

Introduction

We're going to be wrapping up our "Freedom Story" series today. We'll be completing our look at the Book of Galatians. So, if you have a Bible, I want to invite you to go ahead and get that Bible out and turn to Galatians chapter 6. We'll be starting in verse 11 here in just a moment. But before we do that, I just want to pray over us. I want to pray some specific things. I want to pray first of all for those of us that are maybe struggling to walk in the freedom of Christ, that today would be the day that you feel the ability to do that... you feel released to do that. I want to pray for those of us that have yet to ever say "Yes" to Jesus. I know there are some of you out there right now and you're weighing it; you're considering it, and so I want to pray for you. I want to pray that today would be the day that God breaks through whatever barriers you have put up in your heart today. Then finally, I just want to pray and ask that the Holy Spirit would just move across this place and that He would speak to each of us, wherever we are at, whatever that point of need is. So let's just pray and ask Him to do that.

"Heavenly Father, we need to hear from You right now. God, we need your Word to speak to us; we need You to change us. God, we need to be addressed. May your Word speak to us in fullness and in power, and God may we leave here changed. For any who have yet to know you, God, I pray that today they would say 'Yes'. For any who have been running, I pray that they would embrace You. God, for any who have yet to apply grace to their lives, I pray that they would. Change us, Father. May your Holy Spirit sweep across, blow away the cobwebs, and give us fresh faith. We pray this in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen."

1. In The Cross. (v. 14)

Galatians 6:11: "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised, that they may boast in your flesh. But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God."

From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen."

He gets to the end of the letter and he says, "Look at the large letters with which I write to you in my own hand." Paul had a scribe who was writing for him. We don't really know why. Maybe it was just someone who traveled with him or maybe it was, as we have suggested, that Paul didn't have very good eyesight, so he needed someone to write for him. He says here, "Now, look; I'm writing in my own hand and look at these large letters." Why was he writing in such large letters with his own hand? Why did he grab the pen? Maybe it was just because he wanted to say, "Hey, this is really me doing this, and you can recognize that by my handwriting." But maybe he had something else to say. Maybe he wanted to, as you and I do whenever we want to make a point of emphasis when we are writing something, he wanted to really stress it and write it in all capital letters and say, "Whatever you do, do not miss this point." What was the point that he was trying to make? He wasn't trying to say, "It's about law." He wasn't trying to say, "It's about circumcision." In fact, he says, "Look; all these guys that want you to be circumcised, the only reason that they want that, the only reason that they want to pretend that you ought to follow the law, the only reason

that they're saying these things is because they want to pad their religious statistics. What really matters is not about any sort of religion or any sort of law, but this is what I want you to do. I want you to see today, as I write in all capital letters, one thing that I want you to do. I want you to learn how to boast in Jesus Christ. That's really where Paul is headed. This is the way that you boast.

I mean, we love to boast, don't we? We're good at it. I mean, what is the saying they say, "Anywhere that three men are gathered, the first liar doesn't stand a chance." Have you heard this before? We love to brag on ourselves, point at ourselves. The word there for boast... actually Paul says this in verse 14: *"But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ..."* Now when we boast... the word "boast" here, it literally is translated "glory." That's what it means, "glory." Whenever we boast, what are we doing? We're taking the glory light, and we're shining it in a particular direction. Typically when we are boasting, we're not boasting about other people, are we? We're taking the glory light and we're turning it around, and we're pointing it straight at ourselves. Whenever we boast, we're saying, "Check me out." It's as if we're trying to demonstrate that we have some sort of worthiness, some sort of resumé by which you should care about me, you should believe that I'm an important person, because "listen to this really cool thing that I did," or "Listen to this really neat achievement that I was able to accomplish," or "Listen to this really neat thing that happened to me." So what do we do? We turn the glory light around and we shine it onto ourselves. That is what boasting is about. But Paul says, "Whenever I glory, I will glory... I will boast in one thing, in Jesus."

