

Lesson 8

Serving With Joy

The Joy found in Christ is not dependent on circumstances.

THE LESSON OVERVIEW

Joy is often thought to be tied to one's circumstances, but this lesson reveals this does not have to be true for Christians. Although Paul was imprisoned when he wrote the letter to the Philippian church, he remained hopeful and joyful. He presented himself as an example of how adversity can be faced with an attitude of joy and gratitude. Paul's joy came from seeing what Christ was able to accomplish despite his circumstances. He also wanted the Philippian church to see and experience this, Paul asserted that all Christian can and should serve the Lord with joy regardless of trials or hardships.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In studying Paul's letter to the Philippians, it is important to recognize three important facts. First, Paul established the church at Phillipi (Acts 16:1-10), so he felt a close bond with them. Second, Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter (Philippians 1:13). Last, despite being in prison, Philippians is one of Paul's most upbeat and encouraging letters. In the King James Version of the Bible, this letter contains six occurrences of the word rejoice. Paul listed many of the things that once brought him pride and joy (3:5-6), but when compared to the joy he had in Christ, he counted those things as "dung", v. 8.

THE LESSON OUTLINE

1. PRAYING WITH GRATITUDE AND JOY: Philippians 1:3-11.

- A. The Reason for Paul's Joy (1-8)
- B. The Content of Paul's Prayer (9-11)

2. REJOICING IN ADVERSITY: Philippians 1:12-30.

- A. Seeing God at Work (12-26).
- B. Living Worthy of the Gospel (27-30).

3. REJOICE TOGETHER; EXPERIENCE GOD'S PEACE: Philippians 2:17-18; 4:4-8.

- A. Joy Even in Death (2:17-18)
- B. The Path of Peace (4:4-8)

DISCUSSING THE LESSON

1. PRAYING WITH GRATITUDE AND JOY: Philippians 1:3-11.

A. The Reason for Paul's Joy Philippians 1:3-8

Paul shared the reason for the joy he experienced, whatever his circumstances. To begin, it was because of the “fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now” (v. 5). The word *fellowship* conveys the idea of a close personal connection between Paul and the Philippian Christians. They had established a close personal connection with Paul in His work for the Lord. Because of this and their willingness to join him in carrying out the Lord’s work, Paul expressed his confidence in the Lord’s ongoing ministry in their lives, which brought him much joy (vv. 4,6). Not only did Paul sense their connection with him as fellow laborers in the kingdom of God. He added, “It is right for me to feel this way about you, because [you have me in your heart as] I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the good news [regarding salvation], all of you share in [His matchless] grace with me” (v.7 Amp.).

Paul was able to experience joy even during his imprisonment because he did not feel abandoned or alone. Feelings isolated can often intensify feelings of discouragement and hopelessness, even when circumstances are not particularly difficult. These feelings can be multiplied many times over when coupled with adversity. However, close personal connections with others can have a comforting effect. Paul’s relationship with the Philippian church brought him much joy and comfort even while confined, knowing they cared and were praying for him encouraged Paul, prompting him to write an upbeat letter to encourage and bring them joy.

B. The Content of Paul's Prayer Philippians 1:9-11

After expressing his joy and gratitude for the church in Philippi, Paul shared his prayer for them. He began by praying that their “love may abound yet more and more” (v. 9). It might seem odd for Paul to pray that their love would continue to grow. However, considering Christ’s statement that His followers’ love for one another demonstrated to all others that they are His disciples (John 13:35), Paul’s prayer doesn’t seem out of place. Paul’s prayer for the Christians in Philippi appears to remain focused on the all-important mission of proclaiming the gospel of Christ, which is best accomplished through joy and love.

Paul ties this growth in love to the qualities of knowledge and insight (Philippians 1:9). The type of love he is praying for is not mere sentiment and affection but a love that grows out of knowledge and insight, no doubt a reference to their knowledge of God and insight into His will for their lives. Paul then expressed the expected outcome of his prayer – the church would be empowered to discern what was best in their lives and live according to Christian love and godliness. Paul desired that through their discernment of God’s will, they would bring glory and praise to God, (vv. 10-11). This type of discernment is spoken of elsewhere within Scripture on several occasions: Two prominent examples being Christ’s words to His disciples in John 6:63 and Paul’s words in Romans 8:5-8.

Joy is a blessing God desires and makes available for all His children. Nehemiah 8:10 affirms that the joy of the Lord provides God’s people with strength. Paul mapped out the path to the joy of the Lord in his prayer for the Philippian Christians: Joy comes through loving God and others. This love is based on knowing God and allowing His Spirit to provide insight and discernment into who He is and what He is doing in the world and our lives. This is what we should seek, and what should serve as a model in our prayers for others.

