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Experiencing Joy: A Study in Philippians

Joy—It's a Matter of Perspective

Philippians 1:1-11

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It's interesting, when you think about it, how much of what we experience in life really isn't related so much to our circumstances or people, as much as it is related to *how we respond* to our circumstances and people. It's really about our attitude. It's about our perspective.

For example, there are some people who just wear negative glasses. They see everything in life as negative and they're critical and pessimistic. It really doesn't matter what happens—that's just the way they view life. There are other people who tend to be very positive and optimistic. That's how they view life. They maybe go through some very difficult circumstances, but they just tend to stay upbeat and positive.

When we think about this whole subject of joy and what it means to experience joy, there's a temptation to think the difference between those who do and don't (the difference between those who go through life with a positive attitude versus those who go through with this negative attitude) is really all based on circumstances—things we can't control. But the reality is, that just isn't true. I've watched it over the years and it really has very little to do with circumstances and things out of our control. What it has to do with is attitude. It has to do with perspective.

This is a lesson I learned very intensely as a child growing up. My dad had every reason to live life through negative glasses: to live in despair and struggle through life. Every day was a day of pain and suffering for him. Basically his hopes and dreams were taken away, and yet he was one of the most positive, upbeat, happy people I've ever known. As a matter of fact, when people would come to our home to visit, that is the thing they would comment about.

I still hear it. I hear it regularly here in the hallway. Somebody will meet me and say, "I was in your home 25 years ago"... and what they will say most of the time is, "I just couldn't believe how positive and upbeat and joyful your dad was in those circumstances." What I learned early on is that it has very little to do with circumstances and other people. It has everything to do with perspective and attitude. It really has to do with how I choose to respond.

If I'm convinced that the difference between whether I experience joy or don't experience joy is really related to my circumstances or how other people treat me, the reality is I will probably never be a joyful person—because I can't control those things. There are too many elements there that are out of my control, and my chance of really experiencing joy is probably about zero. But if I understand it is really about my attitude and my perspective—how I choose to respond to what life dishes out—then I understand that it is very possible to live a life of joy.

Nearly every New Testament scholar would agree that the foremost book on this whole subject of experiencing joy would be the Book of Philippians. So it is worth noting that the primary book dealing with the subject of joy was written by the Apostle Paul from a prison cell. Paul was not sure if he was going to be released or if he was going to be executed. He

even talks about that in the book. You know, it would be one thing if Paul wrote this book from a penthouse; it's something else that he wrote this book from a prison cell. It is just a reminder right from the beginning that circumstances are not what determine whether we experience joy or not. It's about attitude; it's about perspective.

We're going to spend the next several months studying the Book of Philippians, trying to understand what we mean by that. What do we mean by experiencing joy? And what is this perspective and attitude?

The city of Philippi was what was called a Roman colony. It was a city in Macedonia; and a Roman colony was kind of a Rome in miniature, which afforded significant benefits to the citizens. They basically were given all the rights and privileges of a Roman citizen. So Philippi was a significant city.

The Apostle Paul was headed out on his second missionary journey. He was going to go with Barnabas and they split ways. So he took Silas with him; and pretty soon Luke joined him. They were headed to Asia when the Spirit of God redirected them and said, "I want you to go to Macedonia." They ended up then in Philippi, where Paul had the privilege of leading a wealthy merchant by the name of Lydia to faith in Christ. Right after that, they were thrown in prison; and while in that jail they led the Philippian jailor and his family to Christ. That's where the church in Philippi was born. It met in Lydia's house and was established at that point. You can read the full story in Acts chapter 16.

Paul was then writing this letter back to these believers to discuss some significant things that they needed to know. We have just finished our study of Galatians, which is a hard-hitting, 2x4 between the eyes-type of a book. There were a lot of military metaphors in the Book of Galatians. But the Book of Philippians is very different. It's very warm; it's very shepherding; it's very pastoral. Yet, these two books go together very well, and we'll see that as we go through this study.

Paul opens in Philippians 1:1 by saying, "Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus." It was common in the first century to open a letter with a statement of who the writer is. Today we put that at the end. Have you ever started to read a letter and skipped to the end thinking, *I wonder who wrote this?* And then you go back and you read it. In the first century they always put the writer at the beginning. So Paul identifies himself as the writer. Timothy is more his companion than a fellow-writer.

