

## The Letter to the Philippians

### Lesson 2: The Joyful Letter

### Philippians 1:1-2

People are always on a search to find happiness. For the most part (although we are told otherwise), we try our hardest to find happiness through money. Everyone hears from their mother that money doesn't buy happiness, but we quickly forget that advice when we make our latest, exciting purchase. People always chase happiness, and by always, I mean always. If riches bought happiness, then you'd think that the rich would be the happiest of all. Yet how many times do we read about celebrities who commit adultery, or are alcoholics and drug addicts, or even commit suicide. Clearly, nothing that money can buy will satisfy the soul.

The lie that we buy is that if we only had more money we'd find satisfaction and happiness. The lie tells us that our happiness is directly related to our circumstances. The lie tells us that we have a right to be unhappy with our lives, because we are stuck in the midst of unchangeable (or difficult to change) circumstances. And so people chase dreams. They chase the degree, the promotion, the next dollar. And then it comes, and still the desire for more is always before them, like the carrot in front of their nose.

It's not surprising then, when we read God's Word, to find the theme 'rejoice' all throughout it. The Word of God always meets us exactly where we are, and turns our world (how we think, and act) on its head. The scriptures meet us in our dissatisfied world, and gives us concrete evidence to find our everlasting satisfaction, both now and forever, in Christ alone. In the NT alone, the word 'rejoice' is found 96 times. The word 'joy' is found 59 times. That's 155 occurrences of this theme, and 13 times (8% of NT) it is found in this short letter alone.

John MacArthur did a Biblical Theology of 'joy' and found six features of it<sup>5</sup>:

- 1) **Joy is a gift of God** – Psalm 4:7-8, Psalm 16:11
- 2) **God grants joy to those who believe the gospel** – Luke 2:10-11, John 15:11. Christ came to proclaim a gospel that would give true supernatural joy to those who receive Him as Saviour and Lord.
- 3) **Joy is produced by God the Holy Spirit** – Romans 14:17, Galatians 5:22-23
- 4) **Joy is experienced most fully as believers receive and obey God's Word** – Jeremiah 15:16, 1 John 1:4
- 5) **Believers' joy is deepened through trials** – The full reality of joy is experienced when it is contrasted with sadness, sorrow, and difficulties. 1 Thessalonians 1:6, 2 Corinthians 6:10, James 1:2, 1 Peter 1:3-6

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<sup>5</sup> MacArthur, John *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody 2001, p.10-11

**6) Believers' joy is made complete when they set their hope on the glory of heaven – Romans 12:12, 1 Peter 1:8, 1 Peter 4:13, Jude 24-25**

Paul shared a close relationship with the saints at Philippi. These saints had a joy about them that fleshed itself out in their faithful service to Christ, and the love and concern that they had for Paul and his well-being. Paul loved them deeply, and certainly he was concerned that they remain of one mind, and one spirit, serving the Lord with one purpose. But the one thing that Paul wanted the most for these saints in particular (noting the maturity that they already displayed from the above list), was that they rejoiced in the Lord in the midst of their present sufferings, and that they not be short-sighted, and saddened at Paul's present suffering, but that they set their sight on Heaven and the joy set before them.

So, with the groundwork laid briefly, let's delve into the text and read learn from God's word.

**“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (1:1-2)**

I underlined throughout these verses to show you how frequently Paul mentions the divine names at the outset of the letter. Without wasting any time, Paul points us to the nucleus of our faith, the Godhead. It's also worth noting how Paul describes himself and Timothy as 'servants'. Paul includes Timothy's name, not because they co-wrote the epistle, but because Timothy was closely associated with Paul, and Timothy was also closely connected to the Philippian believers. But Paul and Timothy were more than closely associated, Paul considered him to be as his 'son in the faith'. (cf. 2:22)

Paul calls Timothy and himself *servants*, literally 'slaves' of Christ. It is the idea of complete submission and obedience to the slave Master. The old Scottish pastor Alexander Maclaren, who was a contemporary of Charles Spurgeon, explains the concept of 'slave' well here:

“The true position, then, for a man is to be God's slave....Absolute submission is unconditional obedience, on the slave's part; and on the part of the Master complete ownership, the right of life and death, the right of disposing of all goods and chattels, ... the right of issuing commandments without a reason, the right to expect that those commandments shall be swiftly, unhesitatingly, punctiliously, and completely performed—these things inhere in our relation to God. Blessed [is] the man who has learned that they do, and has accepted them as his highest glory and security of his most blessed life! For, brethren, such submission, absolute and unconditional, the blending and the absorption of my own will in His will, is the secret of all that makes manhood glorious and great and happy....[I]n the New Testament these names of slave and owner are transferred to Christians and Jesus Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

This is the idea that Paul had in mind when he made reference to them being 'servants'. But was this a concept that Paul and Timothy invented? Of course not, they were only following the pattern of the life of Christ, which Paul makes mention of in Philippians 2:6-8.

