

March 15/16, 2003

Experiencing Joy: A Study in Philippians

Citizens of Heaven

Philippians 3:17-21

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Last week in our study of Philippians, Paul greatly encouraged us in the text as he reminded us that we are in the process of becoming a champion of God's grace. Paul told us that we need to embrace and to lay hold of the purpose for which we were "laid hold of." In other words, we're just to believe that God is doing this magnificent work in us and in what we are becoming. We are to believe that and embrace it.

We forget what lies behind and we press forward. We press on for the prize—"the upward call"—for that moment when Jesus calls us before the judge's stand and crowns us as a champion because of what He has made us to be. Therefore, on the good days we celebrate. We celebrate what God is doing. And on those lousy days, we get up and say, "I won't settle for this; I can do better." And we press on... and we press on... and we press on.

But sometimes in the process of all of this, we may feel the way I often felt when I was back in Los Angeles driving a tow truck. When I was going to school in California, I drove a tow truck in the L.A. area for a station that had the AAA license. About 80% of our calls were AAA, and the AAA rule required that when you took a call you had 20 minutes to be at the site. If you weren't there in 20 minutes your station would get a demerit. And if the station got too many demerits, they would take their business elsewhere.

It really wasn't a problem unless you would get multiple calls, because you didn't get 20 minutes for the first call and then an extra 20 minutes for the next. You just had 20 minutes from the time you took the call. So if you were enroute to one call and you received three other calls on the way, you would have just 20 minutes to make it to that last call. That's when it got a bit frantic.

Since there wasn't a real margin for error in those situations, there was this problem that led to a regular sense of frustration. That is, if you've ever been in southern California, you realize whoever laid out all the streets was apparently "on something" when he did that, because nothing makes sense and nothing is straight. It's hard to tell an east/west from a north/south address because they just wind all over the place. What was most frustrating was when you finally did find the street and you were closing in to where you had to be, that sometimes the expressway came through and cut off the street, so there was no way to get through. It's not like you could just 4-wheel it up over the expressway and down. There were multiple times where I would hit that, and sometimes visually I could see my tow, but I didn't have any idea how to get there. I knew where I needed to be, and time was up... but I wasn't there.

Sometimes I think that's the frustration we feel in our spiritual life. We say, "Okay, I believe this. I know that I need to press on and I know the goal. I know where I'm headed." But where we often get stuck is in the "how." I say, "Okay, I get up and I press on, but I'm not sure how. I'm not sure what to do. I'm not sure what this looks like lived out. Tell me how to do this!"

I think Paul anticipates that, and he deals with it in a very practical section that ends Philippians chapter 3. Paul has taught us this magnificent truth: that laying aside his religious performance and what he tried to do to make himself righteous, he simply by faith believed

that Jesus died on the cross for his sins. He says that when we take that step of faith, God applies the righteousness of Jesus to our account, to where we stand in perfect righteousness before God. That's called positional truth.

Therefore, because that's true, Paul says, "I haven't arrived yet; I'm not complete. But I'm on this journey. I'm 'in process.' Therefore I press on." And the last thing he told us is that to the level we understand this truth, then we should live like it. He then anticipates the reader saying, "Okay, I get that. But how? How do I do this?"

That's where, starting in verse 17, he says, "Brethren, join in following my example and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us." That's Paul's answer to the "how"—he says to find somebody you can follow, who can be your example. It's what we might call mentoring in order to help us understand how these great theological truths are fleshed out in everyday life.

The word "walk" in verse 17 is a Greek word that lines up with the Hebrew model of education we talked about a couple weeks ago. We talked about the fact that the Hebrew people had no concept of head knowledge. Their educational model was: if you don't live it, you don't know it. And this word "walk" really captures that same thing. Paul is saying that if you know it, then you live it. This walk is just a living out of this truth.