2. REJOICING IN ADVERSITY: Philippians 1:12-30

A. Seeing God at Work Philippians 1:12-16

In these verses, Paul practices what he was praying regarding the Philippian believers: the knowledge and insight to see how God was at work. While it would have been easy for Paul to focus only on his imprisonment and his hardships, he chose to focus on what Christ was doing through his adversity. Some fellow preachers were envious of Paul, while others ministered “from goodwill” (v. 15 NKJV), but Paul rejoiced that the Gospel was being preached, whatever the motive, (v. 18).

The ability to see God’s hand at work while experiencing adversity is a recurring theme throughout the Bible. One notable example is Joseph, the son of Jacob, who spent seventeen years enslaved in Egypt because of his brothers’ jealousy and treachery. Joseph was eventually reunited with his brothers after rising, by God’s grace, to a position of great power within Egypt. Upon discovering that this powerful person with their lives in his hands was Joseph, his brothers were terrified that he might seek revenge. However, Joseph told his brothers were terrified that he might seek revenge. However, Joseph told his brothers not to be afraid because he understood what happened to him was according to God’s plan to save their lives (Genesis 45:3-8).

In addition to seeing God at work during his imprisonment, part of Paul’s upbeat attitude had to do with the fact that death, when it came, was something he could courageously face since it meant he would be present with Christ (Philippians 1:21, 23; see 2 Corinthians 5:6-8). Rather than being afraid, Paul recognized death would provide him with something “far better” (v. 23), which was to be with Christ. Attachment to the things of this world did not constrain Paul. His ultimate desire was to be with the Lord. As a result, even in his situation, which could have resulted in death, Paul maintained a deep sense of joy.

B. Abraham’s Response Philippians 1:27-30

Beginning with verse 27, Paul turned his attention to the conduct of the Philippian believers. He encouraged them to live a manner “worthy of the gospel of Christ” (v. 27 NKJV). They were evidently suffering some type of oppression (v. 28), which may have been similar to what Paul himself, the Philippian Christians may have been tempted to abandon certain parts of their faith and not to be frightened by what they were going through. Key to this exhortation by Paul is the admonition for them to stand together in unity, “in one spirit” (v. 27), in the face of this adversity. Unity is one of the most essential qualities at the heart of the Christian faith because it gives us the strength to endure whatever spiritual opposition we face.

A significant truth on which Paul’s exhortation was based is his acknowledgment that the Philippians Christians had not only been shown God’s grace, which enabled them to believe in Christ, but it also empowered them to suffer for Him, (v. 29). This was no doubt a startling revelation for the Philippian church. It would have been easy for them to think that since Christ suffered on the cross for them, they might somehow have been exempted from suffering, but Paul wanted to make it clear that was not the case. He personally understood, and he wanted to ensure that the church in Philippi also had a clear understanding of this reality. T

In these verses, Paul touches upon two key realities that helped him experience joy in the adversity he faced. First, his love for Christ far outweighed his love for the world, and his desire to be with Christ helped put his suffering into perspective. Second, he understood that suffering is part of life, even for believers. Every believer should seriously consider their views on these two realities because embracing them, as Paul did, can result in experiencing much greater joy during difficult times.

3. REJOICE TOGETHER; EXPERIENCE GOD’S PEACE Philippians 2:17-18; 4:4-8

A. Joy Even in Death Philippians 2:17-18

Once again, Paul exhibited the ability to experience great joy even in the face of possible death: “Yea, and if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all” (v. 17). Paul did not know how his imprisonment would end, but he realized it could result in his death. However, this possibility did not cause him great concern. In fact, the possibility of death seemed to be one reason for his joy because, along with ushering him into the presence of Christ, his death would come as a result of his service to the Lord and represent a sacrificial offering to God.

Paul reminded the Philippian church that their ongoing service to God, even in suffering, was to be viewed as an offering to God. Therefore, like Paul, they should rejoice that they could make such a sacrifice to the Lord. Paul asserted that service to God in the midst of great difficulty and hardship was something to be acknowledged and celebrated. While Paul would certainly acknowledge that all service to God is something to be recognized and celebrated, he indicated this especially true when serving God during times of suffering or personal sacrifice. Paul wanted the Christians in Philippi to understand this truth and rejoice with him not only in his suffering but also in their suffering. Rejoicing during suffering may have sounded counterintuitive to some, but not when coming from Paul.

