

“A Joyful Letter”
Sermon Series on Christ: *The Source of Our Joy and Strength #1*
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(Phil. 1:1-11)

Introduction.

C.S. Lewis once said that Joy is the serious business of heaven. I love that thought. But I would also suggest to you that joy is the serious business of earth for the followers of Jesus Christ. God wants us to experience joy, and Jesus even said to His disciples, “*These things I have spoken to you that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full*” (Jn. 15:11). But why is it that so few of us experience much joy in this life? Why do we struggle to be joyful at times? And where can find the kind of joy C.S. Lewis wrote about?

We’re going to begin the New Year today by doing a sermon series on the book of Philippians, and one of the reasons we’re doing this is because of all the books in the New Testament this epistle from the pen of Paul talks about joy more than any other. The apostle mentions you 14 times, including in the passage we have just read where Paul writes that he prays with joy.

So I invite you to join me on a serious study of this amazing book of the Bible. I think God has something important for each of us as we study this letter today.

I. The Planting of a Church.¹

Before we get into the text itself, let’s take a few moments to look back at the beginnings of the church in Philippi and see what we can learn about the community there and the people to whom Paul wrote this letter. For some of you the mere mention of the city of Philippi takes you back to memories of sitting in a high school English class reading Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, and you’re experiencing a flashback about now.

Yes, it’s *that* Philippi where Octavian and Mark Anthony defeated the armies of Cassius and Brutus after the latter two men carried out their plot to assassinate Julius Caesar. After Octavian and Mark Anthony won the decisive victory, it was clear they were going to rise to power. However, they thought returning to Rome with a large army would look bad, so they decided to garrison a large number of soldiers right where the battle had taken place. And the city of Philippi exploded in population after the battle in 42 BC.

In the middle of the first century when Paul visited there, although not large, Philippi was strategically located and had a rich heritage and a distinctive culture. It spilled down a mountainside onto a fertile, well-watered plain about 10 miles inland from the port of Neapolis on the Aegean Sea. The Egnatian Way, which was an important road of commerce linking the city of Rome with its eastern provinces, passed right through the center of the city.

Although it was located many miles east of Rome in a province whose common language was Greek, Philippi became a Roman colony after Octavian and Mark Anthony won their victory, and Latin became the official language of the city. Philippi proudly maintained a Roman character, and I should also add that worship of the emperor was an important element in the religious life of the city because of its link to Rome.

It is obvious why Paul would choose Philippi as the base of operations for his first evangelistic effort in the region of Macedonia (which is modern day Greece), because Philippi was the most important city in the region. But how he ever came there in the first place is intriguing. If you read Acts 16 you'll discover that originally Paul and his fellow missionaries were planning to take the gospel to Bithynia, a region in north central Asia Minor, in a part of what is today Turkey.

However, the Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit overruled those plans, and that Paul and his companions felt led by God to go instead to the city of Troas on the northwest coast of Asia Minor. It was there that Paul experienced a nighttime vision in which a man from Macedonia appeared to him and said, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" Paul and his team, which consisted of Silas, Timothy, and Luke, took this as a sign from God, and they set sail for Macedonia. The ship landed in Neapolis, and from there they followed the Egnatian Way to the city of Philippi.

Although their stay in the city was brief, it was very eventful and effective. As a rabbi Paul's usual custom was to go to the synagogue in any new city to which he traveled, but in Philippi there was no synagogue to be found. So he went to a place of prayer outside the city gate by a river where some Jewish women gathered for prayer and worship on a regular basis. In Judaism there had to be at least 10 men to form a synagogue, so presumably there weren't enough Jewish men living in Philippi to organize one. It may also be that the women sought out this place by the river outside the city because Jewish worship wasn't welcome in this deeply Roman colony. We don't really know for sure.

What we do know is that anti-Semitism was prevalent in Roman culture, and it comes through loud and clear in the charges that the owners of a slave girl brought against Paul and Silas for casting out a fortune-telling demon from her. They said, "*These men are Jews, and they are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept and practice*" (Acts 16:20-21).

When Paul and Silas departed Philippi at the request of the city magistrates, they left behind a diverse group of believers, including Lydia, a wealthy merchant of purple cloth in the textile business, a jailer and his family, and perhaps even the slave girl herself. And it appears that by the time Paul and Silas left, this group of new converts began meeting in Lydia's house for worship.

Despite the fact that Paul hadn't been with these people for very long, and in spite of the struggles this little church encountered, they appear to have been Paul's favorite congregation. They were willing to support Paul's missionary efforts in other cities from the very beginning (Phil. 4:15), and they helped him many times during the course of his ministry. The apostle had a close bond of affection with this little church, and they were very dear to him.

When Paul wrote this letter, he was in prison in Rome awaiting trial, and the outcome of the trial could result in his execution. In spite of the danger he was in, the apostle wrote in very joyful terms. How was this possible? Where did he derive his joy and strength? As we shall see over the course of this sermon series, Paul's joy and strength came from Jesus Christ.

