

The Letter to the Philippians

Lesson 6: Paul's Joy Despite the Troubles of Life Philippians 1:12-18

We have already talked at great length about joy in this class. We went through a list of things that can rob a believer of joy. Perhaps, in hindsight, using the word 'rob' is misleading, because no sin in a believer's life has the power of taking joy away, but it does cloud it out. Even in the most unfaithful times of an elect Christian, the glorious truths of our adoption and justification, and eternal security are still true. I cannot sever the relationship with my son, even if we never spoke again, he will always be my son. No sin can change that reality, sin may take away the joy of the relationship, but the standing remains.

The same is true of our adoption into God's family. God chooses His children, He justifies, He adopts. We have no say in the matter, we are adopted. We have no more ability to sever that relationship than I do with my son. Please note, and perhaps further discussion is necessary here, that I am not supporting a view that says that any who claim Christ are eternally saved apart from repentance and faith in Christ. But I am speaking categorically only of those truly elect of God for salvation. There are those who have gone out from the faith, showing that they never were saved. I am not speaking about them this morning, rather, I am defining true believers.

There is a joy that God intends all believers to have. And if we're honest, we know that sometimes joy is so close to us that we could touch it, and sometimes we feel as though it's gone. But it isn't. Our sin however, can darken, and cloud, and separate us from this unshakable joy. I believe this to be a gift from God, given to us so that we would understand the consequences of sin, and so seek to be rid of sin and be close to Him, our source of joy.

But aside from our joy-diminishing sin, many times there are things going on, in and around our lives, that might pose a threat to our joy in Christ. Those things are what we will be focusing on in this lesson. Because our joy isn't found whatsoever in our health, the bad news from the Doctor shouldn't affect it. But notice I didn't use the word "happiness". There is a difference between happiness and joy, a huge difference. Happiness is an emotion tied to our present circumstances. So, if I'm healthy and strong, and comfortable, and pleased, I will smile and be happy. But as soon as I feel discomfort, and the Doctor tells me I have cancer, and the road to recovery will be long and difficult, I will feel pain, and tears, and the happiness goes away. No one in a darkest hour of battling cancer, smiles in happiness, that's not the appropriate emotion. Crying is not a sin, nor is sadness. When you see a Christian in the darkest hour of battling cancer, with a sweet disposition, and a wonderful outlook on life, a refreshing perspective and strength, you've seen a Christian who has realized their unshakeable joy in Christ.

When a man loses his job, and doesn't know how he will provide for his family tomorrow, he isn't happy, but his joy and eternal security in Christ hasn't been shaken. When these type of things happen in our lives however, our joy in the Lord may seem to diminish. Certain believers get angry with God, they begin to doubt His love, or His promises. Believers start to fear for the worst, feeling abandoned, they start to wallow in self-pity, and complain about their lot in life. In these cases, the events that have come upon them, which weren't sinful in themselves, have become sin because of the immature responses to them, which cloud and darken their previous joy.

So what do we do about fighting for our joy? It's not that we might have to fight, or that we might fight once or twice in our lives. The Word of God makes it quite clear that we will all face many problems and

difficulties along the way that will wage war against our joy. Consider these verses: [Job 5:7](#), [Job 14:1](#), [Ecclesiastes 2:23](#), [John 15:20](#), [John 16:33](#), [James 1:2-4](#). So, our problems and difficulties aren't a surprise to God, nor are they outside of His Sovereign will and purposes. We must always remember and apply [Romans 8:28](#).

The Apostle Paul serves us as a model of a man of God whose joy never faltered. Paul took his joy in the Lord very seriously, and thus protected it by resisting anything that might serve to separate him from his Lord. We can see Paul's joy through his writings, and at the same time we can see those instances where he probably wasn't smiling in happiness. As a matter of fact, Paul speaks of his sorrows and tears, and his griefs and disappointments. Yet, no matter his circumstances, no matter his current emotion, his joy was always stable.

As I have done in previous lessons, I'm going to let John MacArthur provide the outline for the remainder of this lesson, and the next. I enjoy the wisdom in his framework, and I will do the work of filling it in. MacArthur breaks down the next 14 verses into four parts, four elements of Paul's joy in ministry. For this lesson, we will look at Paul's joy in spite of trouble, as long as Christ's cause progressed (vv. 12-14), and then Paul's joy in spite of detractors, as long as Christ's name was proclaimed (vv. 15-18).

Next lesson we will look at two more elements: in spite of death, as long as the Lord was glorified (vv. 19-21), and in spite of being in the flesh, as long as the church benefitted (vv. 22-26).