But then Paul refers to himself as a bond-servant. Literally in the Greek it is a bond-slave of Christ. Now it would be easy to skip past this and just move on, but this really is one of the main themes, or perspectives, of this book. So it's very important that we don't skip over this but we stop and think about what Paul is saying. As a matter of fact, I'd go so far as to say that if we don't understand this perspective of what it means to be a slave to Christ, we have no hope of experiencing joy. None! So it's very important.

In the first century they were very familiar with slavery. So this wasn't just a theological metaphor; this was reality on a day-to-day basis. They understood that the slave was subject to the master: whatever the master wanted, that's what the slave did. And it was the master's agenda, not the slave's. What was important to the master is what, then, needed to be important to the slave—that's the way it worked. The slave was never out there just doing his own thing, hoping the master would somehow approve of that.

So when Paul says that he is a slave of Jesus Christ, that's exactly what he means. He understands that Jesus is in control. Jesus is the Master and Paul is the slave. Whatever Jesus wants to do, that's what Paul does. So it is Jesus' purpose—not Paul's agenda—that matters. And what's in the heart of Jesus is what needs to be in the heart of Paul. That's what he's saying there.

Now when you stop and think about it, oftentimes we get this backwards, don't we? I mean, if you think about your own Christian faith, do you really view it from the standpoint of thinking, *I am a slave to Jesus Christ and whatever He wants or asks—whatever His purpose and agenda is—that's what I'm going to live for?*

Oftentimes we kind of turn this thing upside down and we start to think, *You know, what really matters is my agenda, and God is kind of there to serve me. God is there to help me accomplish my agenda and put a blessing on it.* And when God doesn't do His thing, then we get upset and we feel like He isn't fair. We would never say that Jesus is our slave, but that is really how we think far too often.

So to regain this perspective that Paul is talking about is very important. As I mentioned before, when Paul went to Philippi he was preaching the Gospel and found himself beaten and thrown into what Acts 16 calls the deepest, darkest part of the prison. He was chained in shackles. And you know what he did? He just pouted. He sat there and he pouted, saying, “Where is God in all of this? I'm out here preaching the Gospel, and God seems to have abandoned me. I end up thrown in prison; life isn't fair....” No, that's not what he did at all! As a matter of fact, Acts 16 says they were singing and praising God!

Now that's a strange response, but it happened because Paul understood, *Jesus is the Master; I'm the slave. And He has called me to go to this place and preach—so that's what I did. If in the process I get beaten and thrown in prison, then that's His business. I'm just going to do what I'm told.* He really understood that and He lived it out.

I would say that was at the heart of how my dad lived his life. There wasn't a lot of, “Woe is me and why does it have to be this way?” It was just simply him believing, *My call is to be obedient. If this is what God asks from me, then that's fine. And if He asks me to suffer, that's fine.*

Now we don't like that...we really don't. We want to push back on that and just believe that if we really commit to Jesus, life isn't going to be that way. All I can tell you is, these were two men who understood what it meant to be a slave to the Master and every day was filled with joy. Is your life filled with joy? It comes from a perspective; it comes from an attitude.

The second thing a typical first-century letter would do is identify the recipients. Paul says, “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi.” Remember, a saint is not a super Christian; a saint is a Christian. This word shows up over 60 times in the New Testament. It's just a word to describe those who have trusted Christ as Savior. The word literally means “to set apart”—to set apart *from* the world; to set apart *to* Christ—saints.

“To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” We talked about this a lot in the Book of Galatians, that when you really understand grace, it leads to peace. When you understand it's God doing the work, then there's a peace that settles in your heart.

Starting in verse 3, then, he gets into the meat of the letter. “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer *with joy* in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now.” The verb tenses really say that Paul was praying for the Philippians all the time—that’s who he thought about. It is interesting that sitting in prison, he really didn’t think much about himself; he thought about others.

He was thinking about the Philippians and he was praying for them. Paul said that when he did that, there was a joy that filled his heart. Why? Because of their “participation in the gospel.” That word “participation” is the Greek word “koinonia.” Usually we translate it “fellowship.” It means that they had fellowship with the Gospel—which means they owned it; they believed it; they had the truth in common with their lives.

Paul says that’s true “from the first day until now,” meaning they had passed the test of time. He was convinced of their conversion. Sometimes people hear the message of the Gospel and it sounds really good, but in the weeks that pass it just seems to kind of fade away and nothing really happened. But truth and time go together. And oftentimes it’s just through the passing of time that it becomes evident whether someone has really embraced the message of the Gospel or not. Paul says, “From the first day until now, it has become very obvious that you have fellowship with the Gospel. You’ve owned it. It has become yours. You are saved; you have been genuinely converted.”