II. A Joyful Letter.

"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (1:3-6).

Whenever Paul thought about the friendships he made with the believers in Philippi during his short visit there, he was flooded with warm memories. And Paul begins his letter with *a joyful remembrance*. This happened often in Paul's letters in which he usually began by giving thanks for the people to whom he was writing. However, if you think about the context in which the apostle was composing this letter, you can readily see why this might be the case all the more.

Paul was in prison, and there alone in the city of Rome, awaiting trial in a Roman cell, separated from friends and family, far away from home, his mind wandered over the course of his life and to the people who had been important to him. He reflected on those who had supported him financially and with their prayers over the years, and the members of the church in Philippi were at the top of the list. He probably thought about the way in which he felt persecuted for his faith, and he remembered how the church in Philippi had also experienced the very same thing. I think their shared suffering created a special bond.

In this passage Paul also expressed *a joyful affection*. *"It is right for me to feel this way about you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ" (1:7-8)*. In this passage Paul says that the members of the church in Philippi shared in God's grace with him, and it was on the basis of the foundation of a common experience of grace that their bond of mutual affection was built. Another way of saying this is that they were partners in grace. Being a partner in grace was a big deal for Paul, and it formed the basis of this close, intimate bond he felt with the Philippian church.

The final thing I want you to notice about what Paul says in these opening verses is *his joyful prayer*. The apostle writes, *"And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ" (1:9-11)*.

I wish we had time to look at each phrase of the apostle's prayer and dig deeply into it, but let me at least say this in the time we have. Notice that Paul prays that love would abound in the church in Philippi, but it is a love that is marked by knowledge and depth of insight, or discernment. It wasn't blind or sentimental. Rather, he prayed for a love that is knowledgeable and informed.

Notice also that his prayer is that their love might lead to greater discernment and holy living. *"That you may be pure and blameless...filled with the fruit of righteousness...."* The moral and ethical foundation of the church was important to Paul, and as a pastor he prayed for the integrity of their witness and the purity of their lives. When you think about your own walk with Christ, in what ways do you feel like you're growing in your ability to discern God's will? How is your life marked by moral purity? Are there areas of your life that need some work in this New Year, and how are you allowing the grace of Christ to bring you more into conformity with a life of that is pleasing to God?

There is much more I'd like to share with you about this amazing passage of Scripture, but this will have to suffice for now. Let me encourage you to go home and read Acts 16 later today and learn more about how the church at Philippi got started. And read through this prayer again, and maybe pray the prayer yourself. Also, I encourage you to think about the people in your life for whom you have great affection, and give thanks to God for the blessing they have been to you over the years. Finally, consider how the Lord wants you to grow in your love, your

knowledge, your ability to discern things spiritually, and in your holiness. And ask God to show you how you can grow in these ways.

Conclusion.

There is one final matter I want to mention about this passage as we close, and it is this. There is a verse in this passage that has been very important to me over the years, and I want to close my drawing your attention to it because it talks about Christ being the source of Paul's joy and strength. It's where Paul says, *"I'm confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."*

The reason this has been an important verse for me is because in the times when I've felt like my faith was flagging or I wasn't as consistent in living for Christ as I knew God wanted me to be, I have clung to this verse to remind me that God isn't finished writing my story yet. This passage also breathes hope into my heart when I realize that, while I need to be active in my faith and God can't steer a parked car, ultimately spiritual growth isn't the result of my hard work. Rather, it's the product of the Holy Spirit working in me. *God* is the one who causes the growth, and I can count on Him to bring to completion the good work He wants to do in my life and help me live for Jesus.

When I was a young man and had just graduated from college, and I knew I was headed to seminary to become a pastor. But I questioned whether I had what it took to be an ordained minister. I felt like my faith was inconsistent and fleeting at times. In the winter of 1976, Leighton Ford spoke at a missions conference at my home church in Atlanta, and after one of the sessions I sought him out for advice.

I explained my dilemma, and I shared my doubts. And I'll never forget what he said in response to my question. Leighton looked straight at me and said, "Peter, sometimes the candle of faith will burn high and bright, and other times it will barely flicker. But just pray it continues to burn, and God will give you everything you need. He will bring to completion what He has begun." That single conversation changed my life, and the lights were turned on for me spiritually. And from that day forward I have never had a doubt about God's call on my life.

Where are you in your faith today? Do you struggle with inconsistency in your walk with Christ? Have you battled doubts lately and wonder what God is up to? Have you lost your joy in life? Write this verse down on a piece of paper and tape it to the mirror in your bathroom. And recite it every morning and evening when you rise and when you go to bed, and see what God does in reminding you that He is at work in your life both to will and to do according to His good pleasure. And He will bring to completion what He has begun. I think you'll find it will make a big difference.

May the Lord bless our study of Philippians today and in the coming weeks. To God be the glory! Amen.

¹ I'm indebted to Frank Thielman and his commentary on Philippians in the *Application Commentary Series* for some of the details of this section of the sermon on the city of Philippi and the church Paul planted there.