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THE JOY OF CHRISTIAN MATURITY

Marks of Christian Growth

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Introduction

Open your Bible if you will to **Philippians 1**. The title of our study this morning is: “The Joy of Christian Maturity.”

A Joyful, God Focused Life

I am so glad to be saved. Where would any of us be without Jesus? The joyful life is the mature life. It’s a life of constant growing and changing. The Bible not only commands Christians to grow, it promises that every Christian will grow in grace and be conformed to the image of Christ.

Peter says, “Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (1 **Pet 3:18**). Paul says in **Romans 8:29** that all Christians are predestined “to be conformed to the image of God’s dear Son.” That means you were meant to grow! The growing life is the joyful life.

The Maple Tree that Would Not Die

Something that brings me joy is when I think about the maple tree that my brother David planted at our home in Oak Forest, Illinois when we were kids. David was so proud of that tree. He planted it and watered it. He watched it grow. My dad wasn’t so fond of that tree. When he noticed it in the corner of the yard, he didn’t want it there, and so he took the lawn mower and cut it down. But David kept watering it. Eventually the seasons changed and underneath the ground during fall and winter and spring, that root system grew. By late spring, my dad just gave up and let the tree grow. Today, that tree is so big, you can see it from the satellite photos. That maple tree refused to die. There was such life in it that it kept growing.

That’s what happened when you came to know Christ. There was a principle of life in you that guarantees that you will grow in God’s grace and into the image of Christ. That’s the joyful life. No matter what is happening. No matter what trials or burdens, you can have joy because God is growing you. He’s making you stronger. If you’ve gone astray, he’s bringing you back. You are God’s child. He’ll never let go of you. That’s the theme of our passage today.

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (1:6).

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul emphasizes joy in the life of the Christian. In fact, he spoke of gladness, joy, and rejoicing some sixteen times (1:4,18,25; 2:2,17,18,28,29; 3:1; 4:1,4,10). The word for joy simply means, “the experience of gladness.”¹ Paul speaks of a Christian joy that is informed by God’s love and sovereignty.

¹ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed.(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1077.

Thus with Paul joy “is an understanding of existence that encompasses both elation and depression, that can accept with submission events that bring delight or dismay, because joy allows one to see beyond any particular event to the sovereign Lord who stands above all events and ultimately has control over them.”²

True biblical joy, is a “quality or attitude of delight and happiness, which is ultimately grounded in the work of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

Let us notice four fruits of joyful living in Christ from the letter to the Philippians.

A CALL TO JOY

The Bible commands us in Philippians 4:4, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”

Paul goes on to say in **4:6-7** to be anxious for nothing and be prayerful and joyful in everything. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Paul is not talking about sweeping our problems under the rug, but having a deep, rich, abiding joy in Jesus. Because of Jesus we can be filled with joy in every circumstance.

Outline

- Key 1: Gratitude (1:3).
- Key 2: Prayer (1:4-5).
- Key 3: Confidence (1:6).
- Key 4: Love (1:7-8).

Scripture Reading

Let’s stand and read our passage today, Philippians 1:3-8,

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷ It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus (1:3-8).

This is God’s Word.

Paul demonstrates Christian maturity. The mature life is the joyful life. You cannot be joyful unless you are growing and changing in Christ. Paul gives us four areas of

² G. F. Hawthorne. (2004). *Philippians*, Vol. 43 (Dallas: Word, Inc., 2004), 21.

Christian maturity. They are really marks of a God-focused life. A God-focused life will bring you joy. The first mark of a joyful, God-focused life, is gratitude.

1. GRATITUDE (1:3)

Gratitude is a sign of Christian maturity

GRATITUDE FOR PEOPLE

What was it about those folks in Philippi that brought Paul so much joy? First, he had happy memories of the people. Look at how Paul begins his gratitude:

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you (1:3).

What were Paul's happy memories? He had no regrets, he nursed no ill feelings, he struggled through no unresolved conflicts. He looked back over a full decade and when he thought of the Philippians, he laughed with joy! "I'm so thankful!"

