

March 1/2, 2003

*Experiencing Joy: A Study in Philippians*

## **The Joy of Faith**

**Philippians 3:1-11**

Pastor Bryan Clark

All of us to some degree struggle with what I call performance anxiety—some to a high degree and some to a lesser degree. Performance anxiety is identifying our worth, our value and our significance with what we do and how well we perform. I would stretch that out to also include what we own, what we possess, and even how we look. Those are all things in our culture that tend to help formulate our view of our value and our worth.

The reason that creates anxiety is because I can never be good enough. I can never perform well enough. Even if I perform perfectly today, what about tomorrow and the next day? There is this constant stress to perform well enough that creates this anxiety.

I think the same thing is true of our spiritual lives. A lot of people and a lot of Christians struggle with performance anxiety before God. There is this feeling that we are not good enough or we don't measure up. We have a feeling that we have to do better, and we constantly wrestle with our failures. Because of that, it is very hard to be intimate with God. It is very hard to be at peace with Him and to just rest in His presence, because we are constantly feeling that performance anxiety.

I would go so far as to say I believe the performance anxiety we experience out in the world is ultimately rooted in the anxiety that we feel before God. In other words, if I can't get it addressed and satisfied in my relationship with God, I stand no chance of addressing it out beyond that.

It is very similar to a child growing up. If you feel like your parents love you and accept you just for who you are, it gives you much more strength to go out beyond that and to deal with the performance issues out beyond the home. If you don't feel the acceptance at home, you stand no chance of really resolving it out beyond that. The same thing is true in our relationship with God. If we don't get it addressed with God, then we will never get it addressed out beyond. The problem is that performance anxiety steals our joy. It is not possible to be a joyful person if you cannot be at rest in the presence of God.

One of the people who struggled with this performance anxiety in his relationship with God, maybe as much as anybody has, would be the apostle Paul. He was absolutely driven. In Philippians 3 he tells a little bit about his story, but he also tells us what it was that finally set him free to experience joy in the presence of God.

I have mentioned before that any time you are interpreting the epistles (any one of the New Testament letters) it is really important that you notice the connectives, words that we otherwise would skip over. We need to pay very close attention to them, because they tell the train of thought and what connects with what. It is equally true that we need to notice those words that seem to bring closure to a train of thought and open us up to a new train of thought.

Chapter 3:1 opens with the word "Finally." That is one of those words that would tell us Paul is starting on another discussion. We have been talking a lot about conduct worthy of the gospel. "Finally" doesn't mean "I am almost done"—because he is only half done. "Finally" is the reason why the chapter break is put right here, because it is the word that tells

us he is moving on to a little bit different discussion. “Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you.”

Paul says to rejoice in the Lord. Now that is an interesting thing for Paul to say, when you think about what he has just been talking about. He has just been in the midst of a very intense discussion involving the reality that, that very day, he may be executed or he may be released. He knows that, and he is waiting hour by hour for that news. He is sending Epaphroditus, I think, at great personal cost to himself; and then he is waiting with Timothy. As soon as Timothy gets the word, Timothy is going to go. This is a very emotional and intense passage, and he flows right out of that by saying “rejoice.” Those are circumstances that would cause most of us to just melt into a pile. Yet Paul is still experiencing joy, because we have talked about the fact that joy is *in the midst of* difficult circumstances, not the absence of. He continues to model that, and now he is commanding the readers, the people in Philippi, and us to rejoice.

What exactly he means by “to write the same things again” is up for discussion. Some people think it means that Paul wrote previous letters that weren’t Scripture, but were just his words of encouragement. Maybe he is just saying the same thing again. Or maybe he is talking about what he taught them when he was there in their presence, and now he is writing it again. What we *can* say with assurance is that this information that follows is something Paul has taught them before. He is saying it is no problem to go over it again, because we need to go over it again as a safeguard. A safeguard to what? To making sure that we experience joy. He is saying, “Rejoice; but there is something I have to tell you again as a safeguard so nobody comes along and steals your joy.”

Verse 2: “Beware of the dogs...” That is quite a change in tone from verse 1. Verse 1 is very pastoral; it is very soothing and comforting. In verse 2 the tone changes immediately. We find ourselves somewhat surprised that Paul is so politically incorrect here. We can’t imagine this world-class pastor and theologian calling a group of people “dogs.” In the first century, that was not a good thing. A dog was a mangy wild animal that carried all kinds of diseases and ate garbage. It was a nuisance that barked and attacked in the streets. So this was a very derogatory statement. Paul is calling some group of people “dogs” and we find ourselves wondering, *Who are these people?*

Secondly, he says to “beware of the evil workers.” He is talking about the same group of people. First he calls them dogs and then he calls them evil workers. We are wondering who these evil workers are. They are probably the pagans. They are probably the secularists. They are all those nasty sinners out there. They are dogs. They are evil workers.

