

Thankful, Joyful, and Hopeful

- Philippians 1:3-6
- Sometime around 62AD, the happiest man in the Roman Empire was in prison. He wasn't happy to be in prison, but he was happy in prison. More than that, he was thankful, joyful, and hopeful. Let's look at those three points today in the text.
- **Thankful (vs 3)**
- It is a distinguishing characteristic of a saint. Remember last week we determined that a saint is the irreducible minimum of what it means to be a Christian. To be in Christ is to be a saint. We who were in Adam, and dead in our sins, are now in Christ, and our sins are forgiven and our eternity with Christ is secure. If that is not enough to put a smile on our face every single day, then we really haven't gotten acquainted much with grace.
- Paul starts his letter with these words: "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you." It's helpful for us to remember "to" and "for" in our thanksgiving. Not the numbers but the words. The vertical and the horizontal. Paul is thankful TO God. That's the vertical. I don't get up in the morning and look in the mirror and say, "Thank you for giving yourself another day." Then reach over and pat myself on the back while singing, "It's all about you" to myself. NO! That would be the height of narcissism, and it would be much worse than that: I would be a fool; the fool says in his heart, there is no God. Instead, we give thanks to God. Paul said in Ephesians we are to be about this: "giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Eph. 5:20)
- We are to be thankful for everything! But let's be clear. Paul didn't spend much time in his letters giving thanks for things. No, he thanked God for people. That's the horizontal. He thanks God here for the brothers and sisters in the Philippian church. All of them. In Romans 16, at the end of his letter to the church in Rome, he lists no fewer than 33 people for whom he was thankful. In 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20, he writes, "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at His coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and our joy." That's the horizontal: we give thanks TO God and FOR people. We were created for relationships, first with God, and then with others. Just as I was writing this last week, I had to stop and go meet a student at Elon. He had taken my class in the first half of the semester, and he goes by Leo because his name in Chinese is too hard for Americans to say. I know Leo is not a Christian and I had prayed on the way over to meet him about whether I would ask him about his faith. He wanted to meet with me because he had heard me say in class that my wife likes tea, and he wanted to give me some tea from China. And as we stood in the lobby of the Schar building, Leo brought up his faith. I had just said I would like to keep in touch and have lunch with him when he got back in August. He said he would like that, and then he said that he does believe in God but he doesn't know anything about him, really. And that he wants to come to church here when he gets back to school because he has heard Oliver and Zack talk about it. I was floored by this, and asked him if he had a Bible. He said yes and I encouraged him to start reading it this summer. Then Leo asked if he could have a hug before we said goodbye. I said yes, and asked if I could pray for him. Listen, tears came to my eyes as I walked back to my car. I thanked God for Leo, and for what I had just experienced as I saw a young man from a Communist country acknowledge that he wants to know God. And I prayed that God would help me to adopt this habit Paul had, that in every remembrance of Leo, I would thank God for him and pray for him that the eyes of his heart might be enlightened. That's a great habit to develop, don't you think? To thank God every time he brings a person to our minds.
- **Joyful (vs 4)**
- Every time Paul prayed for the church in Philippi, he prayed with joy. This is another distinguishing characteristic of a Christian: we are the joyful ones. And gratitude plays a huge part

in that. I am most joyful when I am most thankful. And I am most thankful and joyful when I live in right relationship with Jesus and others. You have heard the acronym, kind of cheesy, but true: Joy is Jesus, Others, Yourself. Christians have a counter-cultural view of joy. Not because we are against pleasure and fulfillment. We simply have a different source. Tom Brady said after his 3rd Super Bowl victory, "Is this all there is?" I don't know what he said after his 4th. But our joy as Christians is in relationships: with Jesus first and with others second. I am most joyful when I am most thankful for God's salvation and the people He has placed in my life. If you are always focused on yourself and your needs and your disappointments, then you don't have joy. The source of our joy is Christ. The fruit of that joy is enjoyed in relationships with others.

