

## KEEPING YOUR JOY - The Heartfelt Theology of an Isolated Prisoner – Part two

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Pastor Don Horban - Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

### THE GOOD WORK OF GOD AND A PEOPLE OF THE FUTURE

**Philippians 1:3-6** - "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."

We've already studied **verses 3 to 5** in this teaching series, but we need to read them again if we're going to approach **verse 6** properly. In **verse 4** Paul almost sings about his *joyous prayer* for these people. Whenever someone links personal prayer with great joy we should all listen. There are enough spiritual disciplines that can feel like **chores**. I love the idea of prayer times filled with *joy*.

Don't rush over Paul's remarkable words. Pick what you most enjoy doing. Sports? Shopping? Success at work? New projects? Travel? Best friends? Fine dining? Paul says prayer is a stronger joy-producer. That's a shocking revelation to most Christians.

But note carefully, the source of Paul's joy wasn't just his love for these **people**. The people to whom Paul writes produced his joy *indirectly* - like the moon reflects the light of the sun. The **source** of Paul's joy was something the people were **doing**. Or rather, it was something **God** was doing in the hearts of the people. Paul says he prayed for them with such joy because of their *"...partnership in the gospel from the first day until now"*(5). Read that phrase carefully - not their **reception** of the gospel - their **partnership** in the gospel.

Understanding is needed here. We need to share Paul's heart. We don't support our missionaries just because we love **them**. We support and we sacrifice and we pray because we love **the gospel**. We want the gospel to run throughout the earth. That's our joy.

And if there was anything Paul loved with all his heart, it was the gospel. Over and over again we can almost laugh at the way Paul forgets himself in his letters. It's like he can't help calling this great, mighty, loving, saving work of God in Christ *"my gospel"*. He cherished and treasured and delighted in it the way a man polishes his Porsche in the driveway on a sunny day, or the way a mother cuddles her new-born baby - *"My Porsche."* *"My baby."* *"My gospel."*

And Paul could see these people cherished the gospel along with him. It wasn't anything they **said**. It was the things they **did** - *"...because of your **partnership** in the gospel from the first day until now"*(5). It isn't mere **doctrinal correctness** Paul is praising. From the moment of their conversion they rolled up their sleeves. They pressed into involvement for the advance of the gospel. They reached out to others in Philippi. They constantly supported Paul in their prayer meetings. They sent him money for his travels. They **showed** the priority of the gospel in their actions. And that made Paul's heart bubble over with joyous, thankful prayer.

God had **changed their hearts**, not just **forgiven their sins**. They were **recruited**, not just **saved**. Their devotion to their Lord was miles away from **dull religious professionalism**. The church walls couldn't contain it. Paul saw this vitality and

loved it. He had been raised with religious routines and robes. Seeing the real deal of Christianity brought prayerful cries of joy from his heart.

All of this leads to this marvellous, famous sixth verse - "**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**"(6).

The "**and**" at the beginning of this verse links it up with what has gone before in **verses 3 to 5**. There was a powerful beginning to their walk with the Lord. Paul says they had been dramatically changed from the "**first day until now.**"(5b). And Paul says he's sure it's all going to grow and continue. God will keep on working in them right up to the "**day of Jesus Christ**"(6b) - right up to the day Jesus Christ comes again.

What made Paul so sure? Whence came this joyful confidence? Certainly not from the easy circumstances of the first Philippian converts. Think about it. What might have happened to someone like **Lydia**, whose heart the Lord so beautifully opened? What happens to the business of someone who switches loyalties from a jealous dictator Emperor to Christ? How much money do you think she made the year following her conversion, now dying and selling garments for the poor and persecuted in this Roman Empire dominated economy?

And what about that **unnamed jailor**? How does a Roman jailor earn a living for his family when he's known to have turned to Christ from the powers who had paid his bills? Did he even escape with his life? How did he support his family?

Then there was the **woman freed from a spirit of divination**. Sure, she had been gloriously delivered, but that wasn't the whole story. She had been making a sizable fortune for the men who had been exploiting and marketing her ability to predict the future. All of that income disappeared when Jesus came into her life. How do you think that made these entrepreneurs feel? What did they do to her? Did they stalk these women when they came to pray by the river? Were they beaten?

Truth be told, you probably wouldn't have predicted a very bright future for **any** of these people. Remember, there was no one around to protect their human rights. Is it possible Paul had **these** people in mind when he said "**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**"(6)?

## 1) **THE TAP-ROOT OF ENDURING FAITH IS GOD'S WORK, NOT OUR OWN POTENTIAL**

**Philippians 1:6** - "**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.**"

Paul focuses his attention very precisely in this verse. It's all about the work "**he**" has begun. But the "**he**" isn't Paul. It isn't any of the **Philippian converts**. The "**he**" is God.

All theological truth needs balance to survive. Unbalanced **truth** is little better than **error**. There is a way of viewing the Biblical stress on discipline and holiness and obedience that sees the Christian life only from one end of the telescope. I can easily come to view only the parts of conversion that seem to depend of **me**. And, while it's

absolutely essential to stress things like holiness and obedience, you can find your confidence in **progressing** and **enduring** in the faith resting solely on **your success** in **accomplishing** these things. And that's a great tragedy.