Gratitude is at the very core of what it means to understand grace. However bad your day is going, your year is going, your life is going – you are not in hell! Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! Wow, God is so good. Gratitude. It's one of the main mark that you are maturing in Christ. Are you a grateful person?

Ingratitude was at the heart of the fall, and at the heart of what's fallen about us to this day. Adam and Eve thought God was holding back goodness from them. Ingratitude led to the very first sin and to all sin (Rom 1:21).

Gratitude takes nothing for granted. It acknowledges each favor, each gift—both big and small. It also recognizes the giver—the relative who shows her love by giving you a gift; the friend who remembers to call you; the person who gives you a compliment or goes out of his way to invite you to go for a walk on a beautiful day; the spouse or friend who brings you a cup of coffee when you're exhausted, cooks you a fine dinner, or throws a party for you.

When we stop to think about it, we have received many gifts from many people, and especially from God. We have much to be thankful for.

And Paul says: when I pray to God, I just tell him how grateful I am for you! Were there difficulties? Yes! That Philippian jailer beat Paul. But now, what a joy that he worships God. You better believe he brought some difficult baggage into the Christian life, but Paul sees the end result for the whole church. He sees them growing and changing in Christ. God's going to finish the work, he says (1:6).

I wonder how many pastors can say that about former churches they have served? Could you say that about former friends you have had? Or places where you have worked? Are yours happy memories? Unfortunately, the memory of certain people makes us churn.

When we call them to mind, they bring sad or disappointing mental images. Paul knew no such memories from his days in Philippi.³

I want you to know something. This **gratitude** isn't a **platitude**. People are hard to love. Look in the mirror. Are you easy to love? The Philippian church was not perfect. Imagine the baggage of the Philippian jailer and the slave girl. Yet Paul was sincerely grateful for them—all of them! Look at the phrase “all of you” in verses 4, 7, and 8.

Based on chapter 2, this church needed to continue to grow in humility, and in chapter 4, some individuals needed a pastoral rebuke, yet Paul was grateful. The conflict didn't crush his gratitude. That's impressive. That's instructive. That's hopeful. If you're a super-critical person, always focusing on what's wrong, then you won't be a grateful person. Don't look for perfection before you show gratitude; look for evidences of grace in people's lives. Be quick to thank God for Christian virtues in others, and remember that **sanctification is a slow process**.

Do you give thanks to God in prayer for others? Paul rarely thanked God for things. Paul thanked God for people, who, despite whatever trouble they may have been to him, remained a source of joy and thanksgiving. Paul even wrote a word of thanksgiving for the crazy Corinthians (1 Cor 1:4)!

Do you allow conflict to crush your joy? Don't misunderstand: Paul doesn't overlook the conflict; he addresses it. He doesn't say he enjoys conflict. He simply is able to rejoice in the Lord despite the conflict. This again shows us that we had better have a well of joy that is much more satisfying and sustaining than a fountain filled with comfortable circumstances to stimulate joy. You must go to the gospel for this kind of joy.

GRATITUDE DESPITE DIFFICULTY

Look at how Paul begins his gratitude:

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you (1:3).

Remarkably, Paul is filled with joy while in prison. Do you find this challenging? I do. Do you think you need something other than Jesus to find real joy? Better-behaved kids? A better job? A different address? More vacation time? In America we often think “bigger” is the answer—bigger house, bigger muscles, bigger church, etc.—but what we really need is a bigger vision of God. Nothing else is an ultimate source of joy. You can have all of those and never know this joy. If you have everything but Jesus, you will be longing for more. If you have nothing but Jesus, you have everything you need for joy. Look at the decadence and the excess of modern culture. None of it provides what people desire.

³ Charles R. Swindoll. *Laugh Again Hope Again: Two Books to Inspire a Joy-Filled Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition) Kindle Locations 495-497.

Paul Practiced Gratitude

Paul had an attitude and practice of gratitude. He knew that though people are sinners, and sheep sometimes “bite”, that God was not finished with the Philippian church yet.

