

The Letter to the Philippians

Lesson 3: Paul's Thanksgiving and Confidence Philippians 1:3-8

In the world we live in, 'joy' is as fleeting as our breath on a cold morning. The world we live in lets our present circumstances dictate our satisfaction and joy. People are many times living their lives, taking care of #1, after all, "learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all" said Whitney Houston. This type of thinking is widespread across our culture, it's the reason why obesity, and financial difficulties, and divorce are rampant. Millions upon millions of people live for the next fleeting pleasure, and nothing, or no one will stand in their way. Whether it's the next item, or the next partner, all is meant to bring happiness. And so depression is rampant today. The website *Everyday Health* posted an article categorizing nine types of depression that people battle today, ranging from Major Depression to Dysthymia (a common depression that 2% of the world has and doesn't even know about). According to this website, your circumstances are the source of your depression, including Postpartum depression (after the birth of your baby), or Premenstrual Dysphoric depression, or even Seasonal Affective depression (the winter blues). There were other categories¹², but ultimately the source of all depression, according to the website, is our present circumstances. Many people because of these "diseases" and "disorders" live their lives tied to pills and psychological therapy to cope.

I argue that all depression is not the result of our circumstances but our thinking processes. Consider the Apostle Paul's circumstances, if there was ever a circumstance to be in to be depressed, he was in it, and yet he wasn't! Here we see Paul imprisoned in Rome because of his faith in Christ, possibly facing execution. Imagine that you were him, what sort of things would you be thinking? In our North American version of Christianity (which in some cases isn't Christianity at all), God is proclaimed to be the great lover of our souls who desires nothing more than our personal happiness, and our personal fulfillment. God, as He will be preached from many pulpits across our continent this morning, is here and available and waiting to help you to achieve your relational, financial, and personal goals. God wants you to "have your best life now", right Joel? But apparently Paul hadn't followed Joel Osteen's formula for success.

Paul gave everything up for the sake of the gospel. And it did anything but bring health and wealth to his life. Let's read the attractive life summary of Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:23-31. I dare any televangelist to give an invitation for lost sinners to give up their life of ease and comfort, and to follow Christ, and to suffer and die like Paul did. I wonder how many would have come forward? I'd bet as many as who were called by the Holy Spirit would! Five times Paul received 39 lashes!!! How many Christians would press forward after the first! How many who sit comfortably in their suits on padded pews this morning would be bold enough to proclaim Christ knowing that being whipped or worse was a likely punishment?

Imagine Paul, scarred from head to toe, in daily pain from the beatings, for the cause of Christ, being told by Joel that he just didn't have enough faith. Imagine Joel Osteen, doing his best impression of one of Job's friends, explaining to Paul that there must be some sin in his life that God is punishing him for. What an absolutely ridiculous thought it is to think that Paul suffered because of his lack of faith. Paul suffered because of the strength of his faith in Christ! Yet many men across the land will sit on pews this morning who were too afraid to speak of Christ yesterday because someone might have teased them or thought that they were strange.

¹² <http://www.everydayhealth.com/depression-pictures/different-types-of-depression.aspx>

If anyone had a reason to be down and out, it was Paul. Paul was faithful, he was taking every opportunity to preach Christ crucified, and yet the only thing seeming to match his faithfulness is his persecution, and yet he's thankful! Paul was joyful! And the question we must ask is why? Paul had either had his bell rung one too many times and he was delusional; or his joy and gratitude was rooted in someone that no person of this earth could take from him. John MacArthur says this about Paul's joy,

*"True joy is an unwavering constant in a Spirit-filled life (cf. Romans 14:17), not a transient emotional feeling that comes and goes depending on circumstances. Because Paul was constantly near to God, he was constantly joyful. He experienced the inexpressible peace (4:7) and contentment (4:11) provided by the Holy Spirit deep within his heart and soul because he had a conscience that was clear of offense against God."*¹³

PAUL'S JOY

Of the six commentaries that I am reading while compiling this lesson, I am surprised at the little attention given to verses 3, 4, and 5. In fact, John MacArthur is the only one who has spent any considerable time over them. So for the remainder of this lesson, I'm going to use John MacArthur's outline, and I will comment. John outlines verses 3-8 noting five different ways that Paul found joy: Recollection, Intercession, Participation, Anticipation, and Affection.