Paul puts himself forth as a pattern, an example. Now at first glance, we might think that's rather arrogant. But it really isn't arrogant at all. As a matter of fact, it's a very consistent biblical pattern. God made us in such a way that this is how we learn. In 1 Corinthians 11:1 Paul said in essence, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ." When Jesus was with His disciples, he did not teach them in a classroom. He taught them out in life. Most of the teaching moments were moments that just flowed out of experiences in real life. And in some cases Jesus would even say, "Okay, I did this as an example that you would do as I have done." Jesus understood this principle—that this is how we're made, to follow a pattern or a model. Rather than seeing what Paul says as arrogance or pride, we realize that he is simply affirming that we are made this way. God expects those who are spiritually mature to provide a pattern or model for those who are coming along behind, because that's how we learn best.

I don't think any of us would probably be real comfortable standing up in front of the congregation and saying, "If you want to know how to be like Christ, just follow me. Let me be your pattern. Let me be your model." None of us would be comfortable with that. But the reality is we need to face the fact: that *is* our responsibility. Whatever it is that would cause you to hesitate to stand before people and say that is what you need to deal with. In other words, if we cannot say that, we need to clean up our lives. We need to deal with whatever is there that keeps us from being able to say, "Follow me; be like me." For good or for bad, they *are* going to follow and they *are* going to see us as a model or an example, so we need to take that role very seriously.

This shouldn't be hard for us to understand, because I think we learn almost everything this way. I've mentioned to you before that for some reason I got it in my head that I wanted to learn to train a horse. So I bought this one-year-old horse, and I'm in the process. And for the most part, it has gone well since we last chatted about this. We had one little rodeo, where he launched me and I limped for a week, but now I'm okay. For the most part, we're making progress.

I've read a lot of books and magazines about training horses. But the thing that has helped me the most, by far, is watching people who know what they're doing. It helps me understand how what I've read in these books and magazines actually plays out in the real training of the horse. That's where I've actually learned most of my information, because there's nothing like just watching it.

The same thing is true, for example, if you think about a doctor who goes to medical school. They pump all this information into that doctor's head, but they don't just then turn him loose on patients. They have an internship that takes them from the classroom to the laboratory. You wouldn't want a surgeon who read it in a book and then just went out there and tried it. They're under a mentor, and they watch and see how it's done. They take the information they've been taught and begin to process it into real life.

If you want to learn how to be an effective businessman or woman, you find someone who knows how to do it. You watch them and learn from them to see how these principles work out in the real world. If you want to learn to drive, you need someone to learn from. How many of us tell our kids to just read the manual, and when they turn 16 we turn them loose? There's got to be time behind the wheel where they learn and they are mentored so they have some time to process all of this.

Well, I don't think there's anything more complicated than the living out of our Christian faith—of trying to understand these magnificent truths and how they flesh out into life. What we need is someone to model that for us. We need someone to mentor that to where we can look and say, “Okay, I understand that. Now I see how that works. I understand how this theology fleshes out in how I treat my wife and how I raise my children and how I operate out in the marketplace.” That is how God has made us, and that's what Paul is saying.

There's a process that we go through, and the first step in that process is *understanding*. In order to get this truth into our lives it starts with understanding, and then it moves to a point of belief. Once I understand it, then I have to choose to *believe* it. And then it moves to a process of *application*. Now, most of my job in this arena has to do with understanding. In this environment I'm trying to help us understand what God has said, and from that we push to belief. You aren't going to believe something you don't understand. Once you understand, you have to believe.

But where this environment really is very ineffective is in the application of that. I can flesh it out in my own life and I can talk in generalities. But to understand what this really looks like lived out in life, this isn't the environment for that. That is why we become very intentional in placing people into LifeGroups, or small groups, because that is really the laboratory. That's where you take these truths you begin to understand and you ask questions and discuss and see it modeled and lived out. Then you can say, “Okay, I see how this truth now starts to work its way into life.” That's the environment where the application process needs to happen.

We want to be like smoothies, not like hot dogs. (Now this is getting very deep here.) Too many times we're more like hot dogs. By that, I mean that I come in and I have my hot dog in the bun, and this week I'm going to squirt some ketchup on it. Then I bring the hot dog back next week and I'm going to squirt some mustard on it. I bring the hot dog back the next week and I'm going to put some relish on it... and then I put some onions on. I just keep

piling more and more stuff on top of the hot dog. But it never really makes it down into the hot dog. Everything is just piled up on top.