Why was Paul so filled with joy when he remembered the Philippians? Was this a perfect church with perfect people? No. Why was he grateful? He chose to notice and focus on God’s gifts.

- These people were once pagans. Now they were growing in Christ (1:6, 9-11)
- They were once proud, and now they were putting on humility (2:1-11)
- They were now pressing on to the mark of the high call of Christian maturity (3:14-16).
- They were growing in their thought life and thinking on whatever was true and honorable, just and pure (4:8).
- Paul must have often remembered that, after he left Macedonia, the Philippian church was the only one that helped him financially (4:15-16). Those devoted believers continued their generosity by contributing toward the collection Paul made for the needy believers in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:1-5).⁴
- And so on and so forth.

Paul Practiced Forgiveness

Paul didn’t just think about gratitude, he walked in it. He practiced it. He wasn’t someone to hold on to bitterness or unforgiveness. Rather than be bitter or gossip, he went to the source if he had a problem. That’s how you maintain joy. Do you have a problem with a church member or a leader at Living Hope? Are you nursing a hurt? **You cannot be hurt and be joyful at the same time.**

Focus on the good things God is doing! Make sure you are bold enough to bring your hurt to the person who hurt you. If you are talking about it with others, you are likely guilty of gossip or slander. It’s not right.

Don’t wait for the person to come to you if you are hurt. The Bible commands us to go to the person who hurt us. The person who is hurt is required to go according to Matthew 18. Go and tell your dear brother or sister who hurt you about the hurt. Be ready to forgive.

Edwards Quote

Listen to the wise words of **Jonathan Edwards**: “Proud people tend to speak of others sins, the miserable delusion of hypocrites, the deadness of some saints with bitterness, or the opposition to holiness of many believers. Pure Christian humility, however, is silent about the sins of others, or speaks of them with grief and pity. The spiritually proud person finds fault with other saints for their lack of progress in grace, while the humble Christian sees so much evil in his own heart, and is so concerned about

⁴ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philippians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 2001), 20.

it, that he is not apt to be very busy with other hearts. He complains most of himself and his own spiritual coldness and readily hopes that most everybody has more love and thankfulness to God than he.”

Corrie Ten Boom - Forgiveness

One of the best stories of the difficulty, but joy of forgiveness is one told by Corrie Ten Boom. She had seen her sister die in the Ravensbruck concentration camp. She was telling about it at a church after the war in Munich, Germany. It was there she saw one of her tormentors during the war. She says:

It was in a church in Munich where I was speaking in 1947 that I saw him - a balding heavysset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat, the next, (*at least in my mind, I saw*) a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones.

Memories of the concentration camp came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment of skin.

My sister Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland. This man had been a guard at Ravensbruck concentration camp where we were sent.

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: “A fine message, fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!”

It was the first time since my release that I had been face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

"You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard there. But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein – again the hand came out – “will you forgive me?”

And I stood there – and could not. Betsie had died in that place – could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it - I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. “If you do not forgive men their trespasses,” Jesus says, “neither will your Father in Heaven forgive your trespasses.”

Still I stood there with this coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. “Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. Lord, you supply the feeling.”

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced

down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!”

For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then.⁵

What a joy it is to forgive. What a pure joy that now Corrie could remember that this former soldier's sins were cast into the bottom of the sea of God's forgetfulness. What a pure joy that she could remember they are together in the Kingdom of God.

Joy is not there because we tuck others' sins under the rug. The joy of remembering our brothers and sisters is there because we forgive them as we are forgiven.

Consider Paul's Example

Paul talks about the messiness of loving Christ's bride and preaching his Gospel. Consider the pain Paul experienced in 2 Corinthians 6:4-10. He didn't hold it against anyone, but actually rejoiced that he could lay down his life for Christ.

As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; ⁷by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything (2 Cor 6:4-10).

Paul never let the conflict that the truth brings stop him from loving God's people. Truth brings conflict. I mean look at the **Philippian jailer** who beat Paul and Silas before he came to salvation. Look at the **slave girl** that harassed Paul and his team for days before she was converted.

