

KEEPING YOUR JOY - The Heartfelt Theology of an Isolated Prisoner - Part oneSunday, June 18th, 2020, 10:00 a.m. - Teaching #2037

Pastor Don Horban - Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

THE WILL OF GOD, CHRISTIAN UNITY, AND THE JOY OF THE LORD

Philippians 1:1-6 - "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: [2] Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. [3] I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, [4] always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, [5] because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. [6] 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."

The first church founded on the European continent was at **Philippi**. Philippi was the capital city of Macedonia. The church there was established by the Apostle Paul and his companions on their **second missionary journey** and some of the events are recorded for us in **Acts chapter 16**. The story **behind** this epistle supplies the first point for today's teaching:

1) **NOTICE THE GOOD FRUIT THAT FLOWS FROM OBEYING GOD - EVEN WHEN YOU CAN'T SEE THE FRUIT AT THE TIME YOU OBEY**

Paul had no plans whatsoever to visit Philippi. He was on his way initially to **Asia**. And all the text says about his trip to Asia is Paul was "**forbidden by the Spirit**" to go there. Still other plans were forming in Paul's mind when, during the night, he had a vision in which he saw a man from **Macedonia** begging him to "**come over and help us!**" This strange interruption led Paul and Silas over to **Europe**. And the first place they arrived at was **Philippi**.

Several things happened very quickly. They bumped into a small group of women who held a regular prayer meeting by the river. The Lord "**opened the heart**" of **Lydia**, who sold fabric and purple dye. She received the gospel along with some of the others with her and formed the first tiny core of the church at Philippi.

Then Paul encountered a poor, demon possessed girl who ran around after him and Silas screaming, "**These men are servants of the most high God!**" There was nothing untrue about her screams but she was being used by men who made money off the accuracy of her divinations. The result was Paul and Silas were finding their work being turned into a side-show.

So we learn right away the gospel never works as a **means** to something else. It can never be added to gain an audience. The truth of the message must be proclaimed and treasured just for what it **is**. People need to have a taste for divine truth just for what it is. Real church and successful ministry aren't up for grabs. They're **defined** right out of the gate.

Paul eventually rebuked the demon and exorcised it. And here's the reward Paul received for his good deed. The men, who were making money off the "**spirit of divination**" in the girl, were, of course, furious at the loss of their fortune. They schemed to have Paul and Silas thrown into prison. This was one of **four** recorded times Paul was imprisoned for declaring the gospel.

Don't rush over that sentence. We're meant to learn doing the right thing for the Lord doesn't always bring pleasant

results. Faithfulness is frequently tested before it is rewarded in this world.

While singing praise songs in prison, the Lord sent an earthquake to set Paul and Silas free. This is where the now famous Philippian jailor was about to slit his own throat because if any prisoners escaped Rome would slit it anyway. Paul told him not to kill himself - yes, he was actually going to **kill** himself - and Paul told him not to because they were all present and accounted for.

Then, in what has to be one of the easiest cases of telling anyone about Jesus, the jailor begs Paul to please tell him **"What must I do to be saved?"** Not only did the jailor come to believe, but his whole family was saved with him.

This is great reading, isn't it? But Paul knows **none** of this when God puts up roadblocks to Paul's best-laid plans of taking the gospel to Asia. All he knows is God's cutting off his dreams at the knees. What he **wants** to do he **can't** do. God won't let him. But he knows enough to swallow his pride and obey God.

Back to our opening text. Now, **ten years later**, Paul is back in prison again - **Roman** prison. And these precious saints at Philippi have sent **Epaphroditus** with a gift for Paul to comfort him and ease his pain and suffering (**4:18**). Epaphroditus became deathly ill while visiting Paul, but recovered. Paul wrote the church at Philippi as an expression of love and thanksgiving for their help and support. And that letter which he sent back to them with Epaphroditus is the letter we know and love as the Epistle to the Philippians.