- The church at Philippi was famous for joy. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 8:1-2, "We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part." Even in affliction, they had an abundance of joy, because their joy had nothing to do with stuff, and everything to do with Jesus. That's why Paul believed that joy was not optional for believers, and he even commanded us to have it: "Rejoice in the Lord, always; again, I will say, rejoice!"
- Verse 5: Paul rejoiced over the church at Philippi because of their "partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now." See, the greatest joy doesn't come from just friends we have fun with and hang out with. Paul wasn't filled with joy because of the cookouts he had enjoyed with the church at Philippi, though that was perhaps part of it. He was thankful because of the partnership in the Gospel that they enjoyed. If you have no relationships with partners in the Gospel, then you don't have the joy that Paul is talking about here. The greatest joy is found in walking together, side by side, in the fellowship of the Gospel. Tony Merida writes, "If you don't have deep joy, maybe you haven't cultivated such relationships or participated in the mission (of the Gospel) as you should." He talks about four obstacles that can keep people from enjoying deep and enjoyable relationships, and they are worth sharing.
- Sensationalists don't find Christian community scintillating enough to participate in it. However the Christian life isn't about shock and awe, but acts of service and love, (because of Christ). Mystics make the Christian life into a series of quiet times. They desire to live the "me and Jesus" kind of Christianity without the church. But Christianity is "we and Jesus," not "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. Individualists fall prey to culture that only enjoys community online. We have a culture of "busy loneliness": people do a lot of stuff, but they remain extremely lonesome.
- I was thinking about the way I feel when I am on a mission trip. When I am with a team in Colombia or Kenya or South Africa, or anywhere else I have gone with people for the Gospel, there's a camaraderie and joyfulness that we sometimes don't feel in the normal day to day here. But maybe it's simply because we don't look around at the ways we can serve with one another for the sake of the Gospel here. I realized that I have that same feeling of purpose and joy when I go with one or two brothers to the Piedmont Rescue Mission. Or with a group to serve at Operation Christmas Child. Or when we men get together to study the Bible at a men's breakfast. And there are lots of other ways we can partner together for the Gospel. I encourage you to look for ways you can partner with others in the church while meeting needs in this community or in the community around us. And by all means, plan to go on a short-term mission trip as soon as you can!
- **Hopeful**
- Finally, we are the hopeful ones. Verse 6 is one of the most memorized promises in the New Testament, and it is a picture of biblical hope. Biblical hope, of course, is not the same as worldly hope. When Carolina was playing Gonzaga for the national championship last month, I was hopeful that they would win. But I was not filled with unswerving confidence. Nor did I say to anyone

before the game, "I am sure of this, that Roy Williams who began a good work in these boys, will bring it to completion at the day of the championship..." Biblical hope is when we can say, "I am sure of this." And what great encouragement it should be to all of us in Christ that we KNOW that He who began a good work in us will bring it to completion at the day of Christ. Just as surely as the day of Christ is on God's calendar, when all accounts will be settled, this is a done deal as well: We will be welcomed into heaven on that day with, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

- How can we be so confident, so hopeful, without any doubt? Because God started the work. How did Lydia, the first convert on European soil, in Philippi, come to faith? By doing good works and praying and reading and studying and trying her best to be a good person? No. We saw it two weeks ago in Acts 16: "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul." God began the work in Lydia that day, at that moment. God started the work in you. He will continue the work in you. Praise God, He will complete the work in you! I have that dream sometimes where I show up for the final exam and realize I never went to class once. It will not be that way for us at the day of Christ. God began a good work. God will continue the good work. God will complete it. Moises Silva says Paul can write this promise because Paul's hope, his confidence, his absolute certainty is in the "Godness of God." That's not a typo. God's goodness rests in His Godness. And so does our hope.
- How are we to live, then? With the same confidence. Even when the going is tough. You guys who lift weights know what it's like to be going through your reps with a spotter because you are pressing the max of your ability. Does he say as you strain at the weight, "Come on, give me 15 more?" No, he says, "Come on, one more." When I have run long distances, and the pain is getting intense, I encourage myself to go one more mile. "Just go one more, Mark, you can do one more." And then after that mile, I tell myself again. Listen, saints, no matter what you are going through, encourage yourself with this. You can do one more day. In fact, I heard Andree Seu Peterson says this week that life is served a spoonful at a time, and grace is given to us one moment at a time. So, take that spoonful of life along with that truckload of grace, and you can make it. You **will** make it. How? Because the promise is not that you will be able to hold on to Him for that one more day. The promise is that He will never let go of you. Ever. God finishes what He begins.
- May God make us more and more, thankful, joyful, and hopeful.