

Philippians 1

Although filled with some of the richest theology, the book of Philippians is a book of basic Christianity. Its theme is the joy of living. Fourteen times in four short chapters the words "joy" or "rejoice" appear. The two thoughts of following the basics and joy go hand in hand. Keep the basics, and we will find joy.

Put the fellowship of the gospel at the center of your relationship with fellow believers.

1:3-8

*1:3 I thank my God for your every remembrance of me,
1:4 always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy,
1:5 for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now,
1:6 being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ;
1:7 just as it is right for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as both in my chains and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers with me of grace.
1:8 For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ.*

Paul thanks God for the believers in Philippi and for their interest in him reflected in their fellowship in the gospel (1:3-5). Fellowship means "to share in common," but at the heart of fellowship is a self-sacrificing conformity to a shared vision. In this case, it's self-sacrificing conformity to the gospel. In the first century the word was often tied to commercial interests. If people entered into a business together, they entered into a partnership or fellowship. In Romans 15:26 when the Macedonian Christians contributed money to help believers in need, they were said to have entered into fellowship (the word in that verse translated as "contribution" is the word "fellowship" in Greek). "There may be overtones of warmth and intimacy, but the heart of the matter is this shared vision of what is of transcendent importance, a vision that calls forth our commitment" (Carson,

16). In short, it is their zealous attitude and action in the interest of the gospel.

Paul's thanks is with all joy because from the moment of conversion, (Acts 16:13ff) the Philippian believers had been faithful in their witness (Phil 1:27, 28), persevered in prayer for Paul (Phil 1:19), and tangibly expressed their commitment through their financial gifts (Phil 4:10-20). His words remind us of John who said, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth." (3 Jo.4).

In addition to their interest in him (1:4) and their fellowship in the gospel (1:5), a third basis for Paul's thanksgiving is his confidence that God will complete in each believer the work of salvation which He had begun (1:6).

In verse 6 Paul introduces the tension that exists between the believer's personal responsibility for spiritual growth and his total dependence upon the grace of God. Paul repeatedly exhorts the unbeliever to faith and encourages believers to walk in a manner that pleases God, but he is also clear that God is absolutely sovereign in drawing men to Himself and causing them to grow. Paul is thankful that God is at work in us and will not fail in completing His work. "Because God is preserving them, Paul is convinced that they will persevere." (Carson, 17).

Paul's thankfulness to God and his joy could not be taken from him whether he was in chains or free (1:7).

Paul even puts himself under oath ("God is my witness" -1:8), not because he might be lying, but so the passion of his truthfulness for them might be felt.

From Paul's example we see that the fellowship of the gospel should be at the center of our relationship to other believers. Paul's greatest joy was in seeing peoples' commitment to the gospel blossom.

What brings us our greatest joy?

**Put the priorities of the gospel at the center of your prayer life.
1:9-11**

1:9 And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment,

1:10 that you may approve the things that are excellent (or, "approve what is best" - NIV), that you may be pure and blameless till the day of Christ,

1:11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Paul prays that believers have abounding love, that is, love that is growing and increasing. However, this love is not an end in itself but a means to an end. Where love overflows so does the ability to see what is best. In other words, Paul wants the Philippians to have the ability to discern those things that are excellent, but in order for them to do so, they must first have love that abounds in knowledge and all depth of insight. This kind of love is the prerequisite of discernment.

Two questions naturally arise: (1) Why does Paul describe love as love that abounds in knowledge and discernment (depth of insight), and (2) what are the excellent things that Paul is talking about?

Paul does not say whether the love he is referring to is love directed to God or believers, but from a Christian perspective both are related; love for God is reflected in love for each other (I Jn. 5:1). What is important is that type of love that Paul desires us to abound in. Paul is not speaking about a warm feeling or sentimentalism, but love that becomes more knowledgeable both in the words of God and His ways. "Depth of insight" speaks of having "moral perception across the entire gamut of life's experiences." It is a love "regulated by the knowledge of the gospel and comprehensive moral insight... The point is that Christians must abound more and more in this quality of love if they are to test and approve what is best" (Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 126).

Three clues give us an understanding of what things Paul is specifically talking about.

1) If love that is regulated by the knowledge of God is necessary to approve what is excellent, "what is excellent" must be something subtle in nature, for those who are not abounding in love lack the ability to see it.

2) In Greek the word "approve" includes both the idea of examination or evaluation but also that of choice (O'Brien, 77). Paul is no doubt thinking of the ability to see how two things differ and then choose that which is best.