People come with baggage. If you love people, you have to be patient with their baggage. You come with baggage. But we thank God, like Paul did, for every remembrance. Because one day the war will be over. One day we will see Jesus. One day we will all be presented blameless to Jesus Christ. Paul could see that day coming. It filled his heart with gratitude for the Philippians.

One way you can tell if you are growing in Christ is if you are grateful. In order to be grateful to people, you have to be forgiving and tender and kind in your heart to them (Eph 4:22-31).

⁵ Corrie ten Boom. "I'm Still Learning to Forgive" Guideposts Magazine. Copyright © 1972 by Guideposts Associates, Inc., Carmel, New York 10512.

2. FELLOWSHIP (1:4-5)

Fellowship is a sign of Christian maturity

FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD INDICATES OUR WEAKNESS

Paul begins to tell of his prayer life. He fellowships with God and rejoices over his fellowship with the saints in Philippi. Paul was **never too busy** to pray and thank God. That's the secret behind Paul's joy. He prayed without ceasing. E. M. Bounds was right when he said: "He who is too busy to pray will be too busy to live a holy life."

We cannot live a joyful life without fellowship with God. We are so weak and easily overcome. Life is impossible, wouldn't you agree? We are so weak. We were never made to walk this life alone. That's why the person who is growing in Christ is a person of **deep prayer**. You know the importance of prayer. You feel your weakness. To pray you have to be humble. There is a humility to the person who prays. Listen to Paul.

Always in every **prayer** of mine for you all making my prayer with **joy**,⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now (1:5-6).

Prayer indicates our weakness. Paul attributes all the success of his life and the Philippians to God. That's what gratitude and prayer are all about. We can preach and teach and spend hours preparing. But the truth is: I did nothing. You did nothing. The Word of God did everything. Jesus is absolutely correct when he says, "Without me you can do nothing" (**Jn 15:5**).

How weak Paul was. He considered himself "the chief of sinners." He was often given pain in his life that left him feeling debilitated. Look over at 2 Corinthians 12. Paul says:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor 12:7-10).

Pain drove Paul to prayer. And even in the pain, Paul started rejoicing. "Lord thank you for this thorn in my side." Maybe that thorn was the difficult situations in the Corinthian church that tore him up. Maybe it was physical. But even the pain led him to rejoice in his weakness. His weakness helped him to know Christ better!

Prayer is a place where we can rejoice and thank God that we are not alone. We have **fellowship with God**. We are never alone. But we also have **fellowship with people**.

FELLOWSHIP WITH THE SAINTS SHOWS OUR JOY

Paul's great prayer focus is on his partnership with the Philippian church. He's so thankful to be united with them in Christ. His joy began the first day he met them until now. Listen to Paul.

Always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with **joy**, ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now (1:5-6).

What does "gospel partnership" mean? Paul really believed he was on a mission together with all the Christians everywhere, including the Philippians. *Partnership* from the Greek *koinonia* (cf 1:5,7; 2:1; 3:10; 4:14,15). We often translate it as "fellowship." It means "sharing in the presence of God" and sharing in his presence with each other.

We need this fellowship. It's what makes life satisfying. When you are dying, you don't say, "Bring me my high school or college diploma." You don't say, "Bring me my trophies from third grade or my awards from work." No. You want people. We all want to have those intimate connections with people. Fellowship is knowing God is near and knowing his people are near.

And this *koinonia* – this Gospel partnership also included his financial support.

And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into **partnership with me in giving** and receiving, except you only (4:15).

It seems the fellowship they had with Paul included communication, financial support, expanding the Gospel, etc. We can also imagine that Paul must have sent workers to Philippi to train the **elders** and the **deacons**.

Fellowship means that we are **one in Christ**. There is a divine unity that we have in the Spirit of God that brings us together. Fellowship with Christ brings great and inexpressible joy! "Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice **with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory**" (1 Pet 1:8).

Fellowship with God is **more to be desired** than the greatest of earthly delights. "That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and the **fellowship** of his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (3:10).

