

Dec. 3, 2017

The Joy of Fellowship in Christ

Philippians 1:1-8

There is no greater joy than the fellowship of those who sacrificially love, labor, worship, and suffer together in Christ.

LTS: Psa. 96

Intro:

When my wife and I were in college, young, single and in love, we wrote letters to one another. One semester I found myself temporarily employed by the university in a manner that required me to travel. For months on end I would bounce from state to state, church to church, Christian school to Christian school in the hope of inspiring young people to enroll in my alma mater.

As a young man with no ties, I enjoyed the constant traveling. I like the comradery of the four other young men who traveled with me. I relished seeing parts of the country I had never visited before and enjoyed meeting new people. But what I most looked forward to at every destination was the letter I was sure to receive from the young lady who would one day become my wife. It didn't matter where I landed at the end of any given day. Chris had my itinerary and made sure there was a fresh letter waiting for me at every stop.

For those of you in the younger generation it may seem ridiculous in this email, text, and twitter generation, to think of looking forward with wrapped anticipation to reading a message that was already four days old! And it gets worse! The answers I would send back through the mail in my own letters were always flying through the postal system in the opposite direction of Chris's new letters with new news and new questions. There was always a four-day lag time between her side of the conversation and mine!

In those days we had no personal computers. Email hadn't been invented yet. There were no cell phones. There was just pen and paper and a painfully slow postal service. Nevertheless, there was nothing I enjoyed more on those trips than getting to the end of the day and finding a letter waiting for me from the person who had come to mean more to me than anyone else in the world. In fact, I still have those letters treasured away in a special place in my home. Try that with a text message!

I suspect, however, that the delight I had in receiving those notes was small compared to the joy Paul must have experienced when he, incarcerated in a lonely Roman prison, received a letter and a package from his dear friends in Philippi.

There is a reason Philippians is called the epistle of Joy. Yes, Paul was joyful in the Lord. But the Lord often makes his joyful presence known NOT ONLY through His word, but through the personal ministry and fellowship of His people. As I considered these things this week it occurred to me that, there is no greater earthly joy than what is experienced in the fellowship of those who sacrificially love, labor, worship, and suffer together in Christ.

If you are wondering how Paul's letter to the saints in Philippi earned the title "Epistle of Joy," the first eight verses offer four reasons.

- Paul's Blessing on them. (1-2)
- Paul's Partnership with them (3-5)
- Paul's Confidence about them (6-7)
- Paul's Affection for them (8)

Read Phil. 1:1-8

One of the clues that the tone of Philippians is going to be different from some of Paul's more corrective epistles is the fact that Paul makes it through a full 26 verses before he issues a command. Eventually, Paul gets around to telling the Philippians what they are to do, but most of this first chapter is nothing more than thanksgiving and encouragement from one grateful brother to his dear friends.

Another wonderful thing to consider while reading this letter is the historic fact that Paul was once the church's fiercest and most determined enemy. He hated Jesus and was determined to wipe out all who were devoted to him. It is one of the great evidences of the veracity of the gospel that the murderous Saul of Tarsus became the gentle and joyful Paul the apostle – lover of Christ Jesus and lover all who follow Him. Do you need a transformed life? You can get it from the same source Paul got his.

The first indication that Paul's epistle to the Philippians will be a letter of joy is...

I. Paul's Blessing on the brethren. (1-2)

Read 1-2

1. Notice with me first of all that Paul doesn't begin with his common greeting, "*Paul, and apostle of Christ Jesus.*" He did that whenever he needed to assert his authority before issuing correction. But not here. He is writing to bless, not to correct.

And listen to the terms of the blessing (2): “*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*”

2. Thus Paul begins the letter by pronouncing upon the saints in Christ Jesus, together with the overseers and deacons, GRACE. That is, And with it comes its resulting PEACE ; that true spiritual wholeness, and blessing based on Jesus’ finished work on the cross. And so Paul begins this letter in a way that pours over his readers the sweetest blessing any human could hope for; Namely, grace and peace from God..

3. Paul is jubilant! He had just recently learned from Epaphroditus that the church of Philippi is not only still alive, but thriving in its love and devotion to Christ and His gospel. Moreover, he is overjoyed by their expression of love for him, both in sending a gift and in sending their dear brother Ephroditus as their their messenger. No wonder Paul pronounces upon them God’s blessing.

3. Secondly, we know this is going to be an epistle of joy because of...

II. Paul’s Partnership with the them (3-5)

Read 3-5

1. First Paul blesses them, then he tells them how thankful he is for them. The phrase “*I thank*” is one word in GK, *Euxharisteo* from which we get the word Eucharist (referring to the Lord’s table where Jesus gave thanks to God).

2. It was common for Paul to begin his letters with an introduction and a thanksgiving. His praise, however, is not offered to “the gods” as was the custom in his day among the pagans) but to that glorious being whom Paul calls, *My God*. This is not a distant god, an aloof god, a passive god. No, this is the God who inserts Himself in our lives to accomplish His will and fills us with the joy of knowing Him above all things. For Paul, it wasn’t “the gods.” It was “My God.” The God of heaven and earth with whom Paul has a vital and active relationship.

