

Philippians 1:1-26

The Potential for Joy

That your rejoicing may be more abundant in Jesus Christ...v. 26

Church planting should be governed by the Holy Spirit's leading. The church at Philippi was certainly planted that way. We read the account earlier in the service of how the Holy Ghost forbade Paul to preach the word in Asia, and how He suffered not for Paul and Silas to go into Bithynia even when they assayed to go there. He then received what we commonly call the *Macedonian Vision* and the thing I find most interesting about that vision is that it served the purpose of helping Paul and Silas to *assuredly gather* that the Lord had called them to preach the gospel there.

And so they went there and preached the gospel – first to a group of women that met for prayer by the side of the river. The church began, you might say, in the home of Lydia, whose heart the Lord had opened. But before long Paul and Silas were in trouble. They had cast a demon out of a certain damsel, a young slave-girl is the literal meaning of the phrase. There's something very interesting about the account of that exorcism. This demon possessed damsel had followed Paul around everywhere he went and announced his purpose in coming. *These men are the servants of the most high God, which show unto us the way of salvation* (Acts 16:17).

The thing I find interesting in this narrative is that the message of this demon possessed slave girl was true but Paul didn't think he needed the devil's help in his church planting venture so he commanded the demon to depart and the departure of that demon meant financial loss to the owners of the slave girl which in turn led to Paul and Silas being thrust into the inner prison (v. 24) their feet made fast in the stocks.

What do you do when you've come to a city to plant a church and find yourself thrust into prison? The lesson that Paul and Silas teach us is that you proceed with your church planting venture even while you're in prison. I wouldn't go so far as to say that this was their direct aim but still the venture went forward when they prayed and sang praises unto God within ear-shot of the prisoners.

You know the story – there was an earthquake, the prison doors were opened and every one's bands were loosed – and here is something else that is so fascinating about the narrative. When Paul perceives that the keeper of the prison is about to kill himself he cries out with a loud voice (v. 28) *do thyself no harm: for we are all here*. Don't you find that incredible? You might understand why Paul and Silas would stay – they were men of faith who believed in Christ but why did the other prisoners also stay? Presumably these men would have been criminals facing dismal futures, perhaps facing life in prison or maybe even death – and now the doors of the prison are open and their bands are loosed but no one leaves.

I can't help but think that the praying and singing of Paul and Silas had been made effectual to these prisoners. Luke does note that detail that when Paul and Silas sang

praises to God *the prisoners heard them* (v. 25). This leads to the salvation of the keeper of the jail along with his house and in a short while Paul and Silas are released from prison and they return to the house of Lydia before they depart from Philippi.

So a church is planted in Philippi. And it's interesting to note that this church planting venture began with a vision and was guided by the Holy Ghost and what I want you to see now from Paul's epistle to the Philippians is that the church ended so to speak with a definite divinely ordained church structure. Look at the very first verse in Philippians – *Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.*

This church that began with a vision and then arguably became a house-church ended up with a definite ecclesiastical structure – bishops (which is just another term for elders) and deacons. Can I make one more preliminary observation here about this church at Philippi? I think it's worth noting that the epistle is addressed to *all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi* – it's addressed directly to them and to them first and then Paul goes on to say *with the bishops and deacons.*

Doesn't that order serve to confirm to us the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura*? This epistle does not find its way to the saints at Philippi through the bishops and deacons as if the word of God must come through them to others of lesser rank beneath them. No – it comes directly to them and to the bishops and deacons. The word of God, in other words is directed to us all.

Now as I was reading and contemplating the way the church at Philippi was planted I was searching for something in the narrative about that church that could link it to this epistle that Paul wrote to it. And I believe I've found that link in a statement that is made in Acts 16 about the Philippian jailer. Notice what it says beginning in v. 32 *And they (Paul and Silas) spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway, And when he had brought them into his house, he set meat before them, and rejoiced,* (v. 34) *believing in God with all his house.*

There's the link between the narrative in Acts and Paul's epistle to the Philippians. He rejoiced, believing in God with all his house. If you've read or studied Paul's epistle to the Philippians and have sought to look for the features in this epistle that distinguish it from Paul's other epistles then you know that Philippians is an epistle that addresses the subject of joy or rejoicing.

