

**Worship Series: Victorious**  
**Service Theme: Joy Marches Victorious Over Circumstance**

**Sermon Theme: The Code to Joy (May 15, 2022)**  
**Acts 14:8-22**

What do you need in your life in order to have joy? I want to let you contemplate that this morning. Open up to the sermon notes page in the back of your worship folder, and jot down two rapid fire lists: 1.) A list of things in life that give you joy, and 2.) A list of things that rob you of joy. Then, summarize your answers like a simple math equation, like \_\_\_\_\_ + \_\_\_\_\_ + \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ = *joy*.

Maybe your equation sounds something like, **God + Family + Enough sleep – Sickness = Joy. Or Friends + Sports + BBQ – Responsibilities = Joy.** Your equation might look very different from your neighbor's, but I think there's one thing that unifies them all. Almost always, what we think gives us joy, or robs us of joy are the circumstances of our lives. Sometimes, we're robbed of joy by issues with big, important circumstances, like family or health. Other times, we're robbed of joy by far more minor circumstances. Someone cut you off on traffic. The dog puked on the rug. Your spouse never responded to your text. Your kid got gum stuck in their hair again.

But what if there was an equation that could ensure your joy, no matter the circumstances of your life? Whether big things, like a cancer diagnosis, or small things, like slow Wi-Fi, it wouldn't matter. You'd still have joy. That would be life changing, right? Well, my friends, there is such an equation. Let's call it **The Code to Joy.** (See what I did there?) It's exemplified by the Apostle Paul in today's sermon text.

Just over a decade after Jesus transformed Paul's heart from zealous persecutor of Christians to zealous Gospel messenger, the church sent

Paul and another missionary, Barnabas, to preach Jesus to cities in modern day Turkey and Syria.

We call this Paul's "First Missionary Journey." But if Paul's joy had been based on his life circumstances, we'd just call it, "Paul's missionary journey," because there wouldn't have been more! Paul's life as a messenger of Christ was a constant rollercoaster of ups and downs.

In Damascus, Paul faithfully preached the message of Jesus, then barely escaped a plot to kill him. In Jerusalem, the Spirit brought many people to faith through his preaching, then others also tried to kill him. In Antioch, both Jews and Gentiles came out in droves to hear the good news of Jesus. But just as quickly, the mission team was persecuted and kicked out of the region. At Iconium, Paul preached boldly, and God confirmed his message with amazing miracles! But then Paul had to flee from a plot to stone him to death. Highs and lows, ups and downs. It's hard to find unshakeable joy in circumstances like that, right? Maybe you know that by experience! But despite all the ups and downs, Paul remains joyful. How? And how can we?

After getting expelled from Antioch, Paul and Barnabas traveled 100 miles east to Lystra. There, things got...interesting! As Paul preached to the crowds, he healed a man who'd been crippled since birth. Not surprisingly, that grabbed the crowd's attention!

And in a city that boasted a temple to Zeus, and believed in the polytheistic gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome, the crowd assumed, ***"The gods have come down to us in human form!"***

An interesting bit of context helps explain why the people were so eager to offer sacrifices and roll out the red carpet. The Roman poet Ovid records a legend about the gods Zeus and Hermes coming down in human form in the nearby region of Phrygia, looking for lodging. But everyone rejected them, except for one elderly couple who took them in. Zeus and Hermes richly blessed the elderly couple, but punished everyone else for their inhospitality by destroying their

homes. So the people of Lystra were determined not to make the same mistake in their city!

And if Paul and Barnabas sought joy from the circumstances of their lives, they could have milked this for all it was worth! You could definitely work things to your advantage if an entire town believes you're a god! But instead, ***“Barnabas and Paul...tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting, ‘Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news...turn from these worthless things to the living God.’”***

Their actions show that their joy wasn't found in power, glory, or outward circumstances. Their joy was in the message they got to share! However, the Gospel produced some pretty difficult life circumstances for Paul and Barnabas!

The same Jews who kicked them out of Antioch and plotted to stone him at Iconium hated Paul and his message so much that they trekked over 100 miles just to cause trouble in Lystra too! Just like that, they turned the crowds against Paul and Barnabas, so that ***“They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead.”*** So much for being treated like gods!

Unquestionably, it's a miracle that Paul survives this. But what's maybe even more amazing is what he does next. ***“After the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city.”*** What?!?! He goes back into the city where people just tried to kill him? That's crazy, right? Granted, the next day, Paul and Barnabas leave Lystra and travel 60 miles to Derbe, where a large number of people come to faith. But after Derbe, Paul and Barnabas then retraced their steps and went back to Lystra, and Iconium, and Antioch—the same cities where they'd been persecuted and nearly martyred. And on his 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey—yes, Paul went on at least 3 more —Paul returned to Lystra again!