In Spite of Trouble—As Long As Christ's Cause Progressed (vv. 12-14)

“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.” (1:12-14)

At the outset of Paul's four reasons for constant rejoicing, he writes to them, “I want you to know.” I think the emphasis of what Paul is saying here is that he really wants them to connect the dots between his unfavorable circumstances, his present realities, and his fixed joy in the Lord. Paul doesn't downplay or ignore his imprisonment, but actually used his imprisonment to further the spread of the gospel. G. Walter Hansen mentioned the possibility of Paul using a word play in this verse that I found helpful.²⁷ Hansen wrote about how interesting it was that the word Paul chose to speak of the furtherance of the gospel (advance), is the Greek word *prokope*, which sounds very similar to the Greek word for hindrance, *proskope*. Perhaps, Hansen proposes, Paul is driving home the point that the exact opposite of their expectation is happening.

There's a few reasons why Paul writes this way, about the advancement of the gospel, at this time. In [verse 5](#), Paul is thankful for their partnership in the gospel. These people supported him, in prayer, and both emotionally and financially. But you can imagine the wind being knocked out of their sails over Paul's imprisonment. Had all been lost? Was the fight over? Should the work end? So Paul writes them, to encourage them that their work is ongoing, that they might know that he is using every opportunity to make Christ known to all whom God would give him.

Another reason why Paul seeks to encourage these believers to joy in the progression of the gospel, in spite of his troubles, is because the gospel is more important than Paul's life. Perhaps this second conclusion is drawn a little prematurely, but Paul writes in [verse 21](#), “For to me to live is Christ, and to

²⁷ Hansen, G. Walter, *The Letter to the Philippians* Eerdmans, 2009 (p. 67)

die is gain.” I’m sure what Paul meant in verse 21, he meant in verse 12, so another conclusion to Paul’s reason for joy is that Christ is superior, and his gospel advances.

A third conclusion is again drawn from a little later in the chapter. In verse 30, Paul writes that the Philippians are, “engaged in the same conflict that [they] saw [he] had and now hear that [he] still has.” Were they in prison for their faith? No. But they were facing sharp opposition over their faith. Paul encouraged them not to fear their opponents in verse 28, but rather to cling to the joy of serving the Lord at all costs, as he was in prison.

The Recipients of the Advancement

Over a span of two years, Paul was held captive and guarded by the elite and influential imperial guards. These prestigious soldiers served a twelve year term (later sixteen years), after which they were granted the highest honours and privileges, alongside a rich severance pay. These men were powerful and highly respected, and you could imagine the fear that they may have invoked over the people. In Paul’s position, he might have sought for his safety and shied away from proclaiming any message that might aggravate the authority who imprisoned him in the first place. And yet, despite his current trouble, the advancement of the gospel took priority, and so he spoke the words of life to them. These guards, who for the duration of their shift, were as much tied to him as he was to them, sat by the grace of God under the preaching and teaching of the Word of God, under one of the greatest men who had ever undertaken the task.

These soldiers would have had a lengthy, consistent, first hand relationship with Paul, and experienced (perhaps for the first time in their lives) the remarkable truths and effects of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The charges against Paul would have dissolved in their minds as they saw him face-to-face. Imagine them, as they watched the life of this man, expecting perhaps violence, and anger. Expecting a man fighting for justice. And instead watching a man who was gentle, and compassionate, and concerned more for their well-being and eternal state. These guards would have seen Paul’s patience, his perseverance through his difficult imprisonment. They would have marveled in his God given wisdom, and his deep conviction for God’s word, alongside his genuineness. They would have been stunned by his humility and his love for them. No doubt, we can be sure that many of those hardened guards were humbled, and saved, through the ministry of Paul. And more than that, we know that those saved guards became evangelists themselves, because Paul writes in verse 13 that the advancement of the gospel had become known “to all the rest”.

So we see that Paul’s imprisonment not only had a profound, and far-reaching effect on the guards, but also all those whom they would reach through evangelistic efforts. It’s not that a few believers were encouraged by Paul in spite of his troubles, or even some believers. Paul writes at the outset of verse 14 that ‘most’ of the brothers had become confident and ‘much more bold’ through this trouble. Why would Paul add they were now ‘much more bold’? When we consider the intense and violent opposition to Christianity at this time, it’s not hard to see why people would fear the proclamation of the Word. Pledging allegiance to Christ in a safe place is easy, speaking when your life is in danger is not easy, but does reveal a true faith. So, it’s quite possible that these believers, before Paul’s imprisonment, were not proclaiming the gospel, or they were at least reluctant too. But now they had been encouraged, because Paul’s courage and attitude had contagiously spread to those observing believers, and they too wanted to share in his zeal. The boldness of these new believers was to preach the resurrected Christ to all, to advance his gospel, and to find their joy in Him, despite any trouble that may come their way.