But fellowship always extends to the Body of Christ. We are one in Christ. We enjoy fellowship together. There is a personal partnership in God's forever family, where we share in Christ's fellowship by coming together. That's why we gather on Sunday mornings and for small groups and for times of prayer and instruction. Jesus is present with us.

Obstacles to Corporate Fellowship

At least four obstacles will keep you from having such enjoyable and edifying relationships as a Christian: sensationalism, mysticism, idealism, and individualism.

Sensationalists don't find Christian community exciting enough to participate in it. However, the Christian life isn't about shock and awe, but lowly acts of service and love (Phil 2:3-4), which are extraordinarily significant. In other words, we fellowship at church for the presence of God, not a light show or a rock concert. God is here. That's more than enough!

Mystics make the Christian life into a series of quiet times, isolated from the rest of the church. They desire to live a "me and Jesus" kind of Christianity without the church. But Christianity is "we and Jesus," not just "me and Jesus."

Idealists struggle in Christian community because they have, in the words of Bonhoeffer, a "wish dream" of what the church ought to be, and it never lives up to their expectations.⁶ The idealists are never satisfied with any church. Let me just say that if you come to church for Jesus, with your eyes on Jesus, Jesus and Jesus alone will satisfy you.

Individualists fall prey to culture that only enjoys community online. Privatization coupled with this technological video-game culture kills people's ability to relate to others. We have a culture of "busy loneliness": people do a lot of stuff, but they remain extremely lonesome.

The Mission of Christian Fellowship

Ultimately, fellowship has a mission: to bring Christ to every creature. You need gospel partners, those united together in Christ by the Spirit, from every tribe and tongue, who live on the gospel. These are friends that will fall and fail but who need the same grace and mercy of Jesus that you need. You need more than friendships; you Gospel partners who are on mission with you.⁷ Godly fellowship does not just result in deep friendships, and a deep walk with God. If you fellowship with God and others, you will share that presence with the lost and expand the kingdom of God. Ultimately we are partnering with God to proclaim his Gospel to lost sinners.

You will also **partner by giving to others** who are going to places you cannot go. By giving generously to God's local church, you are supporting our **21 missionaries** around the world.

Transition: Now it's not just our gathering together in fellowship and preaching and teaching the word in Christian fellowship or even giving to missions that advances God's kingdom. It's God himself who has to work in us for real transformation. Mature, joyful Christians have a deep confidence in God. Confidence is another sign of the mature and joyful life.

3. CONFIDENCE (1:6)

⁶ Bonhoeffer. *Life Together*, 27.

⁷ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Philippians* (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (p. 25). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

*Confidence is a sign of Christian maturity***WHAT GOD BEGINS HE WILL FINISH**

Paul's confidence in God was a settled fact. He knew that God was at work and in control. He was confident that God was bringing about whatever was happening for His greater glory. When we possess that kind of confidence, we have a solid platform built within us—a solid platform upon which joy can rest.

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (1:6).

Focus on the word *completion*. God will finish his work in you. That's what he promises. Travel back in your mind to the cross where Christ was crucified. See the Savior lifted up, paying for the sins of the world. Listen to his words.

There were seven sayings that Christ uttered from the cross, commonly called the seven last words of Christ. One of them our Lord cried out was a single word, *Tetelestai!* Translated, it means, "It is **finished!**" *Telos* is the root Greek term, the same root of the word translated perfect. Paul was saying, "He who began a good work in you when you were converted ten years ago, Philippians, will bring it to completion. It will be finished! Jesus will see to it. And that gives me joy." You want a fresh burst of encouragement? You may have a good friend who is not walking as close to the Lord as he or she once was. Here is fresh hope. Rest in the confidence that God has neither lost interest nor lost control. The Lord has not folded his arms and looked the other way. That person you are concerned about may be your son or daughter. Find encouragement in this firm confidence: The One who began a good work in your boy or in your girl will bring it to completion; he will finish the task. I repeat, that firm confidence in God's finishing what he started will bring back your joy. He's not done with you. He's not done with your family. He's not done with your church. He will bring it to completion.