Paul says this is what puts joy in his heart, because this is Paul’s mission in life, which is the mission of the Master. The mission of the Master is to proclaim the Gospel, to see lives radically transformed for eternity. Now imagine if Paul’s mission in life, his agenda, was to be comfortable...or to have a big bank account...or to have everybody like him...or to have life just kind of work out with health, wealth and prosperity. If that had been his mission, he would have been in despair. But his mission in life was the mission of Jesus, because he was the slave of Christ. And what mattered to him was that these Philippians had embraced the message and their lives had been radically transformed.

Verse 6: “For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.” One of the things that was so exciting to Paul, and that put this joy in his heart, is that he knew if these people were genuinely converted—if they had truly embraced the message of the Gospel—then God would be faithful to complete the work that He had started. In other words, it was as good as done. There wasn’t fear in his heart that maybe it wasn’t going to last or maybe it wasn’t real. But he said, “I have confidence that He who started the work *is going to be faithful to complete it.*”

That word “began” is an interesting word in the Greek language. It seems like a very ordinary word in English, but it’s worth noting that this Greek word only shows up two times in the entire Bible. Once is right here in Philippians 1:6—“He who began....” It’s a word that means “to inaugurate”—He *started*. Guess where the second time is? Galatians 3:3, when Paul said, “You foolish Galatians! If this whole thing started [*began*—there’s our word] by faith, what makes you think it can be completed by the flesh?” It’s really the same thing that Paul is saying in Philippians 1:6: “If it was *started* by God, then it’s going to be *finished* by God.” Paul says it in a very positive fashion in Philippians 1:6: “He who began a good work...will be faithful to complete it.”

Think all the way back to grade school. Do you ever remember being in a race—whether it was in PE or wherever—and no matter how hard you tried, you just couldn’t be the fastest?

It was frustrating because you knew, *I will never be fast enough to win*. That's how a lot of people feel about their Christian life. They just feel that same feeling and they look around and say, "You know, I feel like no matter how hard I try, I'm just never going to make it. I'm never going to be fast enough." We feel that in life, no matter where it is—out in the marketplace or in school—we realize that's a reality. Most of us are just kind of average. And we're confronted with that all the time.

But here Paul is saying, "You know, there is one place where you have a guarantee that you're not going to come up short—you're just not. That's because it isn't really about you and your abilities; it's about 'He who began a good work...is going to be faithful to complete it.' He is going to do whatever He has to—whatever is necessary—but He is going to get you there. Promise."

Some of you this week may have had a lousy week spiritually. You may be feeling like you did in that race, *You know, I'm just a lousy Christian and I'm never going to get this thing figured out*. You need to listen to what Paul said, because he says, "Yes, you are. He who began it is going to be faithful to complete it. He is going to get you there—guaranteed—to the finish line."

When I look at each one of my daughters, I have absolutely no question that each one of them has embraced the truth of the Gospel. It has been tested with time. I know that. So what I know for a fact is that they are going to get to the finish line: they are going to be completed in Christ. It's not "might be," not "could be," not "I hope." They're there! And it's not me and it's not even them. So I don't have to try and force it or manipulate it. I just have to fulfill my role by understanding He who started it is the One who's going to finish it. That really helps me in how I view what's happening in the lives of my children. It's true of all of us. He started it... He's going to finish it! It's a great promise.

It also reminds me that my salvation *is* eternally secure. Look at what the verse says: "He who began a good work...*will be faithful*." Not "might be," not "could be," not "should be." It says, "*will be faithful to complete it*." Therefore, if my salvation does not come to completion, who ceased to be faithful? Not me. God. *He* will be faithful to complete it. So if I could lose my salvation, He's the one who failed to be faithful. The verse says, "He started it; He's going to finish it; you can take it to the bank." It's a very strong statement.

Verse 7: "For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all [*he's talking about his joy*], because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me." "Partakers of grace"—that's our word "koinonia" again. It means that we are fellow partakers in the Gospel of grace. God is doing this in our lives.