Here's my point in these opening comments. As you grow in the Lord you learn some things about His will. It manifests itself in different ways. Sometimes your deepest desires are an **expression** of God's will because He **gave** those desires in the first place. He gets your heart **ready** for following Him by **changing** the things that bring you joy and satisfaction. He **loosens the roots** of your life in one area so He can drive them deeper in **another** area. So, by our calculating, He gives the **desire** and **then** He gives the **call**.

I think of this as the **easy** way of walking in God's will. And, remembering we are dust, it is probably the most common way He motivates and leads His children.

But there are other times. Sometimes God knows it's not in our best interest to be **easily** led into His will. Sometimes He calls us **against** our deepest desires before He **changes** our desires. He does this to **encourage self-denial** and **test our trust**.

You might be in a situation like that right now. You don't **see** the fruit of God's work at the moment. By God's design, His will **feels** against the grain of everything you think would bring you joy. This is the **growth forcing** will of the Lord. In the words of the chorus we used to sing so frequently from the Psalms, He calls us to openly **prove** His **"loving kindness is better than life"** itself.

- 2) **WHEN YOU COMMIT YOURSELF TO GOD'S WILL HE COMMITS HIMSELF TO YOUR JOY - EVEN WHEN YOU DON'T FEEL THAT JOY AT YOUR FIRST STEPS OF OBEDIENCE**

Remember, I didn't say your *comfort*. I said your *joy*.

Philippians 1:1-4 - "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: [2] Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. [3] I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, [4] always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy...."

These words need to be given their due weight. They carry more freight than just a standard polite greeting. This is the first time Paul will mention his joy, but it is nowhere near the last. The words "*joy*" and "*rejoice*" dot Paul's prose sixteen times in a letter only four chapters long. Joy *dominates* this letter. It *rules*. But it doesn't seem to *fit*.

Have you ever had a conversation with someone who has just found out he or she is going to die? Of course, we're *all* going to die and *know* it. We all know we *could* get some deadly disease, but that isn't the same thing as *getting* one. Have you ever talked to someone who just found out his death was *imminent* - that he would likely die *soon*?

That's Paul. He writes this church from Roman prison. If tradition holds, he's chained to a Roman soldier by each wrist. His feet are shackled. His own assessment of his future is hinted at in **1:20-21** - "**.... as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. [21] For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.**"

This isn't *theological* talk. Paul isn't talking about *death in general*. He's talking about *his* death. He says it's right at the doorstep. It's a *high probability*. And it's a likelihood *soon*.

So what does this do to *joy*? Where is joy to be *scraped up*? And how come Paul doesn't seem to be *scraping*, but *overflowing*? - "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, [4] always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy!"

Here's what I see in this amazing passage. Remember, Paul never *intended* to go to Philippi initially. He didn't *want* to put that destination on his map. Now, *ten years later*, as he faces his impending death, the people of Philippi have become the source of his *greatest joy*.

This is *unexpected* joy. It's the richest kind. One of my favorite hymns is "*All the Way My Savior Leads Me.*" And right in the middle of it there is that strange line - "*gushing from the rock before me, lo, a spring of joy I see.*" Whenever we sing that hymn together I feel the need to stop and explain that weird sentence to all who may be visiting. What is this "*spring of joy*" coming from a hard rock?

The hymn-writer captures that historic account where God tells Moses to speak to the rock in the dry wilderness because the Israelites are dying of thirst. And the lesson is God can produce life-giving resources in places you don't think any are to be found.

So what's the lesson in Paul's joyful discovery in Philippi? What can I plug into my life? Here's a great life-lesson for all of us. Living for **God's** will rather than my own - making **His** goals **my** goals, even if it goes **against** my first impressions - will **pay my life back with an abiding joy that can't be threatened or removed, even in the face of losing life and all the pleasures of earthly existence.**

I think Paul would put the question to us very directly: **"Looking back over this past week, from what sources have you been securing your joy?"** That's the issue. What's been motivating your heart's joy this week? Was it profit at **work**? Was it the hope of **promotion**? Was it some **material gadget or possession**? Was it an **investment**? Was it the thrill of some **physical accomplishment**? Was it getting back to the **health club**? Was it the buzz of some **personal success** when you didn't know for sure you had it in you?

