

Philippians 1:12-18

Rejoicing in the Preaching of Christ

What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice – v. 18

Some people in their religious fervor are driven by guilt. I believe this to be the driving force behind cults and behind Roman Catholicism and behind apostate Christianity as well as hyper-Calvinism. Others, it seems, especially in the Muslim faith are driven by anger. You see it in their faces when you have cause to see Muslim crowds in the news. It seems that you rarely see them without seeing expressions of rage and hatred. And when you hear those that are prominent speakers within their ranks, that anger and hatred become readily detectable through their words and their tone of voice.

We would also have to acknowledge that there was a time even in Paul's life – Paul as a zealous Jew, not as a Christian – Saul as he was known then was also driven by anger. I find the picture of Saul given to us in Acts 9 to be a very vivid portrait of an angry man. So we read in Acts 9:1 *And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest,*

Breathing out threatenings and slaughter – doesn't that picture bring to mind an angry bull snorting through his nostrils and pounding his hoof on the ground? What hollow and empty lives people must live who are seemingly mad at everything and everyone all the time. What a difference Paul's meeting with Christ on the Damascus road made in his life. He went from breathing out threatenings and slaughter to rejoicing in the Lord. And not just rejoicing but rejoicing even when the circumstances of life seemed to go against him and were unfair and not right. We find him in this epistle in prison, awaiting trial, facing the very real possibility of execution yet still rejoicing.

So we find him in prayer – not focusing on how unfair life seemed to be for him, or what a rotten government was in place in the Roman Empire. Instead we find him writing beginning in v. 3: *I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, 4 Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy, 5 For your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now.*

His own heart was filled with praise and thanksgiving and joy and one of the purposes in writing this epistle was that the Philippians might continue and grow in their joy – vv. 25,26 *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.*

We have noted from the outset of our study of Philippians that this epistle places a stronger emphasis on the theme of joy and rejoicing than any other of Paul's epistles. In a sense it's a sad reflection of our depravity that we have to be told to rejoice. When you think of what you've gained from the stand point of eternity and what you deserved from

the standpoint of eternity then it becomes hard to imagine why a Christian would find it challenging to rejoice.

But, sad to say, and we know it well – we still live in a sin-cursed world and we still wrestle against a sin nature that looks for joy in all the wrong places and for all the wrong reasons. We are still prone to walk by sight instead of faith and so the joy of the Lord can become very elusive to us at times.

So while it's a sad reflection of our depravity that this epistle is necessary it's also a very good thing that we have it. And I believe that if we're going to draw from this epistle all that God wants us to have from it so that the joy of the Lord is our strength, then we have to look at this epistle in terms of what it took to enable Paul to rejoice from a Roman dungeon awaiting a trial that shouldn't have had to happen.

And this is what brings us to our text this morning. We find what I think could be called a major contributing factor that enabled Paul to rejoice. Look again at v. 18 and see it now from that vantage point of what it took to enable Paul to rejoice: *What then? He asks: notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice.*

You see the contributing factor to Paul's joy? – Christ was preached. Even though Paul was in jail Christ was still being preached. And even though there were those who were doing it for the wrong reasons Christ was still being preached. That meant everything to Paul. There was nothing in the world that was more important. Jail was not important – being executed was not important – being treated unfairly was not important, the important thing was the preaching of Christ and so long as that was happening Paul would not and indeed could not be robbed of his joy.

The preaching of Christ is a phrase that I have come to love and to hate. I love it for what it means in truth while I hate the way it's abused and denigrated so that in the end it amounts to little more than a stamp of approval that is either given or withheld based on one's reaction to a sermon. If I enjoyed the sermon – the preacher preached Christ. If the sermon challenged and convicted me, exposed me and laid me low and perhaps magnified all the more my need of Christ – then the preacher didn't preach Christ.

At the last International Free Presbyterian Congress in Toronto back in 2010 I had the privilege of sharing my testimony with the audience that was gathered for that congress. I was only suppose to speak for 10 minutes but I stretched my 10 minutes out to about 24 minutes because I was giving testimony to what the preaching of Christ meant to me and how I viewed the preaching of Christ as being the very reason for the existence of the Free Presbyterian Church. And I shared at that time the burden of my heart which continues to be the burden of my heart and that burden is simply that we not allow this Scripture phrase *the preaching of Christ* to degenerate into some trite slogan that amounts to nothing more than a sanction of approval on a sermon.