#1) Recollection – **"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you."** (v. 3)

There is a beauty to this verse that we should not overlook. Paul finds his joy in recalling all the saints who serve God alongside with him in Philippi, but more than that, Paul is thankful for them. There's nothing necessarily special about being thankful for people. Everyone is thankful for friends. Even the tax collectors love those who love them. (Mt. 4:46) Even atheists are thankful that they have a best friend. So what's the big deal about Paul's thankfulness for these Philippians brothers and sisters?

The big deal lies in the source of Paul's thankfulness, and it is at this point where Paul's soteriology becomes intimately practical. At the root of it all, Paul doesn't thank the Philippians for their partnership in the gospel, rather, he thanks his God! And why? Because Paul recognized the necessary work of God in the lives of each and every believer in Philippi to salvation, through the finished work of Christ.

Paul knew God as a sovereign God, and therefore he trusted God to be in control of history. If Paul trusted in himself, or if Paul trusted in the young Philippian believers, his joy might be in jeopardy. He might have wondered how God could spread the gospel without his influence while he was in prison. He might have wondered if those saints in Philippi would hold the faith or if they would fall into temptation and pervert the gospel? Paul wasn't depressed about those things, Paul could find joy even in the most difficult circumstances because he recognized that the God whom he served was fully aware of, and in control of those things. Paul recognized that God was still breathing new life into dead sinners and calling them up to go unto the ends of the earth sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

So Paul thanked his God in all of his remembrance of them, but we should note again the history of how Paul met them initially. Acts 16:7-10 tell us the story. Paul came during his second missionary journey. In Acts 16:10 we see that the Holy Spirit had directed Paul to come to the province of Macedonia, where Philippi was located. Paul may have been specifically remembering Lydia (Acts 16:14-15), and he probably remembered the demon-possessed woman who was a fortune-teller, whom he commanded the demon in the name of Christ to come out of her (Acts 16:16-18). I'm sure Paul remembered his time of

¹³ MacArthur, John, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody, 2001 (p. 18)

imprisonment in Philippi for casting out that same demon (Acts 16:19-40). And I'm sure that Paul remembered how the Philippians brothers and sisters were they only ones who continued to support him financially after he departed. (Phil. 4:15-16, 2 Cor. 8:1-5)

MacArthur defines Paul's joy of recollection well here, "[Paul], having a genuine desire to remember and focus on the goodness, kindness, and successes of others does not involve denying their weaknesses and shortcomings but rather looking past them. The Holy Spirit prompts believers to appreciate others' love, generosity, and compassion and to forget the rest (cf. 4:8; 1 Cor. 13:4-7). On the other hand, a person who constantly focuses on the negatives, faults, shortcomings, and slights of others is a person not controlled by the Holy Spirit, and is perhaps an unbeliever. Bitterness, resentment, a critical spirit, holding grudges, and the like are works of the flesh, not of the Spirit. Much of Paul's joy was based on the pleasant, loving recollections of believers who, like those in Philippi, were consistently faithful to the Lord, to their fellow believers, and to him."¹⁴

#2) Intercession – **“always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy”** (v. 4)

There is a certain humility and selflessness that emanates from this verse. Paul finds joy in remembering these believers, but also, Paul finds joy in praying for their needs. It's not that Paul prays for them here and there, but rather they are his prayer before God. He prays for them “always in every prayer”. Praying for the spiritual well-being of another believer is a mark of a spiritually mature child of God. There is a progression in the life of a Christian where they grow from a nursing babe to a grown adult. Many times the prayers of a new convert are self-centered, sporadic, and awkward. The prayers of a new convert many times are immature in that their requests are not always in line with the plan and will of God. Many times the desire to even pray is lacking in the new believer, as they don't know what to say, or what to do. What every new believer needs is a church family of mature believers who pray for them, and pray with them, and nurture them, and mature them into saints who pray without ceasing.