"His point thus far, then, is that love shaped and honed by knowledge and moral insight is the absolute requirement for testing and approving "what is best," for developing a sense for "what is vital" (Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 127). Or, as O'Brien says, ". . .the Philippians who were in Christ were to make such choices of what was vital on the basis of ever increasing love - a love that penetrated more deeply into the knowledge of God and the treasures of Christ, and imparted to the Christian a keener and more delicate moral sense of specific situations" (O'Brien, 80).

3) A third clue helping us to understand more concretely what Paul means by "what is best" is found in a theme in the epistle. Paul has already expressed his thankfulness to God because He, who has begun a good work in us, will bring it to completion (Phil 1:6). Paul doesn't think of the Christian walk in terms of maintaining our faith, but as a process of continually growing to be more like Christ until we are perfected in Him at His coming.

If these ideas are then encapsulated into a single thought it would be this: The pursuit of excellence does not turn on clear distinctions between right and wrong but on delicate choices that must be made throughout life. If our hearts and minds are not profoundly Christian, we will not be able to see the subtleties in our choices and make the decision that brings God the greatest glory.

The reason we are to choose what is excellent is because through such choices we become filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ (Phil 1:10b-11). Paul's challenge to excellence is not primarily a mental exercise, but a challenge of our whole being that results in a transformation of life.

"Fruit of righteousness" is parallel in thought to "pure and blameless." "It seems best, therefore, to take all three as ethical qualities. To be 'filled with the fruit of righteousness' is to be characterized by the conduct - the actions, words, and thoughts -that God Himself judges to be right" (Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 134). The One who makes this righteousness possible is Christ. Just as "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" are called the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), so the fruit of righteousness Paul describes has a supernatural source.

"Till the day of Christ" in verse 1:10b has strictly a temporal thought in English, but in Greek carries the connotation of looking forward to the day of Christ. This gives the motivation for pursuing excellence. Because we have the day when Christ returns ever before our eyes and the righteousness that will accompany it, we will strive to allow Christ's righteous fruit to be produced in our lives today.

"The church is to see itself as an outpost of heaven. It is a microcosm of the new heaven and the new earth, brought back, as it were, into our temporal sphere. We are still contaminated by failures, sin, relapses, rebellion, self-centeredness; we are not yet what we ought to be. But by the grace of God, we are not what we were. For as long as we are left here, we are to struggle against sin, and anticipate, so far as we are able, what it will be like to live in the untarnished bliss of perfect righteousness. We are to live with a view to the day of Christ" (Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 135-136).

And all of this, if done with the proper motives, results in the praise and glory of God (Phil. 1:11b).

Thus, Paul's prayer was centered on the gospel and the transformation it brings to our lives. We find the gospel to be at both the center of Paul's relationships (Phil 1:1-8) and his prayers (Phil 1:9-11). It was also at the center of his aspirations as the following verses reveal.

**Put the advance of the gospel at the center of your desires
1:12-18**

1:12 But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel,

1:13 so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else,

"I want you to know" is invariably used by Paul to introduce an important statement, and might even imply that he is correcting misunderstandings. In this case, it could be that others were thinking that Paul's imprisonment in Rome, from where he was writing to the Philippians, was a setback and hindrance to the gospel. Paul, however, was convinced that his imprisonment had not hindered the spreading of the gospel or the working of God in his life.

He offers two reasons as evidence for what he is saying:

- 1) First, through his imprisonment the whole palace guard had been able to hear the gospel (1:13).

It is doubtful that the whole palace guard took turns guarding Paul, but those who did guard him heard his testimony and the gospel, and the news of who he was most likely then spread to others. But Paul's bold testimony had also spread beyond the guard to "everyone else" as well. We know from other places in scripture that members of the Jewish community (Acts 28:17ff.), at least one Gentile (Philem 10), and many Christian co-workers were influenced by Paul when he was in prison in Rome.

Paul was an extraordinary prisoner and he made it clear that his imprisonment was due to his relationship to Christ. Instead of falling into self-pity and harboring bitterness due to his circumstances, he continued to put the gospel first.

- 2) A second reason that Paul believes that his imprisonment has advanced the gospel is in verse 14:

1:14 Because of my chains, most of the brethren in the Lord have been much more bold to speak the word without fear.

A taste of persecution sometimes puts backbone into otherwise timid Christians. A more literal translation of the verse would be that they are "daring to speak the gospel without fear." That they were "daring" shows that the danger had not left but there was a greater degree of courage to meet the challenge. Paul, through his suffering, had been an example that inspired others to greater boldness.

Nevertheless, not all responded in the same way.

1:15 Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from good will:

1:16 The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains;

1:17 but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel.