The importance of a right understanding of that phrase certainly becomes apparent in our text because it was the preaching of Christ that enabled Paul to rejoice. And so I want to

approach the text that way this morning and have you consider the theme with me this theme:

Rejoicing in the Preaching of Christ

I. The Reasons for that Joy or the Meaning of the Preaching of Christ

In order to determine the reasons for that joy it becomes necessary to know what the preaching of Christ means. The Apostles are helpful to us in this respect because they demonstrate in the book of Acts what the preaching of Christ amounts to.

Peter on the day of Pentecost is a prime example and that's why we read his sermon earlier in the service. If you look closely at his sermon you discover that it can be divided into two parts: the first part consists in a Scriptural explanation of the tongues phenomenon that the crowd was witnessing and then the second part of the sermon, or the sermon proper, you might say, begins like this in Acts 2:22: *Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles, and wonders, and signs which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: 23 Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: 24 Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.*

Talk about a rich and powerful beginning for a sermon! Peter begins with the humanity of Christ – *Jesus of Nazareth, a man* but not just a man but a man approved of God – there's certainly an implication in that statement that this was a sinless man. And this sinless man fulfilled the determinate counsel of God – and this sinless man was crucified and slain but was also raised from the dead because it was not possible for death to keep him – another indication of his sinless life.

And Peter goes on to describe how this Jesus of Nazareth has fulfilled Scripture in all that he's done especially his resurrection from the dead. And this sinless man who is risen from the dead has also ascended to the right hand of God and from his exalted position at God's right hand he has poured forth his Spirit. And then he finishes with a strong conclusion when he says in v. 36 *Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.*

And then in answer to the cry that arises from a congregation, so to speak, that is pricked in their hearts and under strong conviction of sin Peter applies his message in a word of exhortation and so we read in v. 38 *Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. 39 For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.*

One might argue that in that sermon preached by Peter on the day of Pentecost he provided all that would be needed for every preacher that followed him. And the book of Acts bears clear testimony the fact that this is what succeeding preachers did:

- Ac 5:42 *And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.*
- Ac 8:5 *Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them.*
- Ac 8:35 *Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.*
- Ac 9:20 *And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.*

Paul would never deviate from that sermon subject. So we find him writing to the Corinthians in 1Cor. 2:2 *For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.* Now it's at this point that a question may arise in the minds of some. Paul writes that he determined not to know any thing among them save Jesus Christ and him crucified and yet don't we have to acknowledge that Paul wrote about all kinds of things? Didn't he address church problems when he wrote to the Corinthians? Didn't he address the issues of divisions in the church, and a lack of church discipline, and the abuse of spiritual gifts?

Doesn't he in other places deal with relationships? Doesn't he call on husbands to love their wives and wives be submissive to their husbands and children obey your parents and servants obey your masters etc.? It is the consideration of these many other subjects that Paul and Peter in his epistles and John in his epistles address that lead to a number of misunderstandings about the meaning of preaching Christ.

There are some that are of the opinion that a preacher need not bother with these other subjects and if the preacher is taken up with duties and relationships then he's deviated from preaching Christ. And I must acknowledge that such a thing can be true but that it isn't necessarily true. If the Westminster Divines were right when they set it down in answer to shorter catechism question #3 that the Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man – then it must follow that a preacher is not being true to his calling to preach Christ if he takes that phrase to mean that he's never to address the subjects of Christian duty and relationships.

Now there's a sense in which the kind of situation I'm describing is a little bit like those disciples that were with Christ in the mount of transfiguration. There they were beholding Christ in his glory – why would they want to do anything else? Why would they ever want to come down from that mount? And we recognize that there was a sense, and is a sense in which that experience on the mount points ahead to the time when the saints will be gathered around the throne of Christ in glory, casting our crowns at his feet and singing *worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing* (Rev. 5:12).

Is that what it means to preach Christ, then? When the preacher can take you to the mount of transfiguration or can take you to Christ in heaven or can take you to Calvary's

cross so you can see what it took for your sins to be forgiven and for your soul to be redeemed? That is certainly a part, a large part to preaching Christ but again we have to ask about all the other lessons that the Bible teaches us about our duties and relationships and the task of holy living. Are those things to be classified as something aside from preaching Christ? Do we preach Christ and preach something else when we focus on the Christian life?