It is a great joy and privilege for mature Christians to get intimately involved in the lives of their brothers and sisters in the faith, and to intercede for them. This intercessory prayer is a Godlike attribute, as the same Spirit that dwells within us intercedes on our behalf. (Romans 8:26) MacArthur adds, “*An infallible test of godly joy is the degree to which a believer prays more earnestly for the benefit and blessing of others than for his own.*”¹⁵

MacArthur also adds this in another work of his, “*Pray for one another*” (James 5:16). *This responsibility is at the heart of relationships in the Body. It is something no Christian can avoid and still be a contributing member of the Body. Such mutual prayer is based on the honest sharing of personal needs and the personal discipline involved in setting aside a regular time for it. In summary, fellowship in the Body results in joy. Christ came “that your joy may be made full” (John 16:24)—joy resulting from pure fellowship with God and with one another. Such fellowship is possible; God planned it that way. It is each Christian's responsibility to make fellowship in the Body all that God intends it to be.*”¹⁶

Paul was thankful, and prayed for these believers, who lived in a world that was hostile to the faith. He himself was imprisoned for Christ, and they too faced persecution, and opposition, and defilement from within. There were false teachers who were using Christ for personal gain within their midst, even using Paul's imprisonment against him for their own gain. (Phil. 1:17) Paul encourages them to respond in a

¹⁴ MacArthur, John, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody, 2001 (p. 20)

¹⁵ MacArthur, John, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody, 2001 (p. 21)

¹⁶ MacArthur, John, *The Body Dynamic* Chariot Victor Publishing, 1996 (p. 124)

godly way about this, he tells them that he rejoices nevertheless, because regardless of the personal gain or slander from these teachers, the gospel is still spreading to lost sinners. (v. 18)

Paul's life mission was to see souls reached, and saved. He wasn't laying himself on the line for the fame and glory and reputation. Rather, Paul was willing to undergo whatever God had in store for him, even death, in order to help people because he recognized their greatest need and he loved them. So Paul prayed for these believers. He prayed that they would be saved, and then he prayed that they would mature. But not everyone that he prayed for was saved. This is something we can relate too I'm sure if you've ever prayed for someone you loved dearly.

Sometimes when we intercede for people (even in the church), they never come to saving faith, Paul had a word to say concerning that himself. (Phil. 3:17-19) Paul cries as he even pens the verses down. It is a painful thing to watch loved ones (even those who claim Christ), live as though they are in love with the world, and disinterested in Christ. And so in contrast to those within whom Paul intercedes for them in tears that they repent, he also intercedes with great joy on behalf of those who struggle along, yet love Christ with all of their hearts and seek to honor Him always.

Paul's prayers for the Philippians were offered with great appreciation, thankfulness and joy. There is a great maturity about a Christian who plans on consistently praying for others. Pain and suffering should be expected. Contrary to the Health, Wealth & Prosperity movement, Jesus tells us that the world will hate us, but it hated Him first. (John 15:18-25) A believer who is doing everything right as a Christian, ought to have plenty of pain and suffering to pray about on their own behalf. And yet here Paul gives us the example of considering others needs as more important than our own. (Phil. 2:4) Allow me to let MacArthur close this point of the joy of intercessory prayer,

“It seems that throughout most of the history of the church only a minority of Christians have known the true, full joy that God gives to His obedient children. Lack of joy reveals itself in three ways: in negative thoughts and talk about others, in a lack of concern for their welfare, and in the failure to intercede on their behalf. Joyless believers are self-centered, selfish, proud, and often vengeful, and their self-centeredness inevitably manifests itself in prayerlessness.”¹⁷

#3) Participation – **“because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.”** (v.5)

Paul found great joy in the fellowship that he shared with the Philippian believers. We see that in the word 'partnership' (Gr. *Koinonia*), which is probably a familiar word for many of us, commonly translated 'fellowship' or 'communion'. The term expresses Paul's thankfulness for their shared faith, and their unified work toward the goal of glorifying Christ, and exalting His name throughout the world.

We see at the tail end of this letter, that the Philippian believers alone partnered with Paul financially to aid him as he spread the gospel (Phil. 4:15-16). But not only did they partner financially, they also partnered spiritually, serving as fellow teachers and preachers of the gospel, and being faithful to pray for Paul.

