes wrong. We obsessively check our bank accounts, credit scores, and investment portfolios. We plan for 5-year goals, 10-year plans, and 30-year mortgages. WE want to KNOW. We NEED to know. **We build our entire lives around the pursuit of certainty.**

Because uncertainty feels like chaos. Uncertainty feels like danger. Uncertainty feels like we're one step away from it all collapsing. **And so, we do everything in our power to eliminate it, manage it, and control it.**

But what happens when we can't?

What happens when, despite all our planning, preparing, and controlling, life still throws us into uncertainty?

- When the diagnosis comes out of nowhere?
- When the relationship falls apart?
- When the job disappears?

What happens when all our tools for creating certainty fail us?

Maybe that's you today. Maybe you're heading into this new year, and instead of feeling hopeful and excited, you feel anxious.

- You don't know if the job is secure.
- You don't know if the relationship is going to work out.
- You don't know if your health is going to hold.
- You don't know what this year, let alone this month, is going to look like.

And ***you're just exhausted from trying to control what you can't control.*** You're tired of the anxiety. You're desperate to find joy again, but you feel like it requires certainty, and you just don't have it.

Here's what I want you to know... you're not alone. And more importantly, there's a different way.

That's where we're starting today. Over the next 10 weeks, we're going to walk through a letter written by a man who didn't know if he'd live or die. A man who didn't know if his work mattered. Who didn't know what tomorrow held, yet somehow, he found joy. Not a fake joy. Not just "put on a happy face" joy. ***But a deep, sustaining, unshakable joy that existed right in the midst of uncertainty.***

This series is called "*Even If*" because sometimes faith isn't about having all the answers.

Sometimes faith is saying...

- "*Even if I don't know what's next.*"
- "*Even if life feels like a prison.*"
- "*Even if I don't get my own way.*"

I can experience joy because I know WHO holds tomorrow, even when I don't know WHAT tomorrow holds.

The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to a church in Philippi; a letter we call the book of Philippians. And throughout this letter, he uses the word "joy" or "rejoice" 16 times in just 4 chapters. That's once every 7 verses! By the way, he wrote this letter from a prison cell, chained to a guard, uncertain about his future, waiting to find out if he'd be executed or released.

From a place of uncertainty, Paul wrote the most joyful letter in the entire NT.

And here's what we're going to find over the next 10 weeks... Joy isn't dependent on our circumstances being certain. ***Joy is found in discovering Christ's presence in EVERY circumstance***... certain or uncertain, comfortable or difficult.

Paul is going to teach us how to have "even if" faith. The kind of faith that says...

- ***"Even if I don't know what's next, I can have joy."***
- ***"Even if my plans fall apart, I can have peace."***
- ***"Even if I can't control my circumstances, I can trust the One who does."***

Let me tell you... I need this message as much as you do. Because if I'm transparent with you, I'm still learning how to pastor with open hands instead of clenched fists. I'm still learning how to trust God's faithfulness when I can't see the full picture. I'm still learning how to find joy in not knowing what's next.

So, let's learn this together. ***Let's discover what it looks like to have joy even when we don't know what's next.***

// CONTEXT [Philippians]

Let me give you some quick context about this letter Philippians, because WHERE it comes from and WHO it's written to matters.

Paul wrote this letter from Rome, under house arrest, chained to a Roman guard 24/7. He most likely wasn't in some dark dungeon being tortured; it most likely was a house arrest. He could have visitors, he could write letters, and he had some freedom. But he was still a prisoner. Still chained. Still waiting to find out if he'd be executed or released. ***His future was completely uncertain.***

Here's what makes this so relatable... Paul was stuck. In limbo. Uncertain. Waiting for a verdict he can't control. Sound familiar?

He's writing to a congregation in a city called Philippi [North-Eastern part of Greece], a church he deeply loved. One of his favorite churches. Actually, the only one he allowed to financially support his ministry. This letter feels less like theology and more like a letter from a dad to his kids. There's deep affection here.

And here's what's unique about this letter... Paul isn't writing to correct false teaching or address some issue in the church. There's no crisis in Philippi. ***He's writing simply because he***

loves them and wants to encourage them. He's thankful for them. He's praying for them. And he wants them to know that even though he's in chains, the gospel is still advancing and joy is still possible.

But you need to catch this... It's crucial for understanding this entire series. Paul doesn't write this letter about HIMSELF. He writes it for THEM. Everyone in this congregation knows Paul is in chains. They know he's facing possibly execution. They know his future is uncertain. He could easily make this letter about his suffering, his circumstances, his need for prayer and support.