1:18 What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.

The fact that Paul rejoices that Christ is preached, even though some preach it from selfish ambition and wrong motives, demonstrates that Paul is not talking about false teachers. If they had been, Paul would have exposed and condemned them (see Gal. 1:8-9; II Cor. 11:4, 13-15). They propound the true gospel but do it with evil motives. The source of the problem was not primarily doctrinal but personal.

Those who preach the gospel from pure motives and those who do not are distinguished by their perspectives. One group is said "to know," the other is said "to imagine, or suppose." Those who "know" of Paul's mission to advance the gospel rightly interpret his imprisonment. They see the working of God in it and are aware that he is faithfully discharging the gospel where he is. There is, therefore, no sense that his imprisonment is a sign of God's

disfavor. In fact, they see the opposite to be true; because he is defending the gospel, his imprisonment is understandable.

The other group looks at the situation totally differently. They use Paul's imprisonment as God's punishment upon the apostle, and then use it as a means of bolstering their own influence. It appears that they had a personal rivalry with Paul and could use his imprisonment to discredit his character while building themselves up. They may have also assumed that Paul would bitterly resent their newfound success. "If so they failed to reckon with the greatness of the man" (Kent, 112). (This is only one of many different opinions on this text. See O'Brien, 103-104 for 6 other possibilities).

But how does Paul respond? Does he lash out and spend pages defending his own character and the reasons why he is imprisoned? No! Paul looked beyond his reputation to something of greater value. It didn't matter to him what people were saying - whether they liked him or not. He rejoiced that the transforming power of the gospel was being preached.

"Paul's example is impressive and clear: Put the advance of the gospel at the center of your aspirations. Our own comfort, our own bruised feelings, our reputations, our misunderstood motives- all of these are insignificant with the advance and splendor of the gospel." (Carson, 25).

**Put the converts of the gospel at the center of your self denial
1:19-26**

The flow of Paul's thought is amazing. Personal insult is a source of rejoicing if the gospel spread through it. But he rejoices for other reasons as well.

1:19 For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ,

1:20 according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.

In the context, "deliverance" does not mean "let out of prison," because verse 20 states that he doesn't know whether he will live or die. What is important to him is that he will be approved by God. Regardless of the physical outcome of things, he has reason to believe that spiritual victory will be his. He is confident he will be vindicated by God because he believes that God will answer the prayers being offered on his behalf and because of the support furnished by the Holy Spirit. His desire is that through life or death he will run the course so that once he enters the presence of the Father he will not be ashamed, having boldly done everything to glorify Christ.

No decision of a human court, no antagonism inflicted by believers could sway his faith in God, for he was not motivated by the opinions of men.

1:21 For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Paul had no control over what would befall him. But whatever happened, it was to his benefit. If he lived, he could continue a fruitful ministry in Rome, bringing glory to Christ there. If he died, he would just enjoy the presence of the exalted Christ whom he longed to see. Even if he could choose, he couldn't say which he desired more.

In Philippians 1:20 Paul said, "according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death."

Paul's greatest hope was that Christ be magnified in His body and he wants this to happen whether he lives or dies. How does he expect Christ to be glorified in life or death? The answer is in verse 21: "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Paul saw death as gaining Christ. In other words, Christ was magnified by Paul's dying if Paul's dying is experienced as gain.

How can death be seen as gain? Because Christ Himself is gain. In verse 23 he says, "For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better." Christians benefit by death because dying means that we are with Christ and that is far better than living.

If you want to glorify Christ by dying, you must see death as gain. "This means that Christ must be your prize, your treasure, your joy. He must be a satisfaction so deep that when death takes away everything you love - but gives you more in Christ - you count it gain. When you are satisfied with Christ in dying, He is glorified in your dying." (Piper, *The Dangerous Duty of Delight*, 26)

"It is the same with life. We magnify Christ in life, Paul says, by experiencing Christ as our all-surpassing treasure. That's what he means in verse 21 when he says, 'For me, to live is Christ'" (Piper, 16). In Philippians 3:8 Paul reaffirmed this by saying, "I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ."

"So Paul's point is that life and death, for the Christian, are acts of worship - they exalt Christ and magnify Him and reveal and express His greatness - when they come from an inner experience of treasuring Christ as gain. Christ is praised in death by being praised above life. And Christ is most glorified in life when we are most satisfied in Him even before death.

The common denominator between living and dying is that Christ is the all-satisfying treasure that we embrace whether we live or die. Christ is praised by being prized. He is magnified as a glorious treasure when He becomes our unrivaled pleasure. So if we are going to praise Him and magnify Him, we dare not be indifferent as to whether we prize Him and find pleasure in Him. If Christ's honor is our passion, the pursuit of pleasure in Him is our duty." (Piper, *The Dangerous Duty of Delight* 27).