There is a common bond that all Christians share together, a bond that is our great hope, and our strength and joy. Look at Paul's words in 2 Cor. 13:14. The justifying work of Christ is common to all Christians, as is the love of the Father, and the fellowship (*koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit. It is this blessed fellowship that gave Paul such great joy, and more than just joy, Paul was strengthened from his brothers and sisters,

¹⁷ MacArthur, John, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody, 2001 (p. 22)

and encouraged, and supported, and comforted. Let's hear from MacArthur concerning our participation with other believers, and the joy that will come from it,

“A Christian who willingly forsakes fellowship with other believers will inevitably be without genuine, Spirit-given joy. It is impossible to live faithfully or happily apart from fellow believers in Christ. But the believer who regularly is in the company of fellow saints, fulfilling the responsibilities that such fellowship requires and provides, will just as inevitably be filled with divine joy. To be in the company of those who are joint heirs with Christ, people who love, care for, understand, pray for and with each other, who minister and fight the good fight together, is to be assured of abundant and abiding joy.”¹⁸

These believers had done just that, they had shared everything with Paul **from the first day until now**, and Paul found great joy in them for that.

#4) Anticipation – **“And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”** (v.6)

Here we reach one of the greatest verses in this letter, surely a titan verse that has brought a great amount of comfort to believers throughout the centuries. It is a verse that promises us that God always finishes what He starts, His plans are never thwarted! And so Paul found joy, and he wanted the Philippians to also find joy, in the anticipation that God will complete His sanctifying work in their lives.

Paul says he is ‘sure’ of this, your translation may word it as ‘confident’, and we should note that his confidence is in God, and not in the Philippians themselves. But where does this confidence come from? I think it's logical to conclude that Paul knew God deeply, he has communed with Him. A true knowledge of God alone, along with His indwelling Spirit, can give such an unshakeable confidence. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said it well,

“What really accounts for the Apostle's confidence is his clear grasp of the nature of the Christian life, his understanding of what happens when a man becomes a Christian and of the power and the life that constitute the Christian Church. It is his profound knowledge and understanding of God's plan of salvation that really leads to his confidence...It is only the person who grasps the plan of salvation, its meaning, its character and its power, who can ever feel as the Apostle felt, and who can ever share his experience.”¹⁹

It is God who **began** this work, which is why Paul knows that it will be completed. It's the word ‘enarchomai’ which is only used twice in the entire NT, both times used in reference to our salvation: here and in Galatians 3:3. Paul basically answers his own question in verse 6 of our text this morning. Our salvation was not begun of our doing, nor is it perfected by our own doing. The only thing that God requires of us, is that we place our faith alone in Jesus Christ for salvation, and even that faith which we are to place is God's gift. (Ephesians 2:8-9) Paul even clarifies in 1:29 and 2:13 that our belief in Christ is granted to us. We must never forget that it is God who even grants us the capability to repent of our sins and place our faith in Christ. (Acts 11:18)

When we begin to realize the utter sinfulness and waywardness of our hearts, when we realize our total depravity, it is only then that we can appreciate that our salvation could never come from us. Our salvation must come from the God who is sovereign over all things. Our salvation comes as a gift from the Almighty, merciful, and gracious God. God has in His benevolent goodness chosen to save some who

¹⁸ MacArthur, John, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody, 2001 (p. 25)

¹⁹ Lloyd-Jones, Martyn, *The Life of Joy – An Exposition of Philippians 1 and 2* Baker, 1989 (p.34)

stand as His enemies, satisfying His own justice through the sacrifice of His perfect Son. And He has planned not only the salvation of His chosen children, but the means of their salvation, before time began. (Eph. 1:4) Jesus spoke with a definite clarity in John 6:44, that not one person can possibly come to God without the Father first drawing Him in. Make no mistake, salvation is begun, sustained, and perfected by God. This is why it is always true that when the gospel call is rung, only those who have been appointed to eternal life will believe. (Acts 13:48)

Despite popular belief amongst many in this modern age of self-proclaimed Christianity, we are not the nucleus of our salvation. If we were, not only would Philippians 1:6 make no sense, but neither would the rest of the New Testament. Listen to how clear the sovereignty of our God is in our salvation in Romans 5:8-10. What God begins, He always finishes says Paul in verse 6. He said it again in another of my favorite NT passages in Romans 8:29-30. Paul was absolutely certain that God would fully complete His work of salvation in the Philippians. There was no possibility of failure or of partial fulfillment.