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<sup>6</sup> Maclaren, Alexander, *Expositions of Holy Scripture, the Acts*, commenting on Acts 4:26-27

It probably could go without saying at this point, but it is also worth noting at this point in the letter that Paul spends no time introducing himself, his office, and his authority. As we have said before, there was an already established relationship, so the recipients of this letter would receive it not merely as a common letter from a common man, but as an inspired word from God penned through the Apostle Paul. They may have even read and understood Paul's authority from 2 Corinthians 10:7-18, which he wrote some 4-6 years prior.

*"...to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi..." (1:1b)*

'Saints' is a term that is always plural in the NT, with only one exception, and that being in 4:21, and even in this verse, the greeting is to go out to the entire group of Christians. IOW, all Christians are saints. Sainthood is not reserved for those elite persons who take the call to follow Christ more seriously than even the devout Christians. So it is to our benefit that we rightly understand the definition of the word *saint*. In the RCC (Roman Catholic Church), sainthood is something that only a few good Catholics have ever attained. According to their rough numbers, approximately 10,000 people have ever become a 'saint.' Listen to the explanation from the RCC on the selection to sainthood:

"Canonization, the process the Church uses to name a saint, has only been used since the tenth century. For hundreds of years, starting with the first martyrs of the early Church, saints were chosen by public acclaim. Though this was a more democratic way to recognize saints, some saints' stories were distorted by legend and some never existed. Gradually, the bishops and finally the Vatican took over authority for approving saints.

In 1983, Pope John Paul II made sweeping changes in the canonization procedure. The process begins after the death of a Catholic whom people regard as holy. Often, the process starts many years after death in order to give perspective on the candidate. The local bishop investigates the candidate's life and writings for heroic virtue (or martyrdom) and orthodoxy of doctrine. Then a panel of theologians at the Vatican evaluates the candidate. After approval by the panel and cardinals of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, the pope proclaims the candidate "venerable."

The next step, beatification, requires evidence of one miracle (except in the case of martyrs). Since miracles are considered proof that the person is in heaven and can intercede for us, the miracle must take place after the candidate's death and as a result of a specific petition to the candidate. When the pope proclaims the candidate beatified or "blessed," the person can be venerated by a particular region or group of people with whom the person holds special importance.

Only after one more miracle will the pope canonize the saint (this includes martyrs as well). The title of saint tells us that the person lived a holy life, is in heaven, and is to be honored by the

universal Church. Canonization does not "make" a person a saint; it recognizes what God has already done.

Though canonization is infallible and irrevocable, it takes a long time and a lot of effort. So while every person who is canonized is a saint, not every holy person has been canonized. You have probably known many "saints" in your life, and you are called by God to be one yourself."<sup>7</sup>

The word 'saints' is the word *hagios*, which means 'holy', 'set apart ones'. IOW they are the ones whom God has set apart – elected – chosen for salvation. All Christians are saints, from the old man who has served him sixty years, to the young man who has just repented of a life a thievery sixty minutes ago. Therefore, not only is sainthood universal amongst believers, but it is also not tied to the believers attainment of sanctification. Listen to how Paul opens his letter to the Corinthians,

“To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.”<sup>8</sup>

If there's one thing that we here should all know, in light of the preaching we have sat under every Sunday evening, the Corinthian church was a mess. The members of that church were spiritually immature, and their doctrinal understanding and application was sketchy. Yet Paul opens the letter by referring to them all as saints, and he does so by way of their calling, not their character. It is Christ who has bought them, and renewed them. God is the one who has called them from death to life, Christ is the one who accomplished redemption.