In Spite of Detractors—As Long As Christ’s Name Was Proclaimed (vv. 15-18)

“Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.”

Not only did Paul have joy in the Lord, despite all of his troubles, so long as Christ’s cause progressed, but he also had joy despite of his detractors, so long as Christ’s name was proclaimed. I ask you, at this time, to consider whether you have faced opposition from anyone, to any degree, for your faith in Christ? I assume that we all have. It’s not shocking that believers would face opposition, in fact Jesus says to expect it. In fact, if you’ve never faced opposition I’d say you’re not speaking about Christ at all. As Christians, we expect the unbeliever, the child of Satan, the one at enmity against God to hate us, to slander us, to make us look foolish in believing and proclaiming this Gospel. What we never expect is for the fellow believer in the church to do the same. But this is exactly the opposition that Paul is facing. Opposition from within, and without, but for the purpose of this context, from within.

We should note here that Paul is not categorizing believers and false believers in this section. Hansen says here, “both groups have the same identity: They are not wolves in sheep’s clothing; they are not pseudo-Christians. They are really brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul also repeatedly asserts that both groups preach Christ (vv. 15, 17, and 18). So both groups have the same message. They all faithfully preach the gospel message of salvation through the cross and resurrection of Christ. They are not people who subtract from the gospel message, as some in Corinth did by their denial of the bodily resurrection. They are not people who supplement the gospel message, as some in the Galatian churches did by their requirement of circumcision and other Jewish rituals. The factor that divides these two groups of people is not their Christian identity or their Christian message but their different attitudes toward Paul.”²⁸

Paul says in verse 15, that “Some indeed...from envy and rivalry.” Paul is assuring the reader that he’s not naïve as to what some of those in the churches were saying about him. But he is quick to also assure them that they are nevertheless preaching Christ. Their theology wasn’t in question, but their motives to preach the Gospel were. They were envious of Paul, which shouldn’t take any special explanation to see how sinful that is. But perhaps you’re wondering why anyone would envy a man in prison? First of all, Paul was a gifted man, God graciously saved him and blessed him with much. He was highly intelligent, his God-breathed ministry was therefore effective, and he became a highly respected and beloved man in the churches. His Damascus road experience might have even been further reason for those other leaders to envy him. Perhaps they wanted all of the positive experiences that Paul had, so that they might enjoy the same prominence and influence in the church.

The next word that Paul uses to describe these detractors is ‘rivalry’. This sin is really the outcome of their envy. These envious church leaders desire those positive elements of Paul’s life and his effect on others, and so they put themselves against him, hoping to turn the attention of the believers away from Paul and onto them. Perhaps these leaders were as those believers that Paul corrected in 1 Corinthians 1:11-17? Paul answers that we are a body united, not divided. Perhaps they were attacking Paul’s ability to articulate his words, or they attacked how much attention he gave to doctrine as in 2 Corinthians 10:10, and 11:6. Maybe these leaders attacked the fact that Paul was in prison, which (if you remember Job’s friends) meant that Paul was likely being punished for some serious sin. Maybe Paul’s faith was lacking or faulty? Maybe they were saying that God put Paul in prison because he was out of control and needed

²⁸ Hansen, G. Walter, *The Letter to the Philippians* Eerdmans, 2009 (p. 71-72)

to be taken out of the picture? Exactly what they were saying or doing to detract Paul is not revealed, and it wasn't revealed because that wasn't Paul's purpose. He's not writing to retaliate and detract from their message, he's writing to point out that some people preach the truth, even with a destructive motive to divide the church and promote self, nevertheless, preaching the truth of the gospel. And if some sinner is confronted with their sin, repents, and believes the good news of Jesus Christ, even from this detractor, than Paul is joyful.

So Paul says that there are some who preach motivated by jealousy and rivalry against him, but there are others, who he is thankful for, that do it from good will. These brothers preached with the right motive of continuing the partnership that they had with Paul, continuing in their support of him, and working to advance the gospel. Paul says in verse 16 that their motive is love. Not love in general, but in context, their love for Him was their motive to press forward with the gospel. Of course they loved the Lord, of course they loved each other, but this imprisonment that Paul was in did not rattle the faith of these brothers. They laboured alongside Paul, and loved him deeply, and they knew that this imprisonment was not a punishment, but was divinely inspired and purposeful. Paul says that they knew "that I am put here for the defense of the gospel." That is faith in a Sovereign God. Those believers knew that this wasn't a punishment for some secret sin, but rather God had put Paul in the situation that He wanted him in, to accomplish His purposes, and His purpose was the defense of the gospel. This is precisely what God told Paul he would do at his conversion in Acts 9:15. Paul was incarcerated by God's will, so he could preach the gospel in Rome.