I mean, when it comes to bragging and boasting, we do it right. I mean, there's a saying in Texas, "It ain't braggin' if it's true." You've heard this, right? We love to talk about the stuff that we've done. Texans have kind of a reputation for it, don't they? Last spring break, a year ago, I went to Honduras with Pastor Dwight and Pastor Darren, and we were going to meet up with some of our students there on a trip, and I was really excited about this. Now, I was pretty new at that point. I had only been here about six weeks. I'm loading up, I'm on a plane. You know, you've got that pressure, you're around these people and you don't know them. You just want them to think that you're cool. Right? So you're like, "I'm going to tell the best stories that I can tell to make these people think that there's something to me." So, you know, (in a deep voice) "Manly, man... I'm going to tell my manly story." These sorts of things. I remember we were sitting at breakfast. It was me, Darren, and Dwight. I don't remember but we were doing that thing that guys do and sharing these stories, and this sort of thing. I don't remember what exactly the topic was. I think it was something like this, "What's the coldest you've ever been?" I don't remember what Darren said, but he gave some story about that. I remembered though and I shared my story. "Well, you know, one time Joy and I were in Wyoming, in Yellowstone, and there was snow all around." Just talking about the wind. I was talking about how cold we were. And Dwight is sitting there; he's not saying a word. He's just totally silent. So we're looking at him, "So, Dwight. What's the coldest you've ever been?" He was like, "Do you really want to know?" "Yeah, we really want to know!" Well, there was this one time I went polar bear hunting. (Laughter) "What? Come on! You did not..." He said, "No, I really went polar bear hunting." I said, "Okay, tell me. What does that look like to go polar bear hunting?" He said, "Well, they take you out to a place between Iceland and Greenland." (Laughter) "It is a complete, desolate solid sheet of ice, and a plane lands and drops you off and leaves you in the middle of nowhere and you wait..." I think he said he waited about two hours on his guide to show up. He said the pilot said, "Just wait right here; your guide will be here in two hours." And the plane takes off. He was in that wacky fur suit that's made out of animal skins and he was just waiting there. He said, "That's probably the weirdest feeling you have ever had, watching a plane fly away and as you look around and all you see is ice, and you're going to wait right here for your guide to show up." So there's Darren and I... "Okay. That's a pretty cool story, I guess..." (Laughter) "...you

know, if you're into that kind of thing." (Laughter) You should never ever get into a boasting contest with Pastor Dwight, because he's just waiting there with the polar bear hunting story, to pull it out of his pocket. Have you guys seen that Dr. Pepper 10 commercial with the manly man? He's like eating the bark... that's Pastor Dwight. I mean, you know, he's just the manliest man that is out there, and he's just able to tell you about his... (loud noise from speakers)... Oh, we just happen to have it right here... (commercial plays). (Laughter) Never ever get into a boasting contest with Pastor Dwight. Alright? He's the manliest man that I know.

Now, this is the thing about boasting... seriously... because what happens is that when you attempt to build yourself up, what happens? There's always someone who can outdo your own boasting. There's someone who's gone through experiences that you haven't gone through. There's someone who's done things that you haven't done; there's someone who's seen things that you haven't seen. You see, because the glory light... whenever we shine it on ourselves and we attempt to build ourselves up, what happens? What we end up doing is we end up trying to declare... "I am worthy because of this thing that I've done or this thing that I've seen." But what Paul has said is this: "You can never declare any worth apart from Christ."