Those two words *joy* and *rejoicing* occur more often in this epistle than in any other of Paul's epistles. I'm sure you're familiar with some of the well known verses in this epistle – such as what you find in 3:1 *Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you, to me indeed [is] not grievous, but for you [it is] safe.* And in 4:4 *Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice.*

I think one of the keys to this epistle as well as a key to Paul's entire ministry to Christians is found in 1:26,27 Listen to what it says beginning in v. 23: *For I am in a strait*

betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: 24 Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you. 25 And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith; 26 That your rejoicing may be more abundant in Jesus Christ for me by my coming to you again.

Paul's ministry in another verse is described as being a helper in joy. So we read in 2Cor. 1:24 *Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy: for by faith ye stand.*

Now I know that there is something about addressing the topic of Christian joy that creates a certain amount of apprehension in my mind as we embark on the study of an epistle that places such an emphasis on joy. My fear, and the thing I will hope and pray that the Lord delivers us all from is approaching the topic of joy in a trite and shallow way. This is a topic that is easy to abuse. Perhaps you've been exposed to messages on joy that leave you further removed from joy than you were before you came to church. The preacher approached the subject in such a way as to suggest that you could be guilting into being joyful and you left feeling guilty because you're not joyful.

That's one abuse of the topic of joy. Another abuse can be through trite applications of Paul's exhortations to rejoice. You've heard me refer a number of times to how ineffective Job's friends were when they came and sought to encourage him. Job's friends were "nouthetic counselors" in the sense that they were confrontational counselors who tried to convince Job of sin. *Miserable comforters are ye all* Job says of them in Job 16:2.

But do you suppose they would have been any better had they come to Job and saw his condition and saw how much he'd lost and saw how deep the anguish was in his heart – how would it have been for them to say to him *rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice*. That would have been, I suppose, as effective and well timed as going to a funeral and making your way among grieving family members and telling them to rejoice.

So as we embark on this epistle to the Philippians, I hope by the grace of God that I won't reduce or abuse this epistle in such a way that would make it trite or shallow. I think much of the abuse of this topic springs from a wrong understanding about the nature of Christian joy. For while it is possible to misuse or misapply the topic of joy, it is equally true that the joy that Paul describes and exhorts in this epistle is a joy that transcends our circumstances in life.

Philippians is, after all, a prison epistle. Would Paul be calling on the Philippians to rejoice while he sat in a lonely Roman dungeon feeling sorry for himself? I think what we've already read from Acts 16 where we witnessed Paul and Silas in prison can answer that question for us.

And so what I'd like to look at this morning in the few remaining moments of our study is the theme of:

The Potential for Joy

I. What Does it Take for Joy to be Realized?

If we could go back to the planting of that church at Philippi I believe we can provide a simple but sublime answer to that question. We begin where the church planting venture began – among those women who met by a river side for prayer. They were devout but they were also lost. But then we read of one of them – *a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira...whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.*

Joy – true joy, Christian joy, begins with an open heart to the gospel. Verse 14 tells us that *she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.* We know, of course what those things were that she attended to. Paul's sermon in Acts 13 would be typical of every sermon he preached. In Acts 13:23 with reference to David, Paul says *Of this man's seed hath God according to his promise raised unto Israel a Savior, Jesus.* Paul, therefore spoke of the person of Christ.

He also spoke of the work of Christ. So in Acts 13:26 he says *Men and brethren, children of the stock of Abraham, and whosoever among you feareth God, to you is the word of this salvation sent. For they that dwell at Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they knew him not, nor yet the voices of the prophets which are read every sabbath day, they have fulfilled them in condemning him. And though they found no cause of death in him, yet desired they Pilate that he should be slain.*

A couple of verses later Paul speaks of the resurrection of Christ. Acts 16:30 *But God raised him from the dead: And he was seen many days of them which came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are his witnesses unto the people.* And I love the conclusion to Paul's sermon in that chapter, that's found in v. 39 *And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.*

These are the things that Lydia attended to that were spoken by Paul. Simply put – joy, true joy, Christian joy begins with the gospel and it begins with an open heart to the gospel; it begins with the salvation that comes from the gospel. The same thing could be said of the Philippian jailer. *Sirs,* he asks in Acts 16:30 *what must I do to be saved?* And the simple and sublime answer came to him *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.*