What Paul is saying is that his mission in life is to fulfill the mission of the Master—and that is to proclaim the message of the Gospel in order to see these lives transformed. That's what matters to him. That's what's bringing him joy, because that's really what life is about...because that's what God cares about. But in the process of sitting in prison, it would be possible to think, *You know, is this really true? Is this really real...what I dedicated my life to? Is it really authentic?*

Then Paul starts hearing these stories back from Philippi and he says, "It's right for me to feel this joy in my heart, because you're reminding me that, yes, it is real; it is life-changing. Your lives are being transformed." He's getting the reports back and he says, "I know that we're partakers of the grace of God."

When he talks about his defense of the Gospel, it's a Greek word from which we get our English word "apologetics." It means he stood before the courts and made his defense. It's a legal term. He says, "I stood there and I defended that this Gospel is true." Remember, Paul is not in prison for burglary: Paul is not in prison for stealing a chariot. Paul is in prison because he preached the Gospel. He stood before the courts and he said, "I want to tell you, I'm going to defend this thing. It's true."

"The defense and confirmation..."—that's also a legal term meaning "I guarantee you it's true." You stand before the judge and you say, "I'm telling you it's true." So he said, "When I stood before the courts, I stood there and I defended that the Gospel is true. I guarantee it." He said, "What put that in my heart is that I thought about you. I thought about how this message has radically transformed your life; and I know beyond a shadow of a doubt it's real and it's true." And if Paul has to die for it, he says, "So be it. It's something worth dying for."

After 20 years of ministry, there is no way that anyone could ever convince me that the message of the Gospel is not true. I have just seen too many lives radically transformed—not for a day, not for a week, not for a year—but for a lifetime. I've seen it over and over and over and over again. I know without even the slightest doubt that it is real. It is authentic. It is the power of God unto salvation. That's exactly what Paul is saying.

Verse 8: "For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus." In other words, Paul is saying that he longs for them because Jesus longs for them. What's in the heart of Jesus is what's in his heart. What matters to Paul is what matters to Jesus; and what matters to Jesus is people. Jesus really isn't about buildings; He's really not about budgets; He's really not about bank accounts; He's really not about titles; He's really even not about comfortable lives and all of that. What He's about is people. He gave up His own life on the cross for the sake of people. And what He wants is for people to hear and embrace the message of salvation—that they might know this life in Jesus.

And because that's what is in the heart of the Master, then that's what is in the heart of the slave. And so sitting in a prison cell, Paul isn't thinking, *Woe is me*. He's not thinking about himself. He's thinking about the mission—which means he's thinking about people—and he takes great joy in the fact that these people's lives are being transformed and that they will make it to the finish line.

It's very important for me as a pastor to keep remembering, *This is about people. It's not about budgets; it's not about buildings; it's not about anything else—it's about people. It's not about me and my ego. It's not about me trying to meet some unmet need in my life. It's about people.* How many churches have been destroyed because the leaders forgot it was about people?

Several years ago Patti and I went to South America. We went to Georgetown, Guyana. Before we went there, I had in my mind a picture of Georgetown—and I missed it by a mile. Georgetown is a very dirty, third-world city that has no real redeeming value that I could find. There's no reason to take a vacation there. It's on the ocean, but the ocean that comes in there is brown and dirty and smelly. It's not a pleasant place. So I asked the missionaries, Ken and Karen Glover, "What is it that you like about Georgetown?" And they didn't hesitate for a minute. They said, "We love the people." And I thought, *Well, duh... this isn't a vacation!* God had put within their heart a love for these people. There was no other reason to be there.

A couple years ago Kerry Petersen and I were in Thailand. Now Thailand is very different: it's very beautiful. I can think of lots of reasons to be there. I asked Greg Short, the missionary, "Greg, what is it you like about Thailand?" He didn't hesitate. He said, "It's the people. I love these people." God had put within his heart a love for these people. You show me a missionary that's staying for the long haul and I'll show you a missionary that loves those people—because that's what's in the heart of the Master.

But you know, it's no different whether you're a pastor or a missionary or an engineer or a teacher or a student. It's no different. It's about *people*. The agenda of the Master is not about bank accounts; it's not about titles; it's not about egos—it is about people. And it's about people knowing the truth of the Gospel and having their lives radically transformed forever. That is what's in the heart of Jesus. And as His slave, that's what needs to be in our hearts. It's all about people.

Starting at verse 9, Paul enters into a prayer. He says, "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more." The verb tenses there mean that their love was abounding. He just wanted it to abound more. It's a very positive statement.