“...to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, **with the overseers and deacons**...” (1:1b)

Paul uses two words here, *episkopoi* (overseers), and *diakonois* (deacons). These words weren't new terms that arrived on the scene with the Christian church, but they came from contemporary society and were widely understood to give oversight and service respectively. Along with the canon of scripture, detailed definitions of each office were given, which gave final clarity and detail for each position. But at a minimum it should be noted that there was always an intended structure of operation, always an intended method of worship, always a proper accountability both to each other and to God. The Christian church never was intended to be a gathering of random people, for a time of chaos and ramblings, with no purpose or edification.

Overseer: An alternate word for this position is also found repeatedly in the NT. For example, in Acts 20:17, the word *presbyteros* (elder) is used to speak of the Overseers, the Bishops, the Pastors of the church. The position is intended, as we see clearly in the designation of 'Pastor', to feed and care for the 'flock of God'. And it is worth noting that the word is pluralized, so we can conclude that there was more than one Elder in the church, not unlike what we see today in many good churches.

Deacon: Once again this word is not introduced at the birth of the church, but it was a position held within the community by those who assisted in welfare situations. Deacons would be those who distributed food

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.catholic.org/saints/faq.php>

<sup>8</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (1 Co 1:2). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

and clothing to the needy. The Christian deacon certainly is to serve in the same manner, but there are also certain administrative tasks within the church attached to the office.

1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:6-9 provide for us the detailed qualifications of these offices. In short, these two offices are put in place by Christ to mediate His rule in the local church through preaching, teaching, and a godly example of living. The qualification for the two offices are nearly identical, with one major exception, the Overseer must be considered to be a skilled teacher.

“...to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons...” (1:1b)

One final remark before we move on to verse 2 is the conjunction ‘with’. I believe Paul has structured this sentence in a particular order to show us the equality of the sainthood. Paul could have addressed the letter to the Overseers of the Philippians church, so that they could have in turn read and taught this letter to the lay people in the congregation. But he doesn’t. As a matter of fact, instead of highlighting the two visible offices as the forefront of the letter, he includes them into the lump sum of the group, and tacks them on at the end of the sentence “...with the overseers and deacons...” Our leaders are with us, not above us. Our leaders are saved by the same grace. And our leaders are called to be servants of Christ to the flock. I think of the imagery of Christ washing the disciples feet. It seems so counter-cultural, so opposite of everything we’d expect to see, to see the leader humbly taking the role of the servant. Such is the wisdom of God.

“**Grace to you and peace** from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (1:2)

You might be someone who sees a great value in memorizing scripture. I might be able to read off some of the titan verses of the NT and you might be able to cite the verse without a hesitation. But what if I read, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”? What verse would you come up with? Romans 1:7? 1 Corinthians 1:3? 2 Corinthians 1:2? Ephesians 1:2? Colossians 1:2? 2 Thessalonians 1:2? Philemon verse 3? You’d be right. This is the most common greeting from Paul to the churches (or person in the case of Philemon) that he writes. And it should be noted that Paul writes this to all the saints within these churches, from the newly born-again believer to the elder. Paul had a love for all of God’s people. He offers them “grace” and “peace”, but what does he mean by them? James Montgomery Boice offers this helpful explanation,

“These words convey a warm Christian greeting. And yet, they sound strange to modern ears, largely because few in our day know what grace or peace means. If grace means anything at all to most people, it may indicate charm, good manners, or attractiveness. And peace may refer only to peace as an alternative to warfare. Actually the words mean much more. In Paul’s usage they refer to the deepest of spiritual realities.”<sup>9</sup>

Boice goes on to explain how familiar the words would have been to those people, yet how deep and rich those words would now have been understood. For example, in that culture, it was quite common to begin a letter with “grace”. It literally meant “greetings”. Similarly, the common greeting of the Jewish people of that time was the word *shalom*, or “peace”. Paul was not simply saying “hello” and wishing them a pleasant day. These words carried a Christian definition that implied not those things, but the grace that God gives, and the peace that only God gives.