And in v. 34 the connection is made between joy and believing. *And when he had brought them into his house, he set meat before them, and rejoiced, believing in God with all his house.* You see the connection between rejoicing and believing? I said in my introduction that one of the things that is so astonishing about this narrative in Acts 16 is that when the prison doors were opened by an earthquake none of the prisoners left. There was more opened than just the prison doors. I think the reason they didn't leave is because the same thing happened to them that happened to Lydia – their hearts were opened and

they attended to the things that were spoken by Paul. They found something infinitely more valuable than the temporal benefit of a prison escape. You might say that within the very confines of their prison cells they found that pearl of great price. And they evidently came to a decision that what they would gain in salvation would be worth more than what they would still have to pay with regard to their prison terms.

What, then, is the potential for joy? Salvation holds the potential for joy. Salvation is what gives you the joy of having the heavy burden of guilt released from your back. Salvation is what gives you the joy that comes from assurance of sins forgiven. Salvation is what brings the joy of the sure hope of heaven and everlasting life. Do you ever find an instance in all the New Testament whether it be in the gospels or in the book of Acts where a man or woman who gained salvation went away sorrowful? Quite the opposite – you find joy – you find what’s called great joy.

- Ac 8:8 *And there was great joy in that city.*
- Ac 13:52 *And the disciples were filled with joy, and with the Holy Ghost.*
- Ac 20:24 *But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.*

So the church at Philippi certainly demonstrates to us the potential for joy – joy described by Peter as something that is *unspeakable and full of glory*. But if the church at Philippi shows the potential for initial joy, I think you could say that Paul’s epistle to the Philippians shows the potential for increasing joy.

Near the end of chp. 1 Paul sets before his readers a dilemma that gripped his heart. *For I am in a strait betwixt two* he writes in v. 23; *having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you. And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith; That your rejoicing may be more abundant in Jesus Christ for me by my coming to you again.*

Paul considered himself to be in a win/win situation. If he’s executed he wins and if he continues in the world he wins. And recognizing as he does that the Philippians would win by his staying in the world he gains the confidence that he will stay in order to contribute to their joy becoming more abundant.

We don’t generally think of advancing in joy do we? We more or less think of it in terms of an internal exuberance that you either have or you don’t have. And yet vv. 25,26 speak very clearly in terms of the furtherance and joy of faith. Can we not conclude, therefore, that there is a close connection between increase of faith and increase of joy? Listen to the prophetic words of Isa 29:19 *The meek also shall increase [their] joy in the LORD, and the poor among men shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.*

Oh that we might be headed in such a direction in our Christian lives! The question becomes one of how – how do we increase in our joy? How do we gain more of the joy of

salvation? I'll only say for now that this epistle to the Philippians should serve to show us how our joy may be more abundant in Jesus Christ. So the church at Philippi shows us how joy is initiated; the epistle to the Philippians will show us how joy is increased. But it will show us something else also. It will show us how joy must be guarded. And this leads to my next and final point. We've briefly answered the question about what it takes for joy to be realized and increased. We must also answer the question:

II. What Does it Take for Joy to be Hindered?

The short answer to the question is that all it takes for joy to be hindered is for the gospel to be undermined. This is why Paul makes reference in v. 7 to the defense and confirmation of the gospel – *Even as it is meet for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart; inasmuch as both in my bonds, and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, ye all are partakers of my grace.*

Paul was certainly aware that the defense and confirmation of the gospel meant the defense and confirmation of the joy of salvation. And so long as Christ was being preached even by those that sought to compete with Paul, so to speak – those that would suppose to add affliction to his bonds (1:16) such was the joy in Paul's heart that he could honestly affirm in v. 18 *What then? Notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice.*

This statement is very telling in another way. It shows that the preaching of Christ is essential to Christian joy. We know from Paul's other epistles – most notably Galatians – that the gospel was giving way to a form of legalism. Where that happens then Christian joy becomes subtly replaced at first with pride and self-righteousness which eventually gives way to bondage and a loss of liberty.