In 2 Corinthians chapter 11, starting in verse 21, he says, *"But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure."* Paul says, "Hey, do you want to have a manly man contest? I am as manly as it comes; I have done it all. I have seen it all; I have been everywhere, man." But, that is not what he says is worth boasting about. How does he boast? The next chapter, 2 Corinthians chapter 12:7: *"So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."*

Do you want to know how to boast? You do not boast in your accomplishments. You do not boast in what you have seen. You do not boast in what you have done. The way that you boast is, in fact, very simple. You boast only in what Jesus Christ has done. The way that you boast is that you take the glory light, and you do not shine it on yourself, but instead you turn it and you shine it straight on the cross of Jesus Christ, and you say, "I would have nothing but were it for what God did in me." You think about the most broken, needful, dark place that's in your life, the place where you are an utter and abject failure... in that place, that you hide, that you keep hidden from everyone else... that place right there. That is the place that you boast in. You boast and you say, "I deserve nothing. I am broken but God saved me anyway." You see, that's where boasting comes from. Paul says, "I will boast only in the cross of my Lord Jesus Christ," because he knows that if he points his attention to the place where he is broken, then what happens? His flaws become the place of glory because it demonstrates who Jesus Christ is.

As a church, what would happen if we turn from our tendency to glory in our own achievements and instead used every opportunity where people tried to give us credit and instead said, "Only because of what God has done in me, through Jesus Christ, can I declare anything in this moment." Most of us are trying to build a resumé where we sell ourselves and try to make us sound like great people to other ones. But instead of trying to impress you, instead of trying to compare myself with others, instead of trying to say, "This is how great I am"; instead of doing those things, instead of trying to believe that I have to make myself sound good, I should instead shine a light on my flaws because it is precisely in the place where I feel the least accomplished, that Jesus Christ has done his greatest accomplishment in me. It is precisely in the place where we feel least accomplished, where Jesus Christ does his greatest work in me.

Matthias Grunewald, the German artist, had a painting called "Crucifixion," and in that painting, in the middle, there's Jesus Christ on the cross crucified, but over to the side, there is a figure representing John the Baptist. For those of you who have read the Gospels, you know that John the Baptist had already been beheaded by the time that Jesus was crucified. So why is John the Baptist in this painting? Well, John the Baptist has his hand out and a long, bony finger is extended and is pointing at a particular place. If you draw a line from the end of John the Baptist's finger it takes you right to the spear-pierced side of Jesus Christ. What is Grunewald trying to tell us? He says this: Our job is not to do anything except this: Point people to the cross." That's how you boast.

2. As A New Creation. (v. 15)

So this is the crazy thing. Paul says it's good to boast. You've been told your whole life, "Don't brag and don't boast; that's wrong." You should brag; you should boast, but not on yourself. Instead, boast on what Jesus Christ has done in and through your brokenness and your depravity. When you stop shining the glory light on yourself and start shining it on Jesus Christ instead... what happens? Well, I tell you what. Paul says, "First you boast in the cross," but second, in verse 15, "you boast as a new creation, *"For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision..."* These were the marks of being a child of Abraham, obeying the Law, being part of the covenant. *"...Neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation."*

Paul uses this phrase in 2 Corinthians 5:17: He says this: *"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."* Okay, this is what Paul says: "A new creation." Once you... "are you ready for this? Paul says, "Once you have received the grace of God in your life, you will be brand new, a new creation." How does that happen? He basically gives us two ways, right before that. Go back to verse 14: *"But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which..."* So what does the cross do? How does the cross make me a new creation. Two things: *"By which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."* So, you see, this is interesting. Paul says, "When Jesus Christ was crucified, it wasn't just Jesus that was crucified. It was actually, when I received Him in faith, do you know what happened? At the same exact time, the world was crucified to me. What does that mean? It means this: Nothing that the world offers me any longer holds sway over me. It doesn't have power over me. The world has been crucified to me.