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<sup>9</sup> Boice, James Montgomery, *An Expository Commentary: Philippians* Zondervan, 1971 (p. 27)

Grace is many times defined as “God’s undeserved favor toward us.” Yet, if you remember, we have often heard Pastor Scott give the definition of the word “grace” to mean the “ill-deserved favor of God toward us.” What’s the difference someone may ask? To show an example of **undeserved** favor, imagine if I were to come across a man in great need. He was poor, and starving, and sick, and I gave all that I had to him, even taking him into my home, to ensure his well-being. That is undeserved favor. The man did nothing to earn my grace. He never knew me, he couldn’t repay me, I simply chose to love the man. That is a good definition of God’s grace, but it’s simply not the most accurate portrayal of it. And the reason why is because in the above illustration, the man was in a neutral position toward to man showing grace. He never knew him, he had never done anything to earn the favor of the man, therefore he did not deserve the grace shown towards him (undeserved). Here is the proper illustration of **ill-deserved** favor: I come across a man who is poor, and starving, and sick, and as I stare intently into face, I remember him to be the man who was my employee some years ago. He was a shady character who stole from me, and even physically assaulted me, and then falsely accused me of many things to cover things up. And yet through all of that, even though the man deserved all of the due punishment for his crimes, I have still chosen to love him and to give him grace. I visit him from time-to-time and I talk about Christ and his need of a Saviour. I show him the love and forgiveness of Christ. Not only does he not deserve my grace (undeserved), he actually deserves my wrath (ill-deserved).

It’s important that we hold an “ill-deserved” view of grace when we speak of it, since that is precisely the view of grace that Paul had. It is in our nature to downplay the significance and consequence of sin. Many would argue that while all sin, only the major sins are the ones that matter, and so God would never consider them a sinner. Some would even go so far as to consider themselves a sinner, but not feel too terrible about it because of the universality of sin. So when a person naturally considers the grace of God, they fail to properly estimate just how far God has condescended to reach us. It is imbedded deep in our human (sinful nature) to deal with God on the basis of our merit. Something intrinsically tells us that God is somehow happy, or impressed by our level of religious achievement, our generous giving, and our clean lifestyle. But here’s what is lost in that thinking. If God has given us His saving grace on the basis of our merit, it wouldn’t be called grace anymore, it would be a payment for a service rendered. There’s no grace in giving someone what they’ve worked for! Romans 11:6 says, “But if it [salvation] is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.”<sup>10</sup> God does not show us His grace after we have proved our worth, rather, He loved us while we hated Him. Romans 5:8-11.

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (1:2)

If grace is the unmerited, ill-deserved favour of God shown to sinners, than peace is the direct result of that grace. And the peace is directly proportioned to the grace shown. If the sinners has a small view of sin, than he needs a small saviour. If the sinner has a theology that allows him to atone for his own sin primarily through good works, than his saviour is even smaller. So the gratitude for the peace brought by God is proportional to the enmity that the sinner once felt and understood. Listen again to James Montgomery Boice on the peace from God,

“Peace with God! Think of it. We are not naturally at peace with God. We are at war with God, either passively or actively, and being at war with God, we are also at war with each other and at war with ourselves. That is why we each experience so much misery and why there is so much

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<sup>10</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (Ro 11:6). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

unrest in the world. But God gives peace, perfect peace. And He does so in Christ. He will give you peace if you will come to Him in Jesus.”<sup>11</sup>

A mind that understands the ill-deserved favour of God, who recognizes the infinite chasm between himself and God, who recognizes the infinite debt that he could never repay God, who feels the weight of his sin crushing him by God’s righteous judgment; that mind feels the proper peace from God for His grace shown.

But we not only feel an eternal peace due to our judicial right standing before God through Christ, but we also experience a present peace as we combat sin in our daily lives. This is the peace that Christ promised in John 14:27, and later Paul in Philippians 4:6-7.

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (1:2)

We should note the unity of the Godhead here. Who is receiving the grace and peace? The saints. A specific people who have been shown this, by a united God. It’s not that the Father is really angry and he doesn’t want to save anyone, but Jesus is really loving and wants to save everyone, and so the Father compromises. It’s not that the Father wants to save this group, but the Son wants to save another group, and they bicker and compromise. Rather, as scripture teaches us, before the foundation of the world, a plan was enacted by the Father to redeem a specific people to be the bride for His Son through His Son’s sacrificial death and resurrection, in the power of the Holy Spirit. All three members of the Trinity, working together in unison to show grace and bring peace to sinners, that the united Godhead might receive all the glory for it.

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<sup>11</sup> Boice, James Montgomery, *An Expository Commentary: Philippians* Zondervan, 1971 (p. 31)