Finally, in the third statement he identifies them: “beware of the false circumcision.” Oh... they are not the secularists. They are not the pagans. They are not those nasty sinners out there. They are the religious crowd, the legalists, the Judaizers. As a matter of fact, the Greek word Paul uses here is “mutilators.” It’s the same word he used in Galatians 6 when he talked about the legalists and called them mutilators. It had to do with this idea of circumcision.

We need to go back and review what we talked about at length in the book of Galatians. The legalists, or Judaizers, were those who taught that there had to be some level of religious performance, religious rituals, that were necessary in order to be acceptable to God, to merit favor with God. At the top of their list was circumcision. They believed that the Gentiles had to be circumcised in order to be acceptable to God.

Going all the way back to Abraham to understand where this whole thing of circumcision came from, we remind ourselves that God had promised a seed that would come through Abraham. It would be his son; and from that son another seed, until eventually the Messiah of the world would come. That was the promised seed. Abraham and Sarah had tried their best to have this son and nothing happened. Finally, when they reached the point in their lives where the Bible describes them “as good as dead” in their ability to have a child, God comes along and says, “Abraham, I am going to do *for* you what you and Sarah cannot do for yourselves. Therefore, I am going to give you a sign of this promise. It is going to be circumcision.”

We remind ourselves of that symbolism. To take the foreskin, that flesh of the male reproductive organ, was symbolic of the fact that in your own flesh—your own ability—you cannot produce this child. Taking the flesh off and discarding it was symbolic of saying that you have no ability to do this yourself. Those days are gone; now it was going to be totally a work of God that was going to produce this promised seed. When Abraham was circumcised and the generations to follow, it was their way of saying, “We believe this. By faith, we believe that God is going to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.” And ultimately that would culminate in a Messiah.

The false teachers, the legalists, came along and basically took what was supposed to be a symbol—that you cannot make yourself righteous in the flesh—and they turned it into a means of righteousness. They made it mean the exact opposite that God intended. They were still telling these Gentile believers that you have to be circumcised and do these religious things to be acceptable to God. But Paul calls them mutilators. He is saying, “You really are not making those people righteous. You are not making them any more acceptable to God. All you are doing is mutilating them.” It is very graphic terminology. These are the joy stealers. They are the dogs, the evil workers. Whether you are reading the New Testament letters or whether you are reading the Gospels, the strongest language of rebuke was always saved for the legalists—the false teachers and the religious crowd who misrepresented the truth. That is definitely true here.

Verse 3: “For we [*meaning the Philippian believers and Paul and his group*] are the true circumcision.” In other words, we are those who believe in the symbolism of circumcision. We believe that it is totally by faith that God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. The identifying marks of the true circumcision are those who worship in the Spirit of God.

When we see the word “worship” we tend to think of gathering like this and worshipping. But that is not the word used here. It is a word that means service. It means to go out and live and serve. We have seen it two other times in the book of Philippians. We saw it in Philippians 2:17 when Paul said, “offering upon the sacrifice and service [*that is our word*] of your faith.” We see it again in Philippians 2:30, talking about Epaphroditus “risking his life to complete what was sufficient in your service [*that is our word*].”

Basically, it is a reminder that worship is not something we do one hour, one day a week. Worship is a way of life. Worship is how we live our lives. Worship is how we work out our salvation, as Paul has said. Therefore, we live our lives every day in a way that is worthy of the God who has saved us. That is worship and that is what Paul is talking about. He is saying that it only happens with the Spirit of God doing His work in and through us. This was the message of the book of Galatians. We cannot do it ourselves. It does not matter how hard you try or how sincere you are. If you do not realize that it is only through the power of the Spirit of God that we can live out our Christian faith, it will never happen. Paul is saying that

one of the identifying marks of a true believer is our dependence upon the Spirit. We no longer believe we can do it ourselves. We believe the Spirit has to do it through us.

Secondly, he says "...and glory in Christ Jesus." The word "glory" is a word that means to boast. We saw it in Galatians 6 when Paul said, "I boast in nothing except for Christ crucified." It is the idea that in order to experience salvation, we have to come to a place in our life where we recognize there is nothing we can do to make ourselves righteous before God. We cannot be good enough. Therefore, in our brokenness and our humility, we reach out and receive the gift of what Christ has done for us. If we believe that, then we have no basis for arrogance. We have no basis for glorying in ourselves, because we did nothing. To be self-glorifying but still believe that we did nothing is to be a hypocrite. Paul is saying if we really believe this, then the glory all goes to God. He did it all. We did not do any of it. Legalists tend to be very self-glorifying.