Not only did the horrible circumstances the Gospel often produced in his life not stop him from proclaiming Jesus, we're even told that ***“The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.”*** Which leaves

us wondering, “How?” How could Paul remain joyful and continue his missionary work when the Gospel so often endangered his life and brought negative circumstances into his life?

Because Paul knew The Code to Joy. And so can we! The first part of the equation is **“– expectations.”** As Paul and Barnabas encouraged the new Christians in the cities where they themselves were persecuted, they reminded them, ***“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”*** As children of God, we might expect the circumstances of our lives to always go well and according to plan, so that we'll always be filled with joy. But as nice as that sounds, it's not what God says. While God has promised us heaven through Jesus, he hasn't promised us heaven on earth! Instead, Jesus tells us we'll have to take up our crosses to follow him, and warns, ***“In this world you will have trouble.”*** Notice, Paul doesn't say we must go around, or past many hardships. We must go through them. When you go through something, you feel it. You experience it. And that won't always be fun, or joyful.

But if we live without expectations that our lives will be free from hardship or struggle, but understand that hardships are part of our earthly journey to heaven, we won't be surprised by them. We'll be better prepared to face them. It would be like your friend inviting you to hang out, but when you show up they say, “Oh, by the way, I signed us up to run a half-marathon today.” You'd be completely unprepared for it. But if your friend told you 6 months earlier, “I signed us up to run a half-marathon in November,” it will still hurt, but you'll be infinitely better prepared to face it. Likewise, if we know to expect hardship in our lives, when it comes, although it might still hurt to go through it, it doesn't need to rob us of joy!

The other, all-important part of The Code to Joy is the source of our joy. As I mentioned earlier, the source of our joy is often based on the outward circumstances of our lives. Our relationships with other people; success at work or school; our health; our hobbies; our plans; our emotions. And those things aren't bad. But the outward circumstances of our lives will never give us lasting joy. Because our

outward circumstances are too transitory and fleeting in a sinful world. Like Paul on his missionary journey, the circumstances of our lives are too much of a rollercoaster of ups and downs to truly find unshakeable joy in them.

How quickly the joy-producing presence of family and friends can change. How quickly your success, your health, your plans, and the ability to carry out your hobbies can change. How fleeting are our emotions, so that something that gives us joy one minute brings sorrow in the next. And in a world broken by sin, we'll never reach some pinnacle in this life where suffering and hardship can no longer reach us.

Therefore, The Code to Joy requires our joy to come from a source that is constant, certain, and unchanging. Built on solid rock, instead of shifting sand. - **Expectations + Jesus= Joy.**

That's why Paul could so joyfully continue preaching the Gospel. Because he knew the constant, unchanging certainty of eternal life through Jesus. As an eyewitness of the Risen Christ, Paul was motivated to joyfully tell others that truth, because he knew the constant, unchanging certainty of the perfect joy that will be ours in heaven. For himself, and for all those whom the Spirit would bring to faith through his faithful and joyful preaching of God's Word.

Although the circumstances of Paul's life were constantly changing and uncertain, he could have lasting joy by focusing on the things of his life that didn't change: his salvation, his identity and his purpose in Christ. Joy not from the source of this life's circumstances, but the circumstances of the life to come!

We're able to remain joyful through a lot of struggle and hardship when we know there's something great and joyful coming. Think of how differently you feel on the last day of work before you leave on a vacation, or the last day of school before summer vacation, or the last exam before graduation. As Jesus references in the Gospel, even the extremely painful struggle of childbirth fades into the background once that newborn baby is placed into mom's arms. Suddenly, the

painful struggle was all worth it, because of the greater blessing that came through it!

And when we look at the perfect, unchanging joy of heaven pictured in Revelation, every hardship or struggle we experience in our lives fades into the background. There is a far greater blessing that will be ours when we've come through those hardships, and entered into God's eternal kingdom. As Paul later wrote in 2 Corinthians, ***“Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”***

Now, understand, having joy doesn't always mean being happy. I doubt Paul felt happiness as he was being repeatedly smashed by stones. But his joy remained undiminished. Because while our emotions are often based on outward circumstances, our joy isn't. Just think of the contrast of someone mourning the death of a Christian loved one. They're not happy, right? And yet, they can have an indescribable joy while they mourn, because they know their loved one now has perfect joy in heaven, and that we'll be with them again. That's the constant power of Easter! Because Christ lives, our joy is founded in something constant, certain, and unchanging.

I remind myself of that daily by keeping this block in my office, which says, ***“He is risen indeed!”*** It's a reminder that my joy isn't found in the ever-changing, uncertain circumstances of life, but in the unchanging certainty of Jesus. No matter what's going on in your life, you can have joy because Christ lives, and therefore, we will live eternally! That makes The Code to Joy incredibly simple. ***Jesus= Joy!***