The last part of verse 6 brings up yet another question that begs an answer. God will complete our salvation at the day of Jesus Christ? But what day is that? There are a couple of possibilities, to which one is true, which I hope you will see shortly. The first possibility, which is not my position, is that the day of Jesus Christ refers to the final Day of the Lord, that day of God's judgment on the sinful world. See 1 Thessalonians 5:2-4 for a description of it. And the other possibility refers to the time when individual believers will be glorified, still an eschatological judgment, but not the final judgment of unbelievers. (2 Corinthians 5:10) This day refers to the time when sin will no longer hold its sway, and all believers will share in the perfect righteousness of Christ.

Sinless perfection, the reflection of Christ, is the destination of each one called of God. Not to be attained in this life, but our lives are directed and catapulted toward it. As William Hendriksen puts it, "*God...is not like men. Men consider experiments, but God carries out a plan. God never does anything by halves.*" What God starts, He finishes. God is the one who draws, no one can come without the drawing, and when God places the elect in Christ's hands, He never fumbles. Consider John 6:37, 39, also John 10:27-28.

We can therefore have joy, as Paul did, in not only our own salvation, but the salvation of the believers around us. We can rejoice even through the trials and the pain, leaning on God, and encouraging others to lean on Him too. We can remember what Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, and remember that He will build His church, and we can therefore trust in his plan, and find our joy in the anticipation of the perfection of our faith.

#5) Affection – **“It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.”** (v. 7-8)

Built upon all the reasons that we have just covered, the above four ways that Paul finds joy, he mentions yet another, the climax of them all: Affection. Paul feels for these believers, and not lightly or superficially. Ralph Martin writes that Paul's feelings for them is "*much more than a mental exercise or emotional reaction, and signifies rather 'sympathetic interest or concern, expressing as it does the action of the heart as well as the intellect.'*"²⁰

²⁰ Martin, Ralph P., *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Philippians* IVP, 1987 (p.64)

At the outset of this verse, Paul says that it is ‘right’ (Dikaios) for him to feel this way. It’s to our benefit that we understand the implication of this word. You might receive a hug from a friend, and you might say that it is only ‘right’ for you to feel loved. And by that, you mean that it’s an appropriate and fitting emotion to feel. But that isn’t quite what Paul was talking about. When Paul says it is only ‘right’ for him to feel this way about the Philippians, he is talking about a moral rightness, a spiritual rightness, which goes beyond the expected reaction (appropriateness), to the required reaction. To give you some clarity, let’s read [Ephesians 6:1](#), and notice again where Paul uses the word.

So Paul had a deep affection for the Philippians, a right affection before God. Paul held them all in his heart, and then he reminds them, **“You are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.”** He mentions two words here: defense (apologia) and confirmation (bebaiosis). Both of these words are legal terms, the first referring to a speech given in defense of the faith. The second referring to a positive proclamation of the faith. So as Paul says, whether he was imprisoned, or in the defense or confirmation of the gospel, they were with him, supporting him, partaking with him, and so he held them close to his heart.

To assure them that his words were true, Paul even calls upon God as his witness that his affection towards them was true. Every Philippian believer, even those within who surely were more difficult to love than others, was loved by Paul with an affection so deep that it reflected Jesus Christ’s love Himself. This love really is a gift from God above, this love does not come from within, but it is exemplified by Christ, and brought about in our own hearts through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Paul writes about this love in [1 Thessalonians 4:9](#).

We have now examined the five ways that Paul found joy, and we could at this time move along to verse nine in the book of Philippians. But before we move along, we are going to look at a list of ten reasons why believers have no joy, or at least have a diminished joy in the Lord. I believe this next lesson will help us to find our joy in the Lord as we still enter into this great book.