3. Paul is saying: Every time I remember you, I talk to God about you. And every time I talk to God about you I say, *thank you* for bringing them into my life. Thank you for their faithfulness. Thank you for how You use them to advance the gospel, even to their own hurt. And thank you for prompting them to meet my needs even out of their own poverty. He prays about them as if they were a gift from God, Himself. And indeed they were! They had been faithful NOT only to the Lord, but to Him. Even though they were separated by hundreds of miles.

4. But we can be sure that prayers of thanksgiving were not the only prayers he prayed for them.

- A. There were dangers that they no doubt continued to face.
- B. There were temptations that sought to deceive and derail them.
- C. There were distractions that threatened to draw them away from the main business of delighting in Christ.
- D. The Philippians needed Paul's prayers.
- E. So Like the Prophet Samuel in the O.T., Paul no doubt could say, "*Far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you*" (1 Sam. 12:23).
- F. And this puts the question to all of us, doesn't it? Do you pray for the brothers and sisters in Christ with whom you worship, sing, and serve? Do you pray for them? Do you give thanks for them?
- G. By the way, the digital church directory is a great tool to help us pray for one another.

5. But the point here (4) is that when Paul prays for them it fills his heart with joy. This is the first mention of Joy in this epistle. In GK it is word *Chara*, which means gladness, great happiness, or delight. His prayers for them were not merely a disciplined act of spiritual service. No, he delighted to pray for them. It filled him with Joy! Sometimes when we pray for people we pray with tears. But whenever Paul prayed for the Philippians, he prayed with a smile on his face. Why?

6. Because (5) of their "partnership in the gospel." The word for "Partnership" is *koinonia* which of course means "fellowship, communion, or close relationship." And it was a fellowship that began on the first day of their acquaintance.

- A. You may remember from our study last week that when Paul arrived in Philippi (Acts 16), there was no synagogue for him to preach in, so he and his companions went down to the river where there was a place of prayer. There he met Lydia.
- B. Do you remember what happened? Paul began speaking about the Jesus, no doubt expounding on the O.T. prophecies of the coming Messiah; how he lived, the miracles he performed, and how he raised the dead and ultimately rose from the dead. Luke records for us that "the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul."

C. That's how all of us came to know the Savior, isn't it? It wasn't our logic or intelligence that brought us to the Savior. It was the gracious hand of God. Jesus said (John 3) that just as the wind blows wherever it wishes, so the Spirit comes and goes as He wishes. "So it is with all who are born of the Spirit." You may have heard the gospel a thousand times, and then one day the Spirit of the Living God touched your heart and you believed.

7. This is what happened on the first day Paul ministered in Philippi. As soon as the Lord had opened Lydia's *heart* for the the gospel, Lydia opened her *home* for the gospel messengers And it probably wan't too many days later that Paul and Silas were arrested. They were beaten with rods and cast in Prison. But the Lord sent the earthquake and opened NOT only the prison doors, but the heart of the jailer as well who exclaimed, "What must I do to be saved." And on that day, he and his household joined Lydia and her household and became the first Christian churchplant in Europe.

8. Sometimes in ministry with other believers things happen that are so wonderful, and difficult, and wonderful again that you never get over them. And you find yourself bound in spirit to those who experienced it with you.

A. For me, one of those events was the difficult and wonderful process of revitalizing Calvary Presbyterian Independent Church (now, CBC). And because of that move of the Spirit of God my heart will always be bound in a unique way to Pastor Jim Pittman.

B. And every time I think of he and dorthy, his wife, I give thanks and pray with a smile on my face because of their partnership in the gospel.

C. Also that trip to Kazakstan (Charlie, Denny, Rodney, Eric, and Kairat)

9. Paul was joyful over their partnership (fellowship) in the gospel. Normally, when we think of fellowship we might think of meeting for a meal and singing and prayer, etc. And that can certainly be fellowship. But there are a variety of kinds of fellowship that Scriptures teach.

A. Fellowship of Grace. We have sweet fellowship because of the free and active work of God's grace in our lives. We have this by virtue of being believers regardless of language or culture.

B. Fellowship of Faith. Just as God draws his people to himself by grace, so believers colectively choose to cling to him by faith.

Bomhoeffer

- C. Fellowship of prayer and thanksgiving: Faith in Christ expresses itself in prayer for one another. As we talk to God about His glory and our needs, we remember to give thanks for one another and petition God for their needs. That's a kind of fellowship we can enjoy even when we're apart.
- D. Fellowship of Love: the magnetic pull of the Spirit that draws us to Christ works at the same time to draw us toward one another. To know Christ is to love one another. That's why I hear so often from visitors to our church how
- E. Fellowship of Service: Because we are one in Christ, when one part of the body suffers we all suffer. We feel one another's needs and willingly make personal sacrifices to meet those needs.
- F. Fellowship of Gospel Ministry: The grace that saved us also motivates us to love the lost and work together to bring them to the Savior.
- G. Fellowship of separation: Attachment to Christ always leads to detachment from the world. What fellowship can there be between light and darkness? Often this leads to the fellowship of suffering.
- H. Fellowship of Warfare: Believers struggle side-by-side against a common foe, and we help one another when we find that a brother or sister is being defeated by temptation and sin.