Thirdly, he says they "put no confidence in the flesh." We are defining flesh the same way we did in Galatians. Flesh means that which I can do apart from the power of God. It may be religious behavior, but it is religious behavior that I do on my own. Paul says we put no confidence in that. We reach the point where we realize that is of no value. He says those are the marks of the true circumcision.

Verse 4: "Although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more." Paul is saying if there is anybody that could look at their religious performance and say that was good enough for God, it would have been him. Paul was driven by religious performance. When Paul was a Pharisee, he was the best of the best. Even these New Testament first-century Judaizers would have known this was true. He was at the top of the heap and they knew that. He is reminding them that if anybody could have performed their way to God, it would have been him. He goes through his resume. In verse 5 he states that he was circumcised on the eighth day, which is just reminding them that he grew up in a very orthodox Jewish home that followed the Law very strictly. He says he was "circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel," which means he was 100% Jewish. He wasn't a Gentile who had converted to Judaism. He was full-blooded Hebrew.

"...of the tribe of Benjamin [*meaning by birthright he was connected to a very significant tribe, very small but very important*]." It was out of that tribe that the first king of Israel came. What was his name? Saul. And what was Paul's name by birth? It was Saul. His parents had identified him very closely with the tribe of Benjamin and the first king of Israel. That was part of his heritage—a part of his resume.

"...a Hebrew of Hebrews" refers to his orthodoxy, but probably more than that, to the fact that he spoke the language. It may seem hard to imagine, but very few Jewish people spoke the Hebrew language in the first century. But Paul had learned this. He still had it as part of his life, and that was a significant thing.

"...as to the Law, a Pharisee." When we see the word "Pharisee" we usually don't think good things; but you have to remember in the first century the Pharisees were highly revered. They were the strictest adherents to the Law. In other words, they were believed to be the most righteous of all. Paul says, "I was a Pharisee. I was in the top crowd. I was A team."

Verse 6: “as to zeal, a persecutor of the church.” Paul believed that the church was offensive to God, so he did not sit on the sidelines and scold them; he went after them. He was not a spectator. He was a player.

Finally, “as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.” Paul says you could look at anything in his life and you could not find anything to point your finger at in terms of his commitment to the Law. In other words, Paul is saying that if you want to talk about somebody who performed spiritually, who performed for God, he was at the top of the list. He was first string; he was the A team. He was as good as anybody, but...

Verse 7: “But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.” Paul shifts into accounting terminology. He is saying, “Those things that I thought were gain (we would say profit) I have had to reckon or count that they were actually loss.” It was not a case where he performed religiously and did such a good job, that he reached a point in his journey where he was almost there and all he had to do was to add Christ and he was there. That is not what he is saying. He is saying just the opposite. After dedicating his life to religious performance, to doing everything that in all sincerity he thought was necessary to somehow make him acceptable to God, he had to reach a point where he realized what he thought was profit was actually nothing but spiritual bankruptcy. After all those years and all that effort, it had gained him absolutely nothing. That is very hard for religious people to accept.

I am sure, for some of you, that is where you are at. Maybe that is what you were taught growing up or maybe that is just what you believed. You had been so dedicated. You had been so religious. It is very hard for you to reach a point of realization that all of what you thought was profit in the eyes of God, is really of no profit at all. You are spiritually bankrupt. But that is where you have to end up in order to gain Christ. God demands that you reach a point where you say, “I did not do any of this. I have no ability in any of my religious performance to make myself righteous before God. It was all Christ.”

But it goes beyond that. Verse 7 is past tense. He had to count all that in his past as lost. Verse 8 is present tense: “More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ.” The Greek word translated “all things” actually means “all things.” It means: everything! He has had to count everything as loss to the extent of even considering it rubbish, which means that which is really expendable, in order to pursue the value of knowing Christ. His understanding of knowing Christ is so much more valuable than anything else.

Remember that when we talk about “knowing Christ” we are not talking about knowing about Him. It is the same Greek word that is used to describe the sexual relations between a husband and wife. It means to know Him intimately. It is what we will do forever in heaven: we will spend all of eternity knowing Christ and we will never exhaust that. It will be the most life-fulfilling and most pleasurable experience one can even imagine. As believers in Christ, we start that journey on this earth; and Paul says that has to be so much more valuable than anything else. Our problem is not that we have the things of this world. Our problem is that we grip so tightly the things of this world—oftentimes more tightly than we value our intimacy with Christ.