1:22 But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell.

1:23 For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.

1:24 Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you.

Paul is deeply tied to the well-being of other believers rather than his own. If he put his best interests first, being with Christ is an easy choice.

But he still feels like others could be helped, and he covets their growth in Christ.

*1:25 And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith,
1:26 that your rejoicing for me may be more abundant in Jesus Christ by my coming to you again.*

Paul's knowledge of remaining for the Philippians cannot be pressed to mean that he had received word from God that this would happen. The previous verses clearly demonstrate that he did not have any word from God about the outcome of his imprisonment. Rather, it was his feeling based on the circumstances he is experiencing that caused him to feel confident.

The lesson to be learned is strikingly clear. Put the converts of the gospel at the center of your self-denial. Paul did not desire what was best for him (escaping the pangs of death, fulfilling his ministry, or entering heaven's gates) but what was best for others.

This is such strange thinking to so many of us it would do us well to meditate upon its implications.

**Realize that the call of God is both a call to salvation and a call to suffer
1:27-30**

*1:27 This one thing, let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel,
1:28 and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is a sign of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing.
1:29 For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake,
1:30 since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.*

"This one thing" or "Whatever happens" (NIV) is an attempt to render the Greek idea of primary importance. In other words, Paul is saying that no matter what happens, no matter what pressures we face, no matter where we go or what we do for a living, certain things are central - and they pertain to conduct. Above all else they must not fail to conduct their manner of life as being worthy of the gospel.

To conduct our lives as worthy of the gospel of Christ is not suggesting that we conduct ourselves in such a way that we live up to a standard in order to receive the benefits of the gospel. We are saved by grace through faith and nothing else (Eph. 2:8-9). The most fundamental reason that Christ came is because we cannot live up to the standards of a holy God. Rather, the verb "conduct yourselves" means to act in a way that is becoming of the position you are in. The term "conduct" is derived from the word "city" in Greek, and in literature outside of the Bible refers to living out obligations as a citizen. Its meaning would be easily understood by the Romanized Christians in Philippi.

Although walking worthily of the gospel is a single command, it stands as a heading for everything Paul writes through Philippians 2:18. Thus, it includes (1) the appeal for unity and courage (1:27-30), (2) the exhortation to unity through humility (2:1-4), (3) the supreme example of Christ (2:5-11), and (4) the admonition for believers to shine as stars (2:12-18).

Paul is looking for consistency in Christian character. "Whether I come and see you or am absent" means that he wants the believers in Philippi to act the same way whether he is looking over their shoulders or not.

The Philippians were in danger of being swayed by opponents to the gospel who threatened the church with persecution, so the conduct that he wants to be consistently displayed in them is a steadfastness in one spirit (i.e. having a common purpose), "with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, and not in any way [being] terrified by your adversaries."

This unity, this contending for the gospel and not fearing one's adversaries constitutes a sign. It is a sign both to the unbeliever and to the believer. To the unbelievers who oppose Christ, it is a sign of their coming

judgment. To the believers, enduring persecution and remaining united is a sign of assurance that we really are the people of God and will be saved.

"So conduct worthy of the gospel is in the first instance a corporate unity and steadfastness in defense of the gospel that cheerfully, meekly, and without fear withstands all opposition and boldly promotes the gospel. To put it bluntly, conduct worthy of the gospel is above all conduct that promotes the gospel" (Carson, 55).

Paul then points to the cross; "For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake..." Our call to suffer has been granted to us. The verb translated "to be granted" is related to the word "grace" and can be translated "to be bestowed upon, to deal generously or graciously with." Paul considers the privilege of suffering with Christ to be a gracious gift given by God. In Romans 8:32 it speaks of the all-embracing bounty that the Father has given to us through the Son. In I Corinthians 2:12 it refers to the Spirit of God leading us to an understanding of all that He has given us (see II Cor. 12:10). Not only have we experienced God's grace in saving us from sin, we also enjoy the privilege of suffering with our Master.

The heart of Christian discipleship is to follow Christ (Mk. 8:34) and the road He took was one of self-denial, heartache, and sacrifice (I Pet. 2:21). "Every time and every place that we refuse to acknowledge that this is so, we sin against Christ and need to confess the sin and return to basics" (Carson, 56).

The Philippians, like Christians in many parts of the world, were facing severe persecution. But Paul reminded them that by doing so, they were simply following his own example, and more significantly, that of Christ.