That is what so often happens: we get layer after layer after layer of information when we come in. It all just gets layered on top, and it gets so thick that pretty soon we can't taste anything anymore.

The alternative to that is becoming a smoothie, where you take all these ingredients and put them in a blender, push the button, and they all get mixed together. Now, that's a very different picture than all this stuff layered on top. It is mixed in and it all becomes one—to the point where that's how I live, that's how I think, that's how I process life. That's just who I am because it's been worked down into the very fiber of my being.

One of the questions we need to always ask when we've learned truth is: "What does this truth demand of me?" In other words, if this is true, and I understand it and I believe it, then this truth makes some demand on me. What do I have to change? What do I have to address? What do I need to *do*?

The problem is, sometimes we stop asking those questions. We just walk away with another ingredient on top of our hot dog and we say, "Oh, that was nice..." and by Monday we're just off on our way again, waiting until next week.

I've noticed something over the years. Most new believers (let's draw the line at about year five—those who have been Christians less than five years) don't have any problem asking that question. As a matter of fact, that is where they live. They're passionate; they drink it up. Every week they are saying, "Okay, yeah, I understand that...and I need to change this...and I need to address this." They are in this mode of growth and they're very good at processing that.

But those of us who have been Christians a long time, often somewhere along the way we stopped asking that question. We have decided that we're pretty much okay, and we're kind of on autopilot and just cruising. I mean, really, when was the last time you walked away having learned something in God's Word and said, "Wow, that's true! Something needs to change; something's got to be different. I have to do something with that!" Oftentimes we just stop doing that, and because of that we stop growing.

Paul is putting himself up before these people as the model, the pattern. Think of the things he has taught them. In chapter 1 he talked about his passion for advancing the gospel—that's what he lives for. He understands, as a believer, that he didn't get on a cruise ship; he got on a battleship. This isn't about comfort and convenience; this is about getting a job done. Therefore, no matter what happens, he processes it through this grid of, *How does this advance the gospel?* So he says, "I'm even joyful sitting in a prison cell because the gospel is being advanced. I don't care if I live or die; because if I live, I'll advance the gospel. And if I die, the gospel will be advanced all the more."

Stop and think about that. Is that *really* your passion—to advance the gospel? Or have you been a Christian so long that you're not in the trenches anymore and that really isn't your passion; you don't think that much about it, and you're really not processing life that way?

Paul talked about conduct worthy of the gospel, and he defined that in part by a serious commitment to unity—which basically means that I will agree to be treated unfairly. It means I will be willing to not return evil for evil, but rather I will extend grace and forgiveness;

because what is more important than my feelings is the unity of the body in order to advance the gospel.

He talked about the fact that we are to think of others as more important than ourselves. We are to have the mind of Christ that caused Jesus to leave the glories of heaven to become a man ultimately to be nailed to a cross. And Paul says, “Have that same attitude of humility. Think of others as more important than yourselves.” Does that really work its way into your life to the point where it is how you live?

Paul said that we are to work out our salvation, and he specifically mentioned that we are not to be grumblers. I continue to be amazed at how many people are grumblers, and they just don’t know it. They don’t hear it. They just process life through a negative grid, and it doesn’t sink in. If what Paul is saying is true, we’re not supposed to grumble. We’re not supposed to complain. That’s got to go.

I’ve also noticed an interesting thing over the years: people who are new believers, young believers, are not grumblers. They are so excited we can hardly hold onto them. They’re fired up. They’re passionate about what’s going on. Typically in a church, the grumblers are people who have been Christians for a long time who have kind of grown stagnant. They’re not in the trenches anymore; they’re just along for the ride. They wonder why it isn’t what it used to be, and what about this...and what about that? And they just start grumbling.

When I say that, I’m not referring to senior citizens. I’m not saying people who are old. Some of our seniors are the most excited, passionate people we have in the church. I’m talking about people who have been Christians for a long time. You might be 40 years old and have been a Christian for 20 years. But oftentimes we reach this plateau where we tend to just ride along.