Joy Stealers

Perhaps this is a good place for me to identify three of these most notorious thieves at work today. All three, by the way, can be resisted by firm confidence, the kind of confidence we've been thinking about.

The first joy stealer is **worry**. The second is stress. And the third is fear. They may seem alike, but there is a distinct difference. Worry is an inordinate anxiety about something that may or may not occur. It has been my observation that what is being worried about usually does not occur. But worry eats away at joy like slow-working acid while we are waiting for the outcome.

Stress is a little more acute than worry. Stress is intense strain over a situation we cannot change or control—something out of our control. (Occasionally the safest place for something to be is out of our control.) And instead of releasing it to God, we churn over it. It is in that restless churning stage that our stress is intensified. Usually the thing that plagues us is not as severe as we make it out to be.

Fear, on the other hand, is different from worry and stress. It is dreadful uneasiness over the presence of danger, evil, or pain. As with the other two, however, fear usually makes things appear worse than they really are.

How do we live with worry and stress and fear? How do we withstand these joy stealers? Go back to Paul's words:

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (1:6).

Let me be practical and tell you what I do.

First I remind myself early in the morning and on several occasions during the day, "God, you are at work, and you are in control. And, Lord God, you know this is happening. You were there at the beginning of the world, and you will bring everything that occurs to a conclusion that results in my good and your greater glory in the end." And *then*? Then (and only then!) I relax. From that point on, it really doesn't matter all that much what happens. It is in God's hands. I will walk in fellowship and holiness and leave the rest to God.

Do you believe in the **sovereignty of God**? Do you rest in it? Romans 8:28-29 should help you feel God's arms underneath you. He loves you.

We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son (Rom 8:28-29).

God's going to do the work. Trust him. Worry and fear never grew us one bit in Jesus. We need to have total confidence that he who began the work in you, in your children, in your parents... no matter how far they have strayed... **he will finish the work**.

Transition: Finally, the last mark Paul mentions in verses 7-8 is affection. **Love**. Isn't that the ultimate mark of Christian maturity? Name all the virtues of Christian maturity. Paul says, you can **prophecy**, you can have **faith** to remove mountains, you can have **hope** and full assurance of salvation, but the greatest of these is what? Love.

4. LOVE (1:7-8)

Love is a sign of Christian maturity

PEOPLE IN GOD'S FAMILY

Paul has a deep love for his church family in Philippi that he compares to the love of Christ. Listen to him in verses 7-8.

It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus (1:7-8).

I've heard God's people say or at least imply: "I love God. I love walking with Jesus and the Holy Spirit. I just don't like his people all the time."

Paul was not like that. He always looked at people through the lens of God's work in them. It's easy to get down, depressed, bitter, and jaded in close relationships. There are toxic emotions that we all experience which threatens our love for one another. Bitterness, discouragement, and just plain *giving up* will rob us of our joy. Paul had a sweet love for the people at Philippi that we can learn from.

John, the son of thunder, said in 1 Jn 3:14, "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brothers." Paul says, "I hold you in my heart" (vs 7), and "I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus" (vs 8).

Bowels of Love

The term Paul uses for affection is, literally, the Greek word for "bowels." In the first century it was believed that the intestines, the stomach, the liver, even the lungs, held the most tender parts of human emotions. That explains why this joyful man would use "bowels" in reference to "affection." He says, in effect, "As I share with you my feelings, I open my whole inner being to you and tell you that the level of my affection is deep and tender." Too many people live with the inaccurate impression that Paul was somewhat cold and uncaring. Not according to this statement; in fact, quite the contrary! When he was with those he loved, Paul went to the warmest depths in conversation and affection.

Conclusion

Where is your joy? Are you living the joyful life? It begins with gratitude. As you grow in Christ so will your gratitude grow. So will your fellowship with God and others grow. So will your prayer life grow. So will confidence in God's work grow. So will your deep love for fellow Christians. Real maturity in Christ is seen in making much of Jesus.