When I was a kid, I played board games a lot with my family. Do you guys play board games? Kids... before you had video games, what there was, there were these boxes and you would open them up and inside... okay, right... so, board games. There were four kids in our family, and so it was kind of cheap entertainment on Friday night... Monopoly, Risk... these kinds of games. We would play these as a family. Now, I hate to admit this about myself, but whenever I was nine, ten, and eleven years old... I was a highly

competitive individual. (Laughter) I'm not really repenting of being competitive. I am repenting of being a sore loser. Alright? I was a sore loser in those days. You'd be playing the games... you know, there's that moment when you're playing the game when you know you're not going to win. Right? You've been there, Right? Let me tell you what I would do. I would then try and make the experience as miserable as possible for everyone else I was playing the game with. (Laughter) I would throw fits, I would scream, I would get bored, I would say ugly things. There may have been tears shed. I would walk out. I would leave the game. You know, these kinds of things that you would do whenever you get angry. Why would that happen? Well, I was nine, ten, or eleven years old. It was a terrible thing... I'm embarrassed about it. I can't believe I was like that. Unfortunately for my kids, I see them doing the same thing now. Sorry guys. But this is the thing: It is that something changed in me as I grew and got older and became more mature. When we play games now... don't get me wrong... I want to win, sure. You know, I mean, who doesn't? You're playing the game; you might as well play to win. But you know what? If I don't win, it doesn't freak me out anymore. I'm not angry about it. I'm like, "Oh... I didn't win Pictionary today. Okay. Not a big deal." It's not a thing that really affects me or bothers me. Instead... what happens? I just enjoy getting to be there with my friends, my family, laughing and having a good time. It's really weird, like something changed in me to where no longer is the highest value when I play a game... winning. The highest value for me is just being a part of the game and having fun. Why do I share that? Because I think that a similar thing happens when you receive grace by faith. Your priorities change. You know, the world doesn't have sway over me anymore. I mean, sure... do we want to make a good living? Absolutely, of course we do. Do we want to raise good children? Absolutely, of course we do. Do we want to have good health? You bet that we want to have good health. But are those things the end-all and be-all of my existence any longer? "No." Because the rules by which I am playing have now changed. The point is not for me to have the most comfortable existence that I can possibly have. Instead now, the point of life for me now is to do what? Glory to Him. Point the glory light back at the cross. So when the world is crucified to me, what that means now is this: When Jesus Christ was crucified and I boast in that, what the world has to offer now, really... it's great if I get it, but if I don't, no big deal. What happens now? Now, what I do is I walk in life looking for opportunities to boast on what Jesus Christ has done.

"Man, you're so successful in your business. That's incredible. Look at these great things that you have given. Look how God has blessed you. Look at the material possessions that you have." ...Let me tell you about the reason that that's possible. It's because of what God has done in me through Jesus.

"Man, the way that you raise your kids... you must be an incredible parent." ...Well, you know what? I love my kids and I've done the best that I can. I've tried to raise them according to the principles that I've found here in this Book, but I can tell you something pretty sure... It's not because of anything that I've done, but it's because of the grace of God in my life, just blessing me with children who have happened to turn out in the way that they have.

"Man, you sure have been healthy. What's your secret to that?" ...Well, you know what? I've been blessed with great health, but let me tell you what. Just because I eat right or exercise or those sorts of things, you know what? It doesn't really matter because God is in control of every breath that I have, and He can take it away... Just like that.

All glory back to God. Right? So what happens now is this. As you reach a point where you say, "Okay, I'm going to boast in the cross, as a new creation." Do you want to know what a new creation is? It's somebody walking in the middle of the world that doesn't run around trying to get the same stuff that the world is trying to get, because you're like, "Hey, I'm a new creation. If I get money, great. If I get success,

great. If I get famous, fine. But do you know what? Those aren't the things that define me. What defines me instead is what God has done in Jesus. So, a new creation says that the world has been crucified and now I am to the world. The world doesn't control me anymore. The world doesn't get to dictate my actions. The world doesn't get to tell me how worth-full or how worthless I am. The world doesn't get to tell me, "Well, you have to live in this way," because now I find my directions and my directives for living not from what the world says, but I've been crucified to the world. Where do I find them? From the cross. And so I now get to live as a new creation in the midst of this.