You say, “Bryan, you’re being kind of hard on us this morning.” Yeah, I am. I am because I believe what Paul is saying is true—that what this generation needs are people who are models, patterns, examples. And if that is true, then we need models that are growing. We need models that are involved. We need models that are passionate about advancing the gospel. We don’t need bad models; we need positive models.

You know, there are many people in this church who volunteer as much as ten hours (some many more) in a week just for service in the Kingdom. Many of those have been believers five years or less. We haven’t asked for that. They’re just excited. They’re passionate. They can’t get enough. And for some who have been believers for a long time, there’s a tendency to think that everything’s fine—that they are really committed to the cause. But sometimes you need to stop and ask, “Okay, what is the evidence of that? What am I actually doing? In what way am I advancing the gospel? In what way am I in the trenches? In what way am I really providing a model for what these younger Christians need to be?”

Anytime we put forth people as the model, which is the biblical pattern, there’s always a risk. The risk is that people will follow the wrong model and end up more sidetracked than on track. So Paul addresses that in verse 18. He says, “For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ.” Paul uses that word “walk” very strategically. He is saying there are many who walk—meaning they appear to be doing the walk. They appear to be living out this truth and they appear to be good models, but they’re really not.

Who is he talking about? Well, he's saying this is a warning he has given them often. If we go all the way back to chapter 3 verse 1, he was talking about the legalists, and I think that's who he is still talking about. These are the ones that Paul is concerned will lead people astray. These are the legalists of Galatians 1 and 2 who have taken the gospel of Jesus Christ and added their own religious performance to it, to where they have denied the ultimate message of the gospel. These would be those who believe that in their own flesh they have the ability to make themselves right before God.

Those are the ones Paul is talking about here, and he defines them as enemies of the cross of Christ. Now, what he means by that is *not* that these people deny Jesus died on the cross. As a matter of fact, they celebrate that. They would heartily affirm, "Yes, Jesus died on the cross for sin, was buried and raised again," and they love to celebrate Easter. They say that is very important, and as long as you believe that and do this...this...and this, then you will be saved.

We talked about this at length when we went through Galatians, in the first two chapters. Paul said that at the moment we add anything to the gospel of grace, it ceases to be the gospel. It becomes another gospel, which is no gospel at all. In Galatians, Paul said these people become an enemy of the cross. They nullify the grace of God. If God's ultimate purpose in your salvation is to hold you up in the heavenlies as a trophy of His grace, then any belief that you did anything to merit that is offensive to Him. Therefore, the gospel is just our belief by faith that Jesus did it all, and we simply receive it.

These people, the legalists, believe in their own flesh, by their own religious works, they can do it. So they become an enemy of the cross. Verse 19 says we don't follow them because their "end is destruction." If they have denied the one means of salvation—the gospel of grace—then they have no hope. They are headed for destruction.

We don't follow them because their "god is their appetite." That's actually the Greek word for "belly." He says their God is their belly. You ask, "What does that mean?" Theologians sometimes refer to it as the lower nature. It basically means that which comes naturally. Just like hunger and eating is not something anybody teaches us, it just comes naturally. It's this idea that the legalists simply do what comes naturally. They have made their god their own human effort, their own self-righteousness.

There are millions of people in religions all over the world who are convinced they can make themselves righteous before God. That comes naturally; it just flows out of us. It's part of our pride and our arrogance. It goes all the way back to Genesis 3 and the thought, *I can be my own god; I can do it myself*. These people are by nature very selfish because legalism, by definition, is selfish. It's a constant emphasis on me and myself. I'm constantly comparing myself with other people. I'm constantly looking at myself to see how I am following the rules. I'm constantly competing with you to see how I line up in a spiritual lineup.

That's very natural and that selfishness comes very easily to us. Nobody has to teach us that. It's very easy to be a grumbler because we are selfish; that's just who we are. The whole idea of conduct worthy of the gospel is that our behavior is supernaturally driven. It's no longer what comes naturally, but it is empowered by a supernatural conversion. Therefore, it's radically different. Paul says, "Don't follow these people; they're just doing what comes naturally. Their god is their appetite."