Certainly there is nothing **wrong** with any of these things. But none of them **alone**, nor all of them **together**, can secure your life in lasting joy. Only doing the will of God through Christ Jesus can do that.

3) JOY COMES FROM PUTTING THE GOSPEL FIRST

Philippians 1:3-5 - "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, [4] always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, [5] because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now."

The first word in **verse 5** is **"because."** It makes specific the **cause** of Paul's joy - it's **fountain** and **source**. He thanks God for these believers and prays for them every day. But it's the **reason** he prays that's important because it's the **reason** that's the source of Paul's **joy**.

I think it's obvious from the tone of this whole epistle that Paul dearly loves the people of this church. His words are warm and informal and loving. But he doesn't pray for them just because he **likes** them. He prays for them with such joy because they **share his passion**. They have a **"partnership in the gospel"** (1:5) with Paul. This is the only church in the New Testament that is on record as **sharing their finances with Paul**.

There's a **chain of events** here that we mustn't lose sight of. Paul had no idea he would have such a special relationship with these people ten years ago. They weren't even in his plans. But the **man in the strange night vision, waving his arms and begging Paul to come over to Macedonia - he knew the blessing in store, not just for those people, but for Paul.**

Paul finds this unbelievable joy in **obeying** the call of God, even when it wasn't what he had planned. That's the first link in the chain of joy. Now something else happens. Paul finds a **second link of joy** in the fact that these Philippian believers were now just as committed to Paul's gospel as was Paul.

So here's another life lesson. Here's what you and I can start sowing into our lives for our **still future** joy in the Lord. **Joy comes from putting the gospel first.** There's no joy in putting it **second**. There's no joy in putting it **third**.

There's no joy in making it a **hobby**.

We can think sacrificing our time and effort and money for the gospel takes joy **out** of our lives. Paul says it puts joy **in**. Find people who put the gospel first and get in the boat with them. Pray with them. Share your heart and soul with them. No one will make you happier than they.

The apostle Paul is long gone now. But his gospel is still being taken to the world. Let's find out what Ilya and Janet Bantseev need in Siberia - what challenges Adrian and Sharon Thomas are facing in the Dominican Republic.

Why? Not to make **them** happy, but to make **us** happy in the gospel. Churches that don't put the gospel first aren't joyful churches. I'm **convinced** of this. Do you know why churches split over whether dress should be formal or casual? Do you know why Christians bark and wrangle over whether they should sing hymns or choruses, or both? Do you know why congregations get up in arms over moderate program changes and adjustments? It's because **they have nothing bigger to think about!**

Churches will **always** be small and petty and driven by silly fads if the engines driving and uniting them are small. The urgent need is to get people of **all** ages and **all** styles of worship and **all** economic backgrounds and **all** ethnic background to **put the gospel first**. That's where the joy is.

God knows we've tried everything else. Churches have covered every base imaginable to keep everybody happy. We'll offer every style of worship service on Sunday morning so no one is offended. Then we'll give them the rest of the day off so no one is too stressed and overworked for Jesus. We'll try every music style from traditional, to Celtic, to modern rock. We'll offer seminars on every subject on the planet and not talk too much about Jesus, just so the unchurched aren't offended by the offence of the cross.

But for all our effort, we're not keeping everyone very happy. And we never will - not until we stop looking at our own tastes and preferences and turn our lives to **putting the gospel first**. You can't tie churches together around small trends. People become joyfully knit together when they point their lives, not at each other at all, but toward the gospel of Christ. That's still where the joy of the Lord is.

Remember, when we honor Him He has promised to **"guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."** Our hearts and minds aren't safe anywhere else.