The answer is no – we don't set those things aside and no – we don't stop preaching Christ when we address those issues. What a preacher has to be very careful to do is make sure that the person and work of Christ become the lens through which every Christian duty and every Christian relationship is viewed.

I've never forgotten the approach that Dr. Cairns took to systematic theology when he taught me that course. He endeavored to teach what he called *the theology of redemption*. And what that amounted to was viewing every branch of theology through the lens of the person and work of Christ. So when you are studying the doctrine of creation you're viewing it through Christ – and when you study the doctrine of man you view that doctrine through the person and work of Christ. And I remember him once making the remark that he didn't know if this was the best way to teach theology but he felt very much that it was the most effective way to train men to preach Christ.

Another way to view it is the way Thomas Goodwin views it in his little book *A Habitual Sight of Him*. I was struck by one of the devotional articles in that little book that sought to answer the question – what does it mean to have Christ dwell in the heart by faith? Listen to what Goodwin writes: *First, it is to have continually Jesus Christ in one's eye, a habitual sight of him. I call it so because a man actually does not always think of Christ; but as a man does not always look up to the sun continually, yet he sees the light of it...*

I love that analogy to looking up at the sun. You can't do it – you shouldn't try to do it, but on the other hand everything you see is illuminated by the sun. That's the way it works with Christ and that's the way it works with the preaching of Christ. We strive to see him, but we can't behold him for long in a glory that would blind us the way it blinded the apostle Paul and so we necessarily see through a glass darkly – but on the other hand we behold everything in the light of him.

You behold your duties in the light of him – you behold your relationships in the light of him – you behold the law of God in the light of him – everything becomes illuminated by the truth of who he is and what he's done. You view life itself and every circumstance in life in the light of him. And when Christ is preached so that everything is viewed in the light of his death and burial and resurrection and ascension into heaven and return to this earth at the last day – when everything is viewed this way then everything contributes to your joy and nothing can rob you of that joy and you find yourself able to rejoice no matter what your circumstances dictate to you.

Paul was in prison, but he was certainly free in Christ. Paul was rejected by the Jews but he was accepted of God in Christ. Paul had been a persecutor of Christians, indeed he had

been a murderer, but his sins were forgiven in Christ. He had gained so much in the knowledge of Christ that he counted everything in the world to be loss and to be dung in comparison. And he knew from that Roman prison that in spite of how unjustly he had been treated and in spite of the restrictions that were now placed on his movements, Christ was being preached. *What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice.*

The preaching of Christ, then, contributes to your joy because the preaching of Christ becomes the manifestation of Christ to your soul. Now I've spent much time on this point of the meaning of the preaching of Christ. The reasons for the joy that springs from the preaching of Christ are found in the meaning of that phrase.

Would you consider with me next:

II. The Priority of that Joy

Note again the words of the text: *What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice.* One of the things that truly hampers the cause of Christ is the factions and divisions within the church of Christ. So many different denominations – so many different worship styles – so many different interpretations of secondary issues and such a sense of rivalry between the various factions.

This phenomenon is nothing new. John the Baptist's disciples became jealous and concerned for John when the disciples of Christ began to baptize more people than John's disciples were baptizing. And even Christ's disciples complained to him in Lu 9:49 *Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name; and we forbid him, because he followeth not with us.*

And in this portion of Philippians we discover the same thing to be true of Paul in his day. So we read in vv. 15-17 *Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will: 16 The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds: 17 But the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel.*

Listen to the way another English version reads. I think this version captures the spirit of competitiveness that existed even in Paul's day. *Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. 16 The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment (ESV).*

If you could move this scenario into our own day and view it from the perspective of rivalry it would go something like this: *Those lousy Baptists are taking advantage of my being incapacitated. Their churches are going to grow larger than mine because I'm stuck in prison. You're probably familiar with some variations of that theme. The only reason that church is growing is because it's engaged in compromise. The reason we are so small is because we're a part of the faithful remnant.*

And where jealousy and a spirit of rivalry dominates then one church or one denomination dedicates itself to finding fault with another. It's true of churches, it's true of denominations, it's true of Christian institutions. I can remember a few years ago when I had the opportunity to be a part of a focus group for a Christian university. It was an unnamed Christian university but I have a pretty good idea of who was sponsoring the project. It was the only time in all my life when I was actually paid money to share my opinion.