He says don't follow them because their "glory is in their shame." He is saying that the very thing these people glory in, which is their own self-righteousness, is their own religious performance. Their performance, which is what makes them believe they are so good, is ultimately the thing that's going to be their shame when they stand before God.

When Paul wrote to the Galatians, he said the legalists need to understand that if they're going to become righteous on the basis of their own performance, then they have to keep the whole Law. It's all or nothing. Legalists are notorious for just picking those laws they want to make into their rules and ignoring the rest. And Paul said they are going to have a surprise when the thing that they glory in (meaning their religious performance) is actually the thing ultimately that will be their shame, when they stand before God and He says, "Sorry, you didn't make it."

Finally, Paul says don't follow them because they "set their minds on earthly things." Now, when he is talking about "earthly things" I think he is talking about the "things" from verse 7. I don't think he is talking about houses and cars and money and those sorts of things. But I think he is talking about the religious things that he had dedicated his life to, and he is saying, "Those things I had to count as rubbish in order to know Christ." Those things that he thought in his own flesh had made him righteous before God—those are earthly things. Those are things that are tied to this earth, because it's simply a performance of our flesh.

Contrast that with what Paul has said about one who has placed his or her faith in Jesus Christ and is in the process of becoming something absolutely magnificent. That isn't earthly at all—it's heavenly. We are in the process of becoming a champion of God's grace. As a matter of fact, that is what he says in verses 20-21: "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself."

When he talks about the fact that these religionists have their minds set on earthly things, he immediately goes to stating the fact, "But that's not us. We're citizens of heaven. Our minds are set on what we are becoming. That's why we're running this race—for the prize, for the upward call!" Think of the contrast between one who is held up as a champion of God's grace versus one who is trying in his own flesh to accomplish this—who is headed to destruction. One is purely earthly on the basis of his own strength; and one is of this magnificent design that is heavenly. As a citizen of heaven we live out that heavenly behavior on earth. It's not something we generate in our own strength and power. It is something that God is doing within us.

Think about this idea of heavenly citizens. In Philippians 1:27, when Paul said, "Conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel," that word "conduct" is the Greek word for citizen. He was saying, "As a citizen, live worthy." Of course he was taking that from the fact that Philippi was a Roman colony and these people believed, as a Roman colony, that they needed to live worthy of that. Paul was saying, "We're not Romans; we're citizens of heaven." And that has been a big theme in this letter: "Live like it!"

Just imagine what behavior and what attitudes are appropriate in heaven. Think about the words that come out of your mouth and ask, "Would that be appropriate in heaven?" What about the attitudes you have—would those be appropriate in heaven? Think about your behavior and what you do with your time and energy and ask yourself, "Does that seem like it would be appropriate in heaven?" In other words, we are supposed to take that heavenly

behavior and live it now on this earth, because that is who we are and that is who we are becoming.

Paul acknowledges the fact that by the power of God, this body of humble state is going to be radically transformed by God to make it into His glory. He is going to complete what He started, which is contrasted with the failure of the religionists to ever accomplish what they thought they were going to accomplish.

The reality is, it is complicated to live on this earth as a citizen of heaven. Many, many Christians are saying, “Show me how!” And what we need are models. We need examples. We need people we can put up as an example and say, “Be like this. This is a person who models heavenly behavior. This is a person who is passionate for advancing the gospel. This is a person who puts others’ interests ahead of his or her own. This is a person who is a model. Follow this person as a pattern; be like this person.” We need models for others, in order that we might conduct ourselves as citizens of heaven.

Father, we’re thankful that You have saved us and that You are in the process of making us something magnificent. We are no longer citizens of this earth. We’re citizens of heaven; and Lord, as such, you call us to live like it.

Lord, there are hundreds of people in this church who model this heavenly behavior on a weekly basis. God, I thank you for them. Lord, I pray for many others, that You would raise them up to be models of what it means to walk with You—that this next generation will have godly patterns they can look at and follow, that they will be mentored to live as citizens of heaven. Lord, we ask this in Jesus’ name, Amen.