"I pray that your love may abound still more and more." How? By getting a warm, fuzzy feeling? No, that's not what it says. It says, "more and more in real knowledge"—which means to know the truth and to grasp it, to own it as your own. "And all discernment" means to live out the truth, what we often call wisdom; it's skillful living based on the truth.

Why? Verse 10: "So that you may approve the things that are excellent." That word "approve" is a word that has two parts to it. It means "to approve or to test," but then also "to identify as having been tested." It was used to test coins. A coin would come and they would determine if this coin was authentic or not. But once it was tested, it would be identified as authentic: it's good; it's good to go. The word "excellent" basically means the same thing. It's a Greek word that meant "to separate that which is superior from that which is flawed." And so you separate out the excellent from the flawed. In that phrase Paul is saying that we abound in love by knowing what's true, by living what's true—in order to understand what is of value and what isn't, what is worth living for and what isn't—and we separate those out.

Why? "In order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ"—in order that we may live out what God is doing in us. That word "sincere" is a word that literally means "to be exposed by sunlight." Sunlight is brutal in terms of what it exposes. Have you ever cleaned the windows at home and thought everything was clear? And then the sun comes through and you realize they look terrible. I've recently been trying to fix the rust on my truck. I did all four fenders and got it all fixed. Then I painted it and clear-coated it. And I thought, *You know, for a rookie it looks pretty good!* But then I got out in the sun. The sun is brutal! I'm thinking, *Man, where did all those come from?* I could see every place I had worked on it. If you've ever done dry walling, it's the same thing. It looks perfect, and then the sun hits it and you're thinking, *Where did that gremlin sneak in and make all those marks on the wall?* Well, that's what the Greeks understood; that's what the word "sincere" meant. It meant that the sun could penetrate into your heart and it would show no blemishes—it would be pure.

And then "blameless" is a word that just simply means that it's lived out. That purity of heart is lived out in your behavior.

Verse 11: "Having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God." Notice it is passive in the verb: "having been filled."

In other words, I didn't fill myself with the fruit of righteousness. I've *been* filled. You could take the entire Book of Galatians and you could put it in Philippians 1:11—because that's what the book is about. It's about the fact that I haven't accomplished this, but it has been done for me. I am being filled with the fruit of righteousness. Ultimately then, God receives the praise and the glory. I have nothing to glory in, because I didn't do it. He's the only one who can receive the glory.

So Paul is praying that their love would abound—because they know the truth and they live that out, in order to separate out that which is worth living for, from that which isn't worth living for. He prays that they would have within their hearts a pure heart and that they would live that way, which would be consistent with what God is doing in them: He is filling them with the fruit of righteousness.

All of that has to do with Paul's perspective. It has to do with Paul's mission. It has to do with what he cares about in life, what he has given his life to. And this is everything that he has dedicated his life to.

As we open this study in the Book of Philippians, with this theme of experiencing joy and what that means, it's very important right from the beginning that we give some serious thought about what it means to be a slave of Christ. Everything in the opening section of Philippians is related to Paul's perspective. The reason that brings him joy is because he understands that Christ is the Master and he's the slave. He understands what matters to Jesus, and that's what matters to him. And ultimately, accomplishing *that* is what life is all about. He has separated out that which is worth living for, from that which isn't; and that's ultimately, then, what's producing the perspective that's bringing him joy.

We really need to ask ourselves: What does it mean to be a slave of Christ? What does it mean that, day in and day out, He's in charge? It's His agenda; it's His purpose. It's not about me; it's not about my agenda; it's not about my comfort. It's about Him.

It's understanding that ultimately what is on the heart of God is people: that people might know the truth and respond to the truth and have their lives radically changed forever. That's ultimately what matters. That's what we live for. That's the source of our joy. It's not about the circumstances. It's not about how other people treat me. It's about my attitude. It's about my mission. It's about my perspective.

If we don't understand what it means to be a slave to the Master, we have no hope for joy. There is no hope—because that's the perspective, the foundation, that allows us to experience joy.

Our Father, we are thankful that You are a faithful God. Lord, we're thankful that You make it possible for each one of us to experience joy regardless of circumstances, regardless of how other people treat us. Lord, it starts by understanding that this life isn't about me and my agenda and my preferences—that it's about You. It's about Your purpose. It's about what's in Your heart—and then dedicating our lives to be slaves of Christ. Lord, help us to understand what that really means. In Jesus' name, Amen.