Do you remember the Tower of Babel in Genesis chapter 11? When they gathered together they built a tower that reached up to the heavens. Do you remember what they said? In Genesis 11:4, this is what they said: *"Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves..."* Listen. You have a desire in you that is sinful and that is broken, and do you know what that desire is? ...To make a name for yourself. But what the cross declares is that now you have been freed. You no longer have to try and make a name for yourself, but now you can try to make a name for One... The only One that matters... Jesus Christ.

So when you reach that point, that is absolute and true freedom. So every point now is a place where the world is crucified and I'm crucified to the world and so now I get to do one thing: brag and boast, every chance I get, not on myself but on the grace of God in my life. What does that do? Well, verse 16: *"And as for all who walk by this rule..."* What is this rule? Bragging and boasting as a new creation, crucified to the world, the world crucified to me. I get to now brag and boast in this. I live by this rule... so what do I do? *"...peace and mercy be upon them..."* Do you want to know why you get peace? Because when you stop comparing yourself to everyone else, you get peace. When you stop trying to impress other people... when I stop trying to have to give you my resumé all the time so that you'll think that I'm cool, when I stop doing that... I have peace, because I get to walk in the assurance that I can have confidence and I can have a self-worth, not that comes from anything I've done but that comes because of what God has done. I can have mercy. How do I get mercy? I don't get mercy because I just wake up and I feel merciful. No. I get to demonstrate mercy because God has demonstrated mercy to me. I deserved death, I deserved hell, I deserved punishment but instead... the cross declares, "God loves his enemies so much that He would rather die for them than kill them. So, instead of killing me like I deserved, what did God do? He saved me and so He showed mercy to me so why don't I show mercy to others? Do you want to have peace... do you want to have mercy in your life? Do you know what you do? You walk in the cross. You walk in the freedom that God has given through Jesus Christ. That's where peace and mercy come from. No longer does the world control me, no longer does any of my desires control me... so there, at the end of that verse... *"And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God."* Actually, the word there should **not** be translated "and". The Greek word is "kai"... it's a particle, it's a conjunction. It's often translated as "and." But the grammatical structure of that sentence is actually better translated as this: *"And as for all who walk by this rule..."* (this rule of boasting and Christ and being a new creation) *"...peace and mercy be upon them, **even as** upon the Israel of God."* What is Paul trying to say? When you walk in the grace that comes straight from the cross, guess what? You get to walk with the same peace and the same mercy that was intended for the people that He chose and called Israel. You get the same peace and the same mercy; it comes to you through Jesus Christ. "Even as" the Israel of God got it, you get it too, and so you now boast in the cross as a new creation."

3. With The Marks of Jesus. (v. 17)

So, is that it? No, he has one more thing to say: *"From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus."* People were after Paul. They thought he was a false teacher because he was teaching "salvation by grace through faith, not by works, lest no man should boast." The Judaizers were after him. They wanted to declare that what he said was incorrect, that it was poor theology. Paul says, "I bear on my body the marks of Jesus." The Greek word there for "mark" is the word "stigmata." Besides being a bad movie in the '90s, "stigmata" was something very significant. What was "stigmata"?

St. Francis of Assisi, it was said, meditated so long on the crucifixion that stigmata appeared on his body... crucifixion wounds in his hands and in his feet. In fact, if you go home and you Google "stigmata" you can find all kinds of articles about people that have meditated so long on the crucifixion that they say these wounds appeared. True or false? I don't know but this is the thing. It is that Paul says, "I bear the stigmata of Jesus." Did he mean the wounds? No. This is probably what he meant. He probably unbuttoned his shirt and opened it up and he said, "Look, I bear the marks of Jesus on my body." What was he saying? "I've been beaten for what I believe. I have scars for what I believe. I've walked this road so many times and I've been beaten so many different ways, and I declare to you that I now bear the marks of Jesus on my body. So if you don't think that what I'm teaching is true, all you have to do is look at me and you know that it is." Really, all you had to do is look at Paul and you would know that he was telling the truth. Why?