But he doesn't. He writes to encourage THEM. To pray for THEM. To remind THEM of God's faithfulness.

Paul is living proof of everything he's about to teach them, but he's not using his situation to gain sympathy; he's using it to give hope. Anyone can give advice. Anyone can tell you what you SHOULD believe when life gets hard. But Paul is showing them what it actually LOOKS like to trust God when the future is unclear. He's not theorizing about joy, he's experiencing it.

The Philippians would have read this letter and thought, "*If Paul can have joy in chains, maybe I can have joy in my circumstance too.*"

That's what we're going to discover together. Not just what Paul teaches, ***but how he lives it.***

// PRIMARY TEXT [Philippians 1:1-11]

¹This letter is from Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus. I am writing to all of God's holy people in Philippi who belong to Christ Jesus, including the church leaders and deacons. ²May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

Paul's Thanksgiving and Prayer

³Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. ⁴Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, ⁵for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now. ⁶And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.

⁷So it is right that I should feel as I do about all of you, for you have a special place in my heart. You share with me the special favor of God, both in my imprisonment and in defending and confirming the truth of the Good News. ⁸God knows how much I love you and long for you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus.

⁹I pray that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding. ¹⁰For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you

may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return. ¹¹May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation—the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ—for this will bring much glory and praise to God. [Philippians 1:1-11]

¹*This letter is from Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus. [Philippians 1:1a]*

Now that word “slaves” hits different... We hear “slave,” and we think oppression, forced labor, someone stripped of freedom and dignity. Rightfully so, based on our history.

However, ***Paul is using this word intentionally, and not flippantly.*** In his time period, in the Roman Empire, to be a “slave of Christ” was the highest honor you could claim. It meant you belonged completely to someone, that your entire life was devoted to serving them, that their will became your will. ***Paul's NOT saying he's oppressed by Jesus, he's saying he's owned by Jesus.*** And for Paul, that's freedom, not bondage.

Think about the context. Paul is literally chained to a Roman guard, but he doesn't call himself a slave of Rome; he calls himself a slave of Jesus. ***Rome can chain his body, but they can't touch his identity.*** His circumstances might be restrictive, but his soul is free because he knows who he belongs to.

Before Paul talks about his chains, his circumstances, his uncertain future... he establishes his identity: I'm owned by Jesus Christ. I'm His. ***And that hasn't changed just because I'm in prison.***

1. When the future is foggy, anchor yourself in what you know.

You may not know what this year holds. You may not know how your situation is going to get resolved. You may have uncertainty about tomorrow. ***But you know WHO you belong to.*** You know your identity in Jesus Christ. And that doesn't change because of your circumstances.

This isn't just Paul's experience; this is a pattern throughout Scripture.

- ***Joseph*** – Sold into slavery by his brothers, falsely accused, and thrown into prison. His circumstances kept changing, but his identity as God's servant never did. Years later, when his brothers were afraid he'd take revenge on them, Joseph said to them, ***“You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good.”*** Joseph's circumstances were painful and uncertain, but his identity in God's plan was secure.
- ***David*** – Before he was king, he spent years running from Saul, hiding in caves, not knowing if he'd survive another day. But listen to what he wrote during that season, ***“The Lord is my light and my salvation – so why should I be afraid? The Lord is my fortress, protecting me from danger, so why should I tremble?”*** David's future was uncertain, but his identity in God was his anchor.

³*Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God.* ⁴*Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy...* [Philippians 1:3-4a]

Put yourself in Paul's shoes. You're in prison, chained to a guard. You have no idea of your future. You have every reason to be consumed with your own situation, your own fears, your own needs. But Paul's FIRST thought isn't about himself, it's thankfulness for the Philippians.

And then we see the first mention of joy in this letter. **Notice where this joy comes from...** not from his circumstances changing, but from Paul's focus shifting. **He's not looking inward at his own problems.** He's looking outward at God's work in others.

Paul is living what he's teaching. He's showing them, and us, that joy isn't found in having all your questions answered. All your problems are resolved. **Joy is found in keeping your eyes on what God is doing, even when you can't see what God is doing in YOUR situation.**

As we start this new year, maybe that's your first step toward finding joy. Stop obsessing over what you can't control and start celebrating what God is doing around you. Shift your focus from your uncertainty to God's faithfulness in others.

⁶*And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.* [Philippians 1:6]

The line that changes everything. Paul writes, **"I am certain."** Not "I hope." Not "I think." Not even "I believe." I am CERTAIN.