If God came along to you today and said, “I would like you to know my Son in such a way that it will change your life; and it will fill your life with pleasure and satisfaction and

more joy than you can even begin to imagine”—would you be interested in that? What if God were to say to you, “In order for that to happen, I am going to have to take your health. I am going to have to take your job. I am going to have to take your money and your possessions. I am going to have to take your spouse. I am going to have to take your child.” See, we don’t like that. We don’t like it because we are saying that some of those things are more valuable to us than ultimately knowing Christ.

I would say it has taken me a long time to get to this place for a variety of reasons. But I honestly believe that today I can say: “God, if you want, you can have it. If you want my spouse, you can have her. If you want my kids, you can have them. If you want my health, you can have it. I will trade it all for knowing Christ.” One of the reasons we hesitate is because we don’t trust God. That is a big part of the equation. There is a part of us that thinks if we do that, then God is going to turn around and say, “Let’s see...”—as if God is somehow abusive. We think God is going to take advantage of that. He is not going to do that. He just wants us to let go. He just wants to be the passion of our lives. He wants to be most important.

The other reason we hesitate is because we believe a myth that if we hold onto it, then we can keep it. That is not true; that’s a myth. We can’t hold onto these things—they are all temporal. They come and go and we can’t change that. As a matter of fact, they are never more safe and secure than when we just let go and we trust God with them.

He goes on and says, “...that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him.” We have seen this word “found” before. It was in chapter 2:8 when Paul says that Jesus was found in appearance as a man. It means that when somebody bumped into Jesus, they would have found him to be a man. He is saying the same thing in chapter 3—that when people meet us, they would find us to be in Christ. They would see the life of Christ now flowing through us. That is a part of what it means to know Him.

Verse 9: “and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law [*meaning from performance*], but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.” Paul says that I may be found in Christ, but it is not on the basis of a righteousness that I merited or performed for. I don’t stand in Christ because of my religious performance or because I keep some religious rule or some religious laws. Rather, it is through faith in Christ. It is the very righteousness from God on the basis of faith.

Paul is again using accounting terms. In other words, he is saying that I looked at my spiritual bank account and I realized I was bankrupt. After all my hard work, after all my goodness, after all my performance, I realized that is all of no profit. I am spiritually bankrupt and there is nothing I can do to change that. Jesus’ death on the cross was payment for my debt, payment for my sin. Therefore, if by faith I believe that and I accept that as my own, then God takes His righteousness and He credits it to my account. So I now stand in His righteousness.

Therefore, this very moment as I stand before God, I stand before Him in perfect righteousness, totally accepted; because it is *His* righteousness. Regardless of how I performed yesterday and last week, and regardless of how I will perform tomorrow, I can enter into the presence of God and I don’t have to perform. I don’t have to have anxiety and fear. I don’t have to be uneasy and restless. I am perfectly accepted in the presence of God.

Understanding this is absolutely necessary to ever experience intimacy, to ever be at rest, and to ever really know joy.

You may say that really sounds arrogant or prideful. It is not; it is actually a statement of brokenness. It is a statement of humility. I am admitting that my account was bankrupt; and it is only the righteousness of Christ that has been credited to my account that is the basis by which I stand in Christ.

The reward of that is in verse 10: “that I may know Him.” In other words, I have the freedom now: the pressure is off and I don’t have to perform. I can just rest in His presence. I can be intimate with Him. I am accepted by Him. I can know Him.

“That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection [*that His resurrection power now begins to flow through me, changing me and molding me, making me into that which I could never be on my own*] and the fellowship of His sufferings.” Paul has already told us that this is not a cruise ship; this is a battleship. I understand that, and I am going to enter into His suffering. I am going to fight the battle. I am going to stand on truth.

“...being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.” That I conform to His death means that I understand He died for me and I enter into that. I believe that. I am conformed to that in order that I might be resurrected to the newness of life—to this new life in Christ.

Paul says that the legalists are joy stealers. They come along and tell you that you are not acceptable to God. They say you have to do this...and this ... and you have got to do that. Because of that, it creates a performance anxiety. We cannot rest in the presence of God. We cannot be at ease in His presence. We just feel like we have to do better. We feel like we let God down—that we are not performing and God is angry and upset and disappointed with us. Paul takes us back and reminds us that is not true. We stand in the very righteousness of God Himself, and that is the basis upon which we know Him and we are intimate with Him. God did for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Many of you may really struggle with this performance anxiety. You are trying so hard and you are very sincere. But therein lies the problem: you are trying to do it yourself. There has to be a brokenness that says, “It is only the Spirit of God that can do this through me and in me.” There has to be a total dependence that it is God and not me in order to truly begin to experience this Christian life that God intended.

It is understanding this truth that is ultimately the message of grace which changes our lives. I have to believe this by faith. I can’t prove it to you. I just have to believe it is true. It is on the basis of that faith that we experience joy.