...Because he lived differently. Right? He was killing Christians just years earlier and now he is one of them. Paul declares, later on, the Fruit of the Spirit: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those are also the marks of Jesus on us, because the longer that you walk with Jesus, the more mature that you come, and those marks of maturity begin to show up in you and on you. The marks of Jesus... there comes a moment, I'm convinced of this, if you choose today to walk in freedom and to apply the freedom of Christ to your life, if you haven't already done it, you will walk through it, I can almost guarantee you... there will come a moment in your life when God will take away everything in your life that feels comfortable to you. Take away finances, take away health, take away relationships... Why does He do that? ...because I think that there's something about walking in freedom that is a real kind of pointed lesson for us to learn. He strips away things so that then you understand that when Jesus Christ is all you have, Jesus Christ is all you need. You learn to hold tight to that. And once you have you have walked through that, it gives you a mark of brokenness that changes you, and you know what happens? So then, if he gives you things back, you know you hold them loosely now, because they were never yours in the first place. You know, even though He has given you these things, all you need is Jesus. Paul has been at the pinnacle. He was like the young, upcoming religious leader in his day, and he has been beaten and shipwrecked and left for dead, and now he just says, "Look... I bear the marks of Jesus on my body."

Some people have kind of asked us, as we have gone through Freedom Story, they've said, "Steve, we want to hear more about your story. What would that be like?" I'm not really going to go into that whole thing today, but there is kind of an episode from my past that taught me about this brokenness, this sense of leaning completely on God. I've shared a little bit about it before. It was a time when I got very ill. But you may not know this: During that time, because it was my heart... I got heart failure and was very, very weak. I got so sick that actually my circulation was so poor, I lost my memory from that time in my life, basically. I can't remember anything very clearly that took place. So what I've done... I want to kind of just share with you a place where we were very broken and leaning on Christ, but I can't give that story, so I've asked my wife Joy to come out. She's going to just tell us a little bit about that today. We want to look and see how it is that God can walk with us through that. So, Joy... come on out here.

Pastor Steve: So, you know, we're talking about this kind of place of poor health in my life. You got to be the very lucky person that got to take care of me during that... (Laughter) Could you tell just a little bit about what that was like during that time?

Joy: Sure. We were married about nine months when Steve was diagnosed with heart failure. He went from being a very hard-working, helpful, healthy husband to, very quickly, being a very hard-working sick husband. His health declined very rapidly. Everyday tasks that we kind of took for granted became very, very hard. Things like mowing the lawn and working in the yard were just off the table at that point. He was not allowed to lift more than ten pounds. But even things very easy, such as carrying in groceries and going to check the mailbox were very, very taxing for his body, and if he did those things, he would have to rest for long periods of time. I remember taking him to the hospital countless times, just because he would be having an episode, and they would say, "Well, come in." I kind of lost track of how many times we did that. I remember checking on him at work... he was a youth pastor, and he was still trying to do his job very well. I remember calling him many, many times, and he would be lying on the floor of his office just because being there was too much. So there was lots of sleeping, lots of not being able to get out of bed, or getting out of bed and doing something very small and then being too tired to do anything else.

Pastor Steve: So how did that affect you spiritually at that time?

Joy: Well, I had a choice. I could either be in a tizzy all of the time and be unbearable to be around, or I could choose to cling to Jesus. It was kind of a very conscious choice because it was a very scary time, you know, when they look at you and say, "This is not going very well," at the doctor's. It was a time of choosing to cling to Jesus and know that He's holding everything about you in His hand.

Pastor Steve: When you say, "Things aren't going well," what do you mean?

Joy: Well, they did not tell us at the time, but they knew that they had given Steve about two years to live. So, your health was declining and they were not sure of how things were going to go.