He's NOT saying, *"I'm certain I'll be released from prison."* He's not saying, *"I'm certain everything will work out the way I want."*

He's saying, "I'm certain of God's faithfulness."

2. When circumstances are uncertain, God's faithfulness is our anchor.

Paul's certainty isn't in his circumstances getting better, it's in God's character remaining consistent. That's the game-changer. Because circumstances constantly change. Health fails. Jobs disappear. Relationships fall apart. Plans crumble. **But God's faithfulness NEVER changes.**

Paul is living this out even as he writes this letter. He doesn't know about his own future, but he's certain about the Philippians' future. Not because they're great and awesome, but because GOD started something in them and God will finish it.

"God who BEGAN the good work within you." You didn't start this. God initiated His relationship with you. God pursued you. God started this work in your life. God will be the one who finishes it.

"He will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns." That's the finish line. Paul's saying, "I don't know if my day of trial will end in freedom or death, but I DO know there's a day coming when Christ returns, and THAT'S the day that matters. That's the day I'm living for."

Again, God's faithfulness in the midst of uncertainty is a theme that runs throughout the Bible. We just finished a series looking at some of the promises of God spoken through the **prophet Isaiah** when Israel was facing uncertainty. In Isaiah 41:10, God says, **"Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand."** Notice **God doesn't promise they won't face uncertainty, He promises He'd be WITH them in it.**

Jesus to his disciples...

³³"I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth, you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world." [John 16:33]

Here's what you need to remember... Your feelings are real, but they're not reliable. Some days you'll feel close to God. Some days you won't. Some days you'll feel certain. Some days you won't. But **God's faithfulness isn't dependent on your feelings.** He's finishing your story because He's faithful to what He started.

Now watch here how Paul prays for them...

⁹I pray that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding. ¹⁰For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return. ¹¹May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation—the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ—for this will bring much glory and praise to God. [Philippians 1:9-11]

Did you notice that Paul DOESN'T pray that their lives would get easier? He doesn't pray that all their questions would be answered. He doesn't pray that they wouldn't face uncertainty again. He doesn't even pray for his own release from prison.

He prays for transformation. He prays for character, not comfort.

3. When you don't know what's next, pray for what matters most.

Paul prays that their love would overflow. That they'd grow in understanding. That they'd discern "what really matters." That they'd be filled with the fruit of the Spirit.

And here's the power of this... Paul is living this prayer himself. He's not asking God to make HIS circumstances better, he's asking God to make THEM better. Even in chains, even facing death, Paul's priority is their spiritual growth, not his personal comfort.

That's conviction lived out loud. That's not just preaching, that's proof.

This is exactly what James writes about in his letter.

²Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. ³For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. ⁴So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing. [James 1:2-4]

James isn't saying troubles are fun, he's saying they're formative. When you can't control your circumstances, focus on who you're becoming in the midst of them.

As you begin to think about this new year... what are you praying for?

Are you only praying for your circumstances to change?

Or are you praying for the transformation that matters regardless of your circumstances?

You may never get all the answers you want, but you can become the person God wants you to be in the waiting.

// CLOSING

Here's the big idea for today and the theme we will find throughout this letter called Philippians...

When the future is unclear, God's faithfulness is our anchor.

Paul doesn't know if he's going to live or die. But he's certain God is faithful. He doesn't know how his story ends. But he knows WHO holds the ending.

And that changes everything.

Because joy isn't found in knowing what's next. Joy is found in knowing WHO's next to you. Joy isn't found in having all the answers. Joy is found in trusting the ONE who IS the answer.

Paul shows us this isn't just good theology. He's not writing this letter from retirement. He's writing this from chains. He's not theorizing about trusting God; he's demonstrating it. The Philippians don't just hear Paul's words; they see his life backing them up. That makes all the difference.

You can ignore good advice. But you can't ignore a life that proves it works.

Let me ask you... What's your "even if?" What's the uncertainty you're facing right now? What's the question that keeps you up at night?

Paul would say to you what he said to the Philippians... anchor yourself in what you KNOW.

- **You know who you belong to.** You're His.
- **You know God's character.** You know He's faithful to finish what He starts.
- **You know there's a day coming when Jesus returns,** and it will all make sense.

In the meantime? Live like Paul lived.

- Focus on what matters. Pray for transformation.
- Choose joy not because your circumstances changed, but because your perspective did.
- Look outward instead of inward.
- Trust God's faithfulness more than your feelings.