In this very letter Paul will certainly encourage the disciples at Philippi to exert great **effort** and **energy** to stretch and strain, just as he did, to sweat their way to the finish line:

**Philippians 3:12-16** - "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but **I press on to make it my own**, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. [13] Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But **one thing I do**: forgetting what lies behind and **straining forward** to what lies ahead, [14] **I press on toward the goal** for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. [15] Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. [16] Only **let us hold true to what we have attained.**"

See how every sentence is directed to what these people must **do**. And these words must be read with care and obedience by any disciple of Christ Jesus.

But in **Philippians 1:6** there's a **complementary** emphasis. And it's one that must not be ignored. **God** has worked in these Christians. God is **still** working. And God will **continue** to work in them. That's Paul's emphasis. That's Paul's confidence. It's not **Paul's** work, though he worked very hard. It's not **their** work, though they too laid aside everything to obediently follow Jesus as Lord. But the work itself is **God's** work.

I wonder what Paul was picturing as he wrote those words. Perhaps he recalled how he didn't even want to **go** to Philippi. He was on his way to Asia with no plan whatsoever to visit Philippi. But **God** went to work. **God** showed Paul another plan.

Or perhaps Paul remembered his very first convert (as far as we know) in Philippi. He remembered how he encountered **Lydia**, whose **"heart the Lord had opened."** **Paul** was involved, but **Paul** didn't open her heart. The **Lord** worked in her.

Then Paul remembered the conversion of the Philippian jailor and his whole household. True, Paul explained the way of salvation to them. But none of that would have even come about except **God sent an earthquake** to open up the jails and raise the whole conversation about conversion and faith in the first place. This work at Philippi was **God's** work. **He** put it together and **He** brought it about.

There is something of great weight here. Forget for a moment all the theological arguments. The truth is clear and vital for Presbyterians and Methodists alike. Our own faith will never be strong and enduring unless it is faith in **God's** great work in us.

Of course the desire for holiness and purity is always important and good. But it also needs to be **informed** to keep it from being self-destructive. We can all so easily look only **inward**. We know our weaknesses and our faults. We

know how we'd like to be and how we are. And there is a **place** for self-examination. The Bible says so. We **examine** our hearts. But we only **visit** there. We don't **stay**. We look **inwardly** but not **disparingly** because we know **God** works in us to deal with whatever we find there. We can look at our own hearts with **both honesty and safety** because we have confidence that the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses from **all** unrighteousness. We can boldly look into all the corners of our heart because, as we follow Jesus, **His love and grace isn't dependant on what we find there**. Mere humility and repentance unleash the mighty working of God in us.

Please think this through. It's high confidence in God's work in us that allows, and even **encourages**, us to search our hearts as the Scriptures command. Only the person who **trusts** in God's inward work is **secure** enough to deal **honestly** with his or her heart. If I ever get the notion that my future with Christ depends on **my** efforts I will **never** honestly examine my heart as the Bible commands. I will feel too **frightened** and too embarrassed and too **threatened** to deal honestly with my sinful self.

But once my faith is properly focussed and directed - once it's anchored securely to God's work in my heart - I can trust His grace to cleanse and supply and empower all that is needed for my ongoing growth and life in His Son.

**Trust in the greatness of God's work in you.** Let that work motivate you to obedience and sacrifice and diligence because you know, with the Creator of the universe working in you, your labour in the Lord can't possibly be fruitless or futureless.

## 2) MAKE SURE THIS GOOD WORK HAS BEGUN IN YOUR HEART

**Philippians 1:6** - "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."

Paul did not write, nor did he **intend** to write, about the One who had "**put a good belief in you.**" What God has begun in all of us is a "**work.**" There's an **energy** to it. There's **dynamic** to it. There's an **ethical, sacrificing, serving** quality to it. It **shows up**. It **manifests** itself. In short, it **works**. It's not just **words**. It's not **pretending**. God begins a **work** in our lives.

You can see this emphasis in the whole context of this **sixth verse - Philippians 1:3-7** - "**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. [7] 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."**

Paul's joy didn't just come from the fact that these people **believed what he believed**. And it didn't come from the fact that these people **liked what Paul was doing**. His joy came from the fact that they were **doing what he was doing**. And if God is at **work** in you, you should be at **work** in this church as well.

### 3) THE WORK OF GOD CREATES A PEOPLE OF THE FUTURE

**Philippians 1:6 - "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.*"**

Now we come to the blazing heart of this text. Notice the **time** words - past and future. No one knows what the future holds for his or her earthly life. Actually, this ignorance is a frequently missed form of God's love and grace. If many of us knew our futures we'd be terrified to death right now. It's bad enough to live with a **past** that can't be changed and haunts without adding the fear of a **future** that may not be bright.

Paul wants to put joy and hope into their uncertain futures. That's why he doesn't tell these Christians God will work in them until the day of **their death**. Nor does he tell them God's work will **prevent** possible persecution, torture, or sickness. No one is promised exemption from pain and trial.

Paul tells **them** and **us** something much better than that. He tells us all God's work can't be snuffed out by anything life brings. He tells us, like the apostle Peter, that we have an **"...inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you...."** (1 Peter 1:4). He tells us that **"...nothing in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"**(Romans 8:39).

We are not kept until the **end of our lives**. God's work in us will be completed, not by some grey grave on a wintery morning at the cemetery. It will be completed when we all kneel with joy at the feet of the One who overcame both sin and death and works without weakness, holiday, sleep, or rest, to bring us to His side in glory.

That's a great work to celebrate indeed!