Pastor Steve: So, when you're clinging to Jesus and God kind of brought us through that... that's a really long story that we don't have time to give right now... how did that affect you then? On the flip side of that, past that, as we started coming out of that, how did God change your heart?

Joy: I think that what I learned from that situation is that everything that we have is such a gift from God. We prayed for you to be healed and you were, but we have also prayed for friends that were in situations of death, and they didn't make it. So, it was kind of ... I consider myself to be very, very blessed and that the Lord blessed us in saving your life. I now know that everything I have comes from the Lord.

Pastor Steve: Amen. So, if you could just give one parting shot, what would you say to anybody who finds themselves maybe in a situation right now, you know, they're ill or they're in a place where they feel like God is, they might even say, punishing them... taking things away from them. What would you say to them right now?

Joy: I think that I would say to trust Jesus, that He will carry you through those times. He provides peace during those times... that He will answer in the way that He knows best. Sometimes I've seen friends walk through it and things don't end the way that we want them to, but He still works through those times.

Pastor Steve: Hmmm... Amen. Thanks, Joy. Thanks for coming out and sharing. I appreciate it. (Clapping)

That's just a real brief look into that. I think the reason I wanted to do that is I know this: I could start probably right here and we could go all the way around the room, and there are people that would stand up and they have stories much more difficult than mine. I know that. And people would say, "There were seasons when everything was stripped from me." If you've ever felt completely powerless, that's how we felt in that moment. It was like, you're taking the medication... I mean, we just went to checkup after checkup and they're like, "Yeah, you're dying." That was basically it. If you've been in that place, you just suddenly realize you are at this point of being out of control and complete helplessness. The crazy thing is you're kind of in that place now, but sometimes we convince ourselves that we have more control than we truly do. I think that this is what I want to communicate to you today, and this is what I really want us to understand. As Joy mentioned, I was supposed to be dead in 2002, based on my initial diagnosis. Sort of the joke that Joy and I have made since then is that right now I'm in "bonus time." I should have been dead so I'm in year twelve of bonus time, here in 2014. We kind of had a moment... if you were supposed to be dead and you're not, you kind of have those conversations... you say, "Okay, I'm supposed to be gone... what are we going to do with our life? How are we going to change things." We made some personal changes, and I made a commitment that even though I was going to be in ministry, I was going to make sure that I always elevated my family to a place of importance, and we talked about some different priorities financially and those kinds of things. But really, ultimately, we came to this point where we said, "The key thing that we're going to do, if we've got bonus time, what are we going to do? We're going to tell as many people about Jesus as we possibly can." That's what we're going to do, right? What we're going to do is we're going to look for as many opportunities, in as many ways as we possibly can do so, to boast that I should be dead but I'm alive because of Jesus Christ. I should be bound for hell but I'm alive and going to spend eternity with Him because of what God did in Jesus Christ. We're going to do that over and over and over again. The reason that I say that now is this: It is because we are reaching the conclusion of this series, and as we reach the conclusion of this series, many of us bear the marks of difficult seasons in our lives, but we perhaps missed the purpose for which those seasons were given to us. You bear the mark of Jesus on your body, but you have not named them for Christ. You have named them for difficult circumstances or the school of hard knocks. You have not declared, "I should have been in a worse off place, yet because of the grace that God showed me, I now am able to flourish." So now, I want to challenge us, as a church, may we boast correctly in the cross, as a new creation, with the world crucified to us, with the marks of Christ... Church, you will walk through difficult circumstances, and do not ever fall prey to the lie that this means that there is something that is different about you or wrong about you. Jesus Christ said it, "In this world you will have trouble." The difference between a believer and a nonbeliever is this: "How do you handle the painful circumstances in life? Will you focus on yourself or will you focus on Jesus Christ?" That is the difference. So, as we approach those difficult seasons, and if they have not come to you yet, mark my words, they will. As they come, you get to decide, "Will I demonstrate the marks of Jesus on my body, and will I, as I walk through whatever difficult circumstances come my way, will I yet boast in Christ or will I say, 'Why me?'" Sure, there's going to be times where you cry; sure, there's going to be times where you say, "It's difficult." You're even going to have those times where you say, "Why me?" but those cannot be the controlling emotion. Instead, you finally have to reach the place where you say, "This is my biography and it will be determined now by my theology, and my theology is this: The cross of Christ is greater than all of these circumstances, and so therefore I boast in the fact that God has given me the grace to walk through this and to give Him glory no matter what." (Clapping)