And in the course of the interview with that focus group one of the things that kept coming up was the fact that there was another Christian university that was drawing a lot of students because this rival institution knew how to keep their tuition costs substantially lower than the other one. And the sponsoring institution, I believe, was looking for ways to cope with that or do better than that or find a way to compensate for that by being a better quality institution. And I don't remember if I expressed this or only thought this – but the thing that crossed my mind was – *wouldn't it be nice if the one institution could simply approach the other in a humble spirit and ask that institution how they kept their tuition costs substantially lower.*

I'm afraid that would not be acceptable – that would amount to conceding to that institution that they knew how to do something better. And so the spirit of rivalry lives on even in Christian circles. We can certainly console ourselves that it's nothing new but we can also go a step further which would be to order our priorities the way Paul ordered his priorities. The striking thing for Paul was not that he might be losing ground to a rival faction – the striking thing to him, rather, was that Christ was being preached.

What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice. Do you get the impression that Paul was more taken up with Christ than he was the faults of others? He certainly stands out in contrast to many modern day preachers and churches in that respect.

And why shouldn't that be the Christian's priority? Christ, after all, is the One who rules and reigns. He is the One who saves us by his grace through the blood that he shed. There are some men in fundamental circles that for whatever reasons seem bent on carving out for themselves an identity that is based on being critical of others.

I wouldn't go so far as to say that there's a never a place for such criticism. Indeed Paul himself says in v. 17 *I am set for the defence of the gospel.* We should be jealous for the gospel and we should be militant in our stance for the gospel when the gospel is what comes under attack. And I can't deny that it becomes a matter of astonishment with me when men that know the gospel and preach it well align themselves with those that deny it and undermine it.

That was the whole reason for the stance of fundamentalism against Billy Graham. The man could preach – the man did preach in his early days but at the same time he preached he assigned legitimacy to those that denied the doctrine of justification by faith and those that denied the once and for all finished work of Christ.

I once heard Billy Graham's efforts likened to a man who is mopping water off the floor that is due to an overflowing sink. But the man, for whatever reason, doesn't see fit to shut off the water from the sink so he continues to mop while the faucet continues to pour out water. It's much the same for those in Christian circles that can and do preach the gospel but never bother to strive to shut off the faucet of gospel denying false gospels.

So I acknowledge the need to stand and the desire to stand for the defense of the gospel. Unfortunately contending for the faith over the course of time has gone to ridiculous lengths to the point where the gospel is no longer at the heart of what is being contended for – but prophetic schemes are contended for – and Bible versions are contended for – and modes and subjects of baptism and forms of church government and music styles and the way people dress and the length of your hair and on and on it goes.

And all of these things have a place in the Christian's life. I have not set before you anything that has no legitimacy – all I'm suggesting is that the primary thing is the gospel of Christ and the preaching of Christ. And if we lose that priority then it becomes inevitable that you will also lose your joy in the Lord.

Notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice. Do you see in the verse the continuity of Paul's joy? *I do rejoice and I will rejoice.* That certainly indicates to us, doesn't it, that the Christian doesn't have to lose his joy. Paul was determined that he wouldn't lose his joy and the way that his joy would be maintained would be through the preaching of Christ.

I wonder then this morning – have you seen Christ with the eye of faith? Do you believe in him? Some of you, I fear, are clueless to what the joy of the Lord even is because you are still in your sins. You mistakenly think that joy can come through the pleasure of sin. I pray that you'll reach the end of yourselves quickly so that you'll come to yourselves and then flee to Christ.

Many of you do know the joy of Christ. You know the blessing of sins forgiven – you know the relief of having the burden of guilt removed from you. But as is sadly the case for many Christians it may be that you too have lost your focus and other things have come to dominate your heart instead of Christ – they might be legitimate things and legitimate concerns. I mentioned last Sunday afternoon my pastoral concern that for many the cares of this world have choked the word and made it unfruitful. And it's not that those cares are not valid cares – that's not the issue but when those cares come to dominate your heart then word is unfruitful and not even the preaching of Christ effects you.

May God help us then to order our priorities right in such a way that Christ is all in all. He must be at the heart of our affections. Love for him because of an awareness of his tremendous love for us must be the ruling force in our hearts and in our lives. May we be moved by a habitual sight of him so that we too will rejoice in him through thick and thin.