Verse 17, Paul makes mention of the detractors again, mentioning that they preach Christ out of selfish ambition. Not once does Paul attack their doctrine, which he certainly would have if there was reason too, but he comments on their character. They were not preaching Christ for His honour and glory, they were doing it for their own. And they were pursuing their own honour and glory even at the expense of Paul, even intentionally attempting to destroy his credibility in order to raise their own. We're those detractors truly saved? It's impossible to say for sure, as every person has different circumstances and only God knows the heart. But to be sure, Paul is not here affirming their eternal state, but rather their right doctrine. People can speak right doctrine, from wrong motives. But as MacArthur puts it, "Apart from the spirit and motive of love, nothing done in the Lord's name—no preaching, teaching, or service, no matter how orthodox or impressive—is truly acceptable to Him. It amounts to nothing."²⁹

Paul's distress wasn't about them personally, he wasn't concerned with revenge. Paul's distress wasn't even about himself, he wasn't looking for justice. His distress was about Christ personally. The black mark left upon the name of Christ, because of the hypocrisy of those men (whether pseudo-Christian or immature believer), were causing many to stumble and reject the gospel. This is why all throughout the Bible, there is a high premium placed upon spiritual maturity. The church will never be rid of false teachers, and we all recognize the damage done by them. But the church was never intended to be a nursery for people to remain Christian infants, whose selfishness and pride and greed and more, create just as much ruin and destruction. Paul has written about immature believers before, consider 2 Cor. 12:20-21. Paul even warned Timothy about professing believers in the church who are concerned with divisions in 1 Timothy 6:3-10.

So Paul writes this to the Philippians so that they might know that he is aware of what's been going on with these detractors. But he also is seeking to encourage the Philippians to keep a joyful attitude as they too go through similar persecution. As these men sought to destroy Paul's credibility, those Philippian believers would have been discredited because of their association. Their gospel witness was going

²⁹ MacArthur, John, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody, 2001 (p. 66)

through the mud alongside of Paul's. Paul recognized his spiritual leadership and influence even from prison, and so he writes to bring peace to their hearts, to bring about a spirit of forgiveness, and to put their eyes on the glory of Christ.

But there was still a bigger picture that Paul wanted these Philippian believers to see, and he paints it in verse 18. Regardless of motive, Paul was joyful that God had used even the pseudo-Christian preacher to save an unbeliever. As Christians, we all have our favorite preachers and authors, but we must never lose sight that behind every good preacher and teacher is God, and His Word. The power never lies in the man, the power always lies in the message, and ultimately, the God who wrote it. The Holy Spirit has a purpose for the written and proclaimed Word, and it will always be accomplished. (Isaiah 55:11) **Group Question: Is God standing behind every teacher, even the bad ones?** I don't believe that God is working through Joel Osteen. But in the example where a man is preaching the biblical Jesus, with an unbiblical motive, Paul still thanks God for working through them. As long as "Christ is proclaimed", Paul rejoiced.

MacArthur again says, "Absolutely nothing could steal Paul's God-given joy. He was expendable, the gospel was not. His own privacy and freedom were incidental, and he cared nothing for personal recognition or credit. Neither the painful chains of Rome nor the even more painful criticism of fellow Christians could keep him from rejoicing, because Christ was being proclaimed and His church was growing and maturing."³⁰

Read how Paul viewed his life in 2 Corinthians 6:1-10. Paul viewed his life as a tool for God to use to accomplish His purposes and advance His gospel. There are some who think that God wants us to be holy, not necessarily happy. Paul agrees that God demands and expects holiness from us, but our joy is not at odds against our holiness, but rather a fruit of it. It is a guarantee from Christ Himself that the world will hate us if we follow Him in holiness. (Luke 6:22, Matthew 10:22, John 15:18) But there is something greater that God is seeking after in our lives, and that is our trust and dependence upon Him alone. When we follow Christ with all of our lives, the seemingly secure things in life begin to collapse, and our suffering and sorrow will increase, it is at that point when the true believer is drawn into a deeper fellowship with our Lord. It is this infinitely precious, and intimate relationship with God that brings us eternal joy. This is the joy that God desires that we all have, and nothing in the created order can give us anything comparable.

³⁰ MacArthur, John, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody, 2001 (p. 69)