This is why Paul writes in 3:2 to *Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the concision* 3 *For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.* Confidence in the flesh springs from pride and pride may lead to a kind of joy but it's a carnal joy that is altogether divorced from the gospel and divorced, therefore, from true Christianity.

Pride from within – evil workers that Paul likens to dogs from without – these are the things that can hinder a Christian from his joy. We'll see in the course of this epistle how these subtle forces spring up again and again and must therefore be watched and checked.

But in closing this morning – let me illustrate for you from another scene – this one in Old Testament history how the law without the gospel fails to bring forth true joy. The scene I have in mind, now, is in Nehemiah 8 (turn there). If you know much at all about the theme of joy then you're probably aware of the statement in Neh. 8:10 that tells us that *the joy of the LORD is your strength.*

It's very instructive to view that statement in its context. Jerusalem had been rebuilt in Nehemiah's day. The temple was built – the altar was being used for sacrifices – the city walls had been erected and the gates mounted and a meeting was called – a worship

service in which the order of the service was going to be the reading of the law of God. And so we read beginning in v. 2: *And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. 3 And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law.*

Can you imagine such a thing? I've wondered on occasion if we'd do well to conduct such a service ourselves. How would it be if I announced that next week the order of service will be nothing but reading the Bible and that we're going to spend the whole time doing nothing but reading the Bible. We won't have Sunday School, we'll read the Bible instead and the Bible reading time will carry itself forward to through the morning service, through lunch and through the afternoon service.

This is basically what was taking place in Neh. 8. And everyone was there – men, women, and children. The thing I want you to see from this section of Scripture, however, is the progressive impact of that time upon those that were there. In v. 8 we read: *So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense – there was explanation as well as reading and this giving of the sense the verse goes on to say caused them to understand the reading.*

So you get the picture. The next verse, v. 9 shows us what the impact of this reading and explaining of the law had on the people – and keep in mind this follows the statement in v. 8 that tells us that they understood the reading. We go onto read in v. 9 *And Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the LORD your God; mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law.*

Isn't that a telling statement? They wept when they heard the law and no wonder for as Paul writes in the New Testament in Rom. 3:20 *By the law is the knowledge of sin.* And a little later in Romans he writes that sin by the commandment became exceeding sinful (Rom. 7:13).

So the people gathered around Nehemiah and Ezra go it. They were understanding the law. They were facing the reality of their own sins and the sins of their fathers. And yet we go on to read in Nehemiah 8 that the Levites said to them in v. 10 *Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the LORD is your strength.*

On the surface of it these exhortations of the Levites might seem a little strange. How do you go from being sorrowful to being joyful? How do you dismiss your understanding that tells you that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God? You have to look down a few verses to get a more complete view of the setting. Notice what it says in v. 12 *And all the people went their way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared unto them.*

Underscore that last clause especially – *they understood the words that were declared unto them*. That’s the second time that the chapter mentions their understanding. In v. 8 we read how the Levites *caused them to understand the reading* and now in v. 12 we’re told again that *they had understood the words that were declared unto them*.

Two verses, then, that make mention of the people’s understanding and yet two very differing and contrasting impacts on their understanding. Initially their understanding led them mourn and weep but by the time you get to v. 12 they are experiencing and participating in great mirth and their understanding contributed to that great mirth.

How do you go from mourning and weeping to joy and great mirth? And I think the very plain implication of the passage is that they went from understanding the law to understanding the gospel. The gospel would have been illustrated to them in all the sacrifices that were offered on the altar that pointed them ahead to Christ.

And so you come to see illustrated in Nehemiah the truth that Paul will teach in Philippians – the gospel of Jesus Christ leads to joy – while the undermining of the gospel will leave you robbed of your joy and will either leave you mourning under the burden of guilt or deluded and self-deceived by a sense of pride.

It certainly is my hope, therefore, that in our studies of this epistle to the Philippians those that have never known the joy of salvation will come to know it and those that have known the joy of salvation will learn to increase it and will learn to guard it very carefully. So much is at stake in knowing the joy of the Lord and in rejoicing more abundantly in Jesus Christ.

May the Lord help us even this day to begin in the direction of that more abundant joy in Christ so that we too will know our strength increased in our walk with Christ and our service to Christ.