10. So Philippians is a joyful letter because of Paul's Blessing on Them; Paul's Partnership with them, and third..

III. Paul's Confidence about them (6)

Read 6

1. "I am sure" means, "I am persuaded, or convinced." Paul writes with Joy because, unlike some others to whom he sent epistles, he was absolutely confident of the Philippian's salvation.
2. And notice what Paul is saying about God in this verse. He saying, first of all, that it was God who began their salvation. In Lydia's case, God opened her heart. God always initiates in salvation. And notice also that it is a good work. That's the understatement of all time, isn't it? God's work of redemption is not merely a "good work," it's a magnificent work! A remarkable work! A Preeminent work! The preacher can only bring the message. God must open the heart. But regeneration is only the *beginning* of this "good work." By His Spirit, He continues working on our lives through sanctification, conforming us to the image of Christ. And then finally, he brings us to glory!
3. Paul says, "He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it. "Will" here is emphatic! God is not like man. We start things and never complete them. You might start your education and never complete it. You might start a new diet and give up on it the first time

someone brings home a half gallon of Blue Bell. But God's isn't like that. He always finished what he starts.

- A. As Paul himself writes in Romans 8:30, "...those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.
- B. God never fails to bring his people all the way home to glory.

4. Here is another way to look at it. Paul is telling the brothers and sisters in Philippi that their perseverance in gospel ministry (5) has convinced him that they are the objects of God's preservation. Does man have responsibility in perseverance? Yes. But no one perseveres without the Spirit. The fact of one's perseverance in the faith gives evidence of God's work of active and sustained preservation.

5. And God will keep preserving them for how long? Until the work that He began in them is completed at the day of Jesus Christ. What is the "Day of Jesus Christ?" It is the end of the age. It is the day of judgment. It's the day when every man and woman will have to give an account of their lives before God.

- A. It used to be in our country that nearly everyone took for granted that their will be such a day. Not so in our time.
- B. And I would suggest that the suppression of this truth in our country goes hand-in-hand with the remarkable moral drift that we see today.

6. But for those who belong to Christ by grace through faith, the day of Jesus Christ will be the most glorious and blessed day of their life. That's why I love the benediction I use at the end of almost every service, from Jude 24-25,

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, ²⁵ to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

7. Phil. 1:6 is one of three decisive N.T. passages on the believer's security in Christ. It leaves no wiggle room for any teaching other than the fact that we are secure in Christ. As Dr. Steve Lawson likes to say, "*The only way one can conclude that a believer can lose his salvation is to read the Bible backwards, up-side-down, in a dark room with blinders over your eyes.*" Why? Because "*He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it at the day of Jesus Christ.*"

8. Beloved, this is our ultimate hope. Nothing can be more joyful in worship, more encouraging in our sorrows, more stabilizing in our trials than the firm assurance that the God who saved us is actively preserving us until the Day of Christ.

9. So Philippians is a joyful letter because of Paul's Blessing on Them; because of Paul's Partnership with them, Paul's confidence about them, and finally

10. Paul's Affection for them (7-8)

Read 7

1. When Paul says it is right for him to feel this way, the implication is that it would be inappropriate if I did not feel this way about you. We all know Paul as a great leader, a towering intellect, and a great strategist, but he was also a man of deep affection (Like king David). And he had great affection for his friends in Philippi.

2. One of the reasons for that affection is that they were partakers of grace. Now, when we think of grace we think of "unmerited favor," but this is not that kind of grace Paul is pointing to. Here it is the active moving of the Spirit of God to enable us to work in the interest of the gospel, to suffer for it, and to assist those who proclaim and defend it. That's who the Philippians were to Paul.

3. They weren't just friends. They were friends who were eager to get their hands dirty to help Paul whether he was attempting to be faithful to the gospel in jail, or whether he was defending and proving the gospel as a free man. Whenever they could, they were in the trenches with Paul.

4. And then, in an effort to communicate the veracity of his claim to love them from the heart, next (8) he calls upon God to be a witness to the truth of this claim. *For God is my witness, how I yearn for you with the affection of Christ Jesus.*"

5. William Hendriksen writes,

Because it is important that the Philippians shall know how ardently he loves them, that they may be confirmed in the truths which he conveys and may take to heart his admonitions, the apostle appeals to the God who cannot lie and who judges the hearts of men. "God knows how much I love you."

6. Doesn't this passage make you want to engage fellowship with other believers? Listen, this kind of fellowship between men and women in Christ is something those outside of Christ can never know. But you can... if you will make time for it. You have to sacrifice some of the mundane things in life for it. But it's always worth it

7. And if you are here as an unbeliever on the outside looking in, you can have this fellowship as well. But you have to come through Christ to get it.

There is no greater joy than the fellowship of those who sacrificially love, labor, worship, and suffer together in Christ.