So now... Paul gets to the end and what does he say? Verse 18: *"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit..."* He starts the letter with grace; he ends the letter with grace, and all between it's all about the unpacking of grace. How are we going to end today? This is how we're going to end. Do not waste my bonus time, alright? If you are a believer but you are not walking in freedom, today is the day to apply it. If you are not a believer and you have heard the Gospel proclaimed through Galatians over these last several weeks or maybe even today is your first day... do not walk out of this room saying, "Let me think about it some more." You say "Yes" to Him today. I plead with you... I beg of you, do not leave without saying "Yes" to Jesus today because He is the reason that you are able to draw your next breath, He is the reason for anything that you have. He is sustaining your life. Colossians 1 says that literally He is holding your body together right now. The only reason you haven't exploded into to a massive bloody ooze is because the Holy Spirit is holding you together because He designed you that way. Do not waste your time or my bonus time, but say "Yes" to Jesus Christ.

So this is what I pray that we would do now, that we would recognize that as we have heard the Gospel proclaimed, we now have to say "Yes" to it; "I deserve death but I get life." That's grace. "I deserve nothing but I get gifts." That is grace. Everything is a gift from the hand of God. It's all grace. It's all grace! So this is what I want to ask us to do. I want to ask you... every person. Take out your worship guide real quick. As you take this worship guide out, I want us all to tear off this info tab. Everybody tear this off. On one side of the info tab, you can write your name, info, prayer requests... that kind of stuff. On the back side it says, "Respond." This is ten weeks of "Freedom Story." We have given testimony after testimony. We have proclaimed the Gospel, week after week. Some of us... listen, you've been waiting for the proof. I've given you all the proof I can give you. Now it's just time to decide, "God, will You give me the faith to say 'Yes'?" Some of you need to check that box and say "I'm trusting Jesus for the first time." You need to say "Yes." Some of you need to say, "I have some questions. I want to talk to some other people about growing." Some of you need to get baptized. There are a lot of people in this room, I know this... you're believers but you're walking around without your wedding ring on. Don't do that. Put your wedding ring on; get baptized. "I would like info about becoming a member." "I want to join a Life Group." Whatever God is telling you to do, you need to fill this out, and you need to say "Yes" to it. Okay? We want to invite you to take the next step. This is the thing: I can't force you to do that; I can't make you do that. In fact, it would be wrong of me to do so. Do you know what we're going to do? We're just going to pray right now, and I'm going to ask God's Holy Spirit to speak to your heart. All I can do is... you've got the card, you've got it in your hand... He's going to tell you what your next step is. That's it. I'm just going to pray and I'm going to ask the Lord to direct you and say, "This is what you need to do." Let's bow our heads and let's pray and say, "Lord, speak to us."

"God, we have proclaimed and exhorted and asked people to say 'Yes' to You in every way that we can imagine. God, your grace is real; your grace is powerful, but Father, eventually people just have to receive it. So, God, I pray right now that they would. God, I pray right now that they would receive the gift that You've given through Jesus Christ, through his cross, and that they would receive it. God, for those who have believed in You for many years, God, I pray that they would now apply it, that they would walk in that grace and they would walk in that freedom. Father, I pray that we would stop boasting in ourselves to build ourselves up, but instead, God, we would boast in what you've done in us. Father, may we always declare it's all a gift; it's all grace. Father, we pray this and we ask it in the name of your Son Jesus Christ. Amen."