

**JOY  
THAT GOES  
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# JOY THAT GOES THE DISTANCE

Some time ago we did a Sunday morning study on the letter to the Philippians. The title of the study was **TRUE JOY**. Philippians is one of my favorite books, as it is for many other Christians. Its message is uplifting and its promises are among the most loved in the entire Bible. To live according to Philippians is to have true joy.

Tragically, over the centuries Philippians has been the cause of much discouragement and disillusionment for many Christians. What? How can this be? The problem isn't really with Philippians, it's with how we apply (or misapply) it. The promises of Philippians (4:6-7, 13, 19) are so wonderful we often focus on them while completely ignoring the entire context of the letter. Paul wrote four chapters, not just four verses. When we carefully read the whole letter, and give note to the historical context, the power of Philippians can be unleashed in our lives. If we simply lift a few verses out of context, it will be difficult to experience the true joy which is available to God's people. We might also draw the erroneous conclusion that God's promises have failed.

There are at least eleven essential truths which serve as foundations to the Philippians promises. Although entire books could be written about each of these truths, we'll limit ourselves to just a few sentences each.

- 1. My Life is Not My Own.** Paul introduced himself as a servant (slave) of Jesus Christ (1:1). In a culture such as the Roman Empire, where there were millions of slaves, this was a profound statement. Basically Paul was saying, "It is not all about me, my life is not me-centered but Christ-centered. Christ has purchased me from sin and guilt. This is the best thing that has ever happened to me. I find great joy in knowing that my life belongs to Him" (see 1:6).
- 2. All events in my life are by divine appointment.** Paul looked at all of his circumstances as involving God's will for his life (1: 12- 14, 1: 19, 2: 13). Even the difficult trials which are caused by the sins of other people have a purpose from which God will bring good things. This is part of seeing "the big picture", something most people never recognize. Failure to trust God and questioning His character is a sure-fire way to lose your joy.
- 3. God is a full-time teacher.** Every moment of every day of our lives, God is in the process of teaching us and transforming us. Once again we see the importance of viewing our circumstances biblically. We must learn to set aside our first instinctive reaction which is usually, "God change my circumstances so that I will have joy". A better prayer is "Lord, help me learn what you want me to learn through these circumstances, and let me experience your joy in these circumstances". Paul learned he could have joy regardless of the circumstances (Philippians 4:13).
- 4. Think Eternally.** All that we experience in this life, whether pleasant or difficult, lasts for but a moment when compared to eternity. The old chorus goes, "It will be worth it all when we see Jesus, life's trials will seem so small when we see Christ". Paul was completely

plugged into this truth when he wrote “for me to live is Christ and to die is gain” (1:20-21). The Bible constantly calls us to fix our minds on eternity, and those who lack joy probably spend most of their time fretting about the past, worrying about tomorrow or thinking only about today. Remember, our citizenship is in Heaven (3:20).

5. **My trials can be a blessing to others.** Similar to the first point, I must see that life doesn't revolve around me. God may have a larger purpose in my difficult circumstances which will include other people being blessed. Paul understood that his imprisonment was being used of God to help others (1:12-14) and what great joy this brought Paul. God never wastes our pain.
6. **God will meet my needs.** Sometimes I confuse needs with mere wants. God never makes that mistake. Sometimes I think that having my needs met depends on the actions of other people. My deepest needs are God's deepest concern, and He supplies the needs (Philippians 4:18) in His perfect time. The meeting of my truest needs does not depend on how other people treat me.
7. **My identity in Christ.** Paul never ceased to marvel at the fact that he had been saved by God's great mercy, grace and love - and this came at such a great price to God (the death of His Son, 2:6-8). Being joined to Christ, both now and for all eternity - imagine that! Do you want true joy? Don't just give your salvation an occasional passing thought; meditate on it frequently. Notice that Paul called the Philippians "saints" (1:1). This means that God sees us as being holy because we have been united to Christ. Our standing with the Father is based upon the perfection of the Son.
8. **Joy is not primarily a feeling.** This confuses people because we tend to think of joy as an emotion. Joy has emotional aspects, but it primarily is a perspective; a way of looking at things from God's point of view. This perspective is a choice of the will. There are times of difficulty and trial when our emotions threaten to crowd out joy, but God Himself will provide the blessing of His strength in order that we might have joy. Don't forget that joy does not always operate with an on/off switch. Sometimes, it involves a process (Psalm 30:5b).
9. **Relationships matter.** The Holy Spirit of God desires to build unity between believers. So important are Christ-honoring relationships that we grieve the Spirit when we break or hurt relationships with fellow believers (4:2-3). God will withhold giving us the full measure of His joy when we sin against others. If you are lacking that deep abiding joy, take a close look for damaged relationships you have left un-mended.

**10. Disobedience and joy can't co-exist.** Philippians makes a direct connection between true joy and living a life that reflects Christ's righteousness (1:9-11). The great work of peace and contentment God wants to work in our hearts is, in some ways, a by-product of the character transformation God seeks in us. The first casualty when a Christian chooses to sin is joy (Psalm 32:1-5, 11; 51:1-4, 12). God sometimes allows us to sin, but He never allows us to have His joy and blessing while we live in sin. Although we need to avoid holding onto false guilt, it is just as dangerous to ignore those things which cause genuine guilt. I believe much of the general unhappiness of Christians, as well as some significant mental distress, is the fruit of sinful choices. On a bright note, the fruit of living a life surrendered to God includes joy and peace (Galatians 5:22).

Much more could be written about Philippians (it took me twelve weeks to teach through it!). I honestly believe that the great promises of this book, the great peace, contentment, joy and strength promised to its Christian readers are readily available but often unrealized. Why? Because those promises rest on a foundation which we have just summarized; a foundation upon which the promises stand. We must build our lives on the right foundation, and true joy will flow from it.

True joy. It is what God wants His children to experience daily. It can make the gospel of Jesus Christ so attractive to unbelievers. On the other hand, if Christians lack true joy why would anyone else want to become one? Many an unbeliever has been needlessly turned off because the Christians they know lack joy. What a shame.

Is true joy a regular part of your life? Or does your joy too often depend on your circumstances? There is one last foundational truth necessary to experience the Philippians promises. I haven't mentioned it yet and it is perhaps the most important truth of all:

**11. There is power in a thankful heart.** Nothing unleashes the power of God in our hearts more spectacularly than genuine thankfulness. Even in the worst of times there are too many blessings to count. Remember Paul's situation when he wrote Philippians? He was in chains, had enemies who hated him with such intensity they wanted to see him dead, and perhaps most painfully, some people within the church were very critical of him. Yet as you read this letter you can't help but notice Paul's thankful mindset (1:3, 1:18, 3:8-9; 4:18). Please understand something about true joy ... we are not talking about self-help psychobabble and the power of the human mind. We are talking about how God's power can work in our hearts through His Word. God is the ultimate source of joy, and He pours that joy into lives that are focused on Him, are consistently giving thanks to Him and are being transformed through His Word.

Do you find that God's joy is only yours some of the time? Do you lack it altogether? Have you known it in the past, but somewhere along the line you seem to have lost it? Philippians is filled with some of the Bible's most precious promises and God wants His children to experience the power and joy of those promises on a daily basis. When you lack that joy, the best thing to do is a self-inventory of the eleven truths discussed here and make any necessary adjustments. God is always ready to bless His children, but as someone once said, "God cannot pour His blessings into hands that are already full."