B. Peace, the Path to Joy Philippians 4:4-8

Paul again encouraged the Philippian believers to rejoice, and then he provided them with a model that could lead them to joy, which is the path of peace during suffering. Perhaps he anticipated their questions about how joy could be experienced while suffering, so he showed them the way. He began by saying, “Be anxious for nothing” (v. 6 NKJV), and then followed up with instructions on how to respond to adversity and difficult situations. In every condition that might cause anxiety or worry, Paul encouraged believers to pray, voice their requests, and give thanks as they came to the Lord. In doing this, Paul assured them that God’s peace was readily available, which is a peace that transcends human explanation. Experiencing this kind of peace leads to the joy Paul described. God’s gifts of joy and peace go together.

Paul then explained how the Philippian believers could put themselves in a better place to experience the peace and joy he described. This had everything to do with what they set their minds on and gave their attention to (v. 8). A related comment by Paul in his letter to the Romans helped provide a bit more insight into what he says here. In Romans 8:6, Paul explained, “For to carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.” In Philippians 4:8, Paul describes those things that believers’ minds should be focused on: “Whatever things are true...noble...just...pure...lovely...are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things” (v. 8 NKJV). Meditating on these positives will lead to much peace and joy in our lives as Christ’s followers.

Joy is available from God through faith in Jesus. The journey to joy is achieved through the proper meditations of our hearts and minds and our interactions with the Lord in prayer, worship, and service. To experience the type of peace and joy Paul presents, we must consider what influences our thoughts and imaginations: conversations we have, things we listen to and watch,

the materials we read, and the influencers we listen to. We find joy when our thoughts align with life in the Spirit, as revealed in the Word of God.

CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

If we desire the type of joy Paul described, we must adhere to his instructions about achieving it. Paul's word in Philippians 4:4-8 provide insight into how this can be done.

MINISTRY IN ACTION

If people in the church are not experiencing joy, we should provide opportunities to pray with and for one another. The joy of the Lord is our strength, so we should encourage joyful faith in one another.

WORKSHEET

Paul's Four Letters From Rome, AD 62-63

The Apostle Paul, While in Rome, Wrote Letters to the Colossians, Philemon, and the Ephesians in the summer of AD 62, and the letter to the Philippians in the spring of AD 63. (Some have surmised Philippians was written at Caesarea in Samaria, or in Ephesus, but Rome as the place it was written is well established.)

During His Two Years at Rome, late spring of AD 61 to summer of AD 63, the Apostle Paul resided “in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him” (Acts 28:30-31 NKJV).

People Often Refer to This as “Paul’s First Imprisonment at Rome,” but what they fail to say is that he was not in a prison. He was living in a house he rented, in the custody of the Roman government, protected from enemies who would have killed him, with complete freedom to conduct his ministry to all who came to him.

When Paul Concluded His Third Missionary Journey, he traveled to Jerusalem, to be there for the Jewish festival of Pentecost in the late spring of AD 58 (Acts 20:16). In Jerusalem, near the end of his seventh day of going to the Temple daily, Paul was assaulted by an angry Jewish mob determined to kill him, but he was rescued by Roman soldiers (21:17-33).

When the Commander of the Roman Soldiers learned Paul was a Roman citizen, he was provided the protection of the Roman Government (22:27-28). Then, he was kept in protection from more than forty Jews who had taken an oath to murder him (23:11-35). Later, Paul remained in the protective custody of the Roman Government by his own request (Acts 25:10-12; 26:31-32).

By the Time Paul arrived in Rome, Spring of AD 61, he had been held in the protective custody of the Roman Government in the Roman fortress at Caesarea in Samaria for more than two years (23:33-34; 24:23, 27), and he had spent several months traveling to Rome by ship and shipwrecked on the Island of Malta, before traveling on to Rome (27:1-2, 41; 28:1-2, especially v. 16).

Confident Living: Philippians 1:12-28; 4:6-7

1. In Philippians 1:12-14, how did Paul say his “chains” had impacted two groups:
 - “the whole palace guard”?
 - His “brethren in the Lord”?
2. What different motives were leading people to preach about Jesus (vv. 15-17), and why did Paul “rejoice” (v. 18)?
3. What two competing desires did Paul have (vv. 22-23)?
 - As Christ’s followers, why should we have the same two desires, and how can we balance them?
4. What double meaning would it have for the Philippians to stand brave before their opponents (vv. 27-28) and how does this relate to our lives?
5. In Philippians 4:6, what does Paul say about “nothing,” and what does he say about “everything”?
6. According to verse 7, what will result from following the advice in verse 6?