

50. Jesus in Philippians

January 11, 2018

You will probably agree with me when I say, "The idea of joy of the Lord for the majority of the born-again Christians in America is relatively shallow and unstable." Here are some of the evidences:

- As long as everything goes our way, we praise God and are grateful for what He is doing in our lives. But when difficulties come our way or things don't go the way we want, we think that God hates us and we no longer have joy in Him.
- Rather than being grateful for what we have, we often look at the things we cannot have or don't have and complain to God about why we cannot have them.
- We complain more often than thanking God.
- We don't see it as the spiritual attacks from the satanic force against us and we allow the enemy to rob our joy in the Lord and go through despair or disappointments.
- We flat out don't realize that the Lord allows the trials and tests in our lives to mature us spiritually, so we pout and complain and remain immature.

In other words, our idea of the joy of the Lord pretty much depends on what we can have or what we do, rather than knowing who God is and what we are in Christ Jesus. Oh, how much we need to grow in Him! I hope and pray that we all need to learn from this apostle Paul's letter.

A. THE AUTHOR AND THE TIMELINE

Philippians 1:1 Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons

When Paul was writing this letter around A.D. 62 to the church in Philippi which was located in present-day Greece and was a capital city. He was in prison in Rome, waiting for his final appeal. He had already had his preliminary hearing, and he was waiting for his appeal before Caesar. He was in the Mamartine Prison, down in the lower dungeon, and was chained to a prison guard.

Paul ministered at Philippi during his second missionary journey, spending about three months in the city. The ministry in Philippi marked Paul's entrance into Macedonia, which came about as a result of a vision he had in the city of Troas, just across the northeastern corner of the Aegean Sea from the port city of Neapolis and its close neighbor Philippi according to Acts 16.

During this first stay in Philippi, Paul brought the true faith in Christ to the people who would become the core group of the growing church congregation in the city. Among them were Lydia, a businesswoman who opened her home to Paul and his coworkers, and the Philippian jailer, who was converted under Paul's ministry after an earthquake miraculously broke open the prison.

Epaphroditus and Timothy were both with Paul, helping with his writings, and waiting to carry his letters to the various churches. Epaphroditus would deliver the letter to the church in Philippi, and Tychicus would take another one to Ephesus.

For a letter to express such joy, we would be tempted to think that the author wrote it while enjoying himself on the polished deck of a Mediterranean luxury cruise ship with all the comforts around him. But nothing could be further from the truth. Paul was an aging apostle who went through beating, being tortured, shipwrecked, starved and being ridiculed at every turn, and now sitting inside of a dungeon, not knowing whether he is going to see next morning sunrise or not.

B. THE THEME OF THE BOOK

Sometimes it's difficult to capture the theme of an epistle of the New Testament in one word, but as you've probably already guessed, the heart of Philippians is "Joy".

Paul didn't write to answer any profound theological questions or to solve knotty problems or even to deal with a particular sin. Instead, he wrote to express joy and encourage the believers in Philippi.

The secret of his joy was the single mind. He lived for Christ and the Gospel. Christ is named 18 times in Philippians 1, and the Gospel is mentioned 6 times.

It was appropriate that Paul would write to them from prison, exhorting them to have the joy of the Lord, since he had been in prison in Philippi and was singing while in chains there years earlier. These Christians had seen firsthand how joy can come while in the most difficult of circumstances, and Paul was encouraging them so they would know that nothing had changed and that God was still in charge.

C. THE PURPOSE OF THE LETTER

Paul's joy at the mere thought of the Philippian church is extremely obvious in the letter, and it's that same joy that he wanted the recipients to possess as well. To lead the Philippians to this truth, Paul took them directly to Jesus, teaching them that a community of believers living in harmony with one another comes only through mutual humility modeled after the Savior. Paul wrote that he poured out his life as an offering for the sake of Christ, leading Paul to find great joy and contentment in Christ's service. His letter to the Philippians showed them that by centering their lives on Christ, they, too, might live in true joy.

I find three reasons why apostle Paul wrote this letter that was filled with joy in the Lord to the believers in Philippi.

1) To encourage them

Philippians 1:27-28 Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, 28 and not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God.

2) To warn them of unbending enemies

Philippians 3:2 Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation!

Philippians 3:17-19 Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. 18 For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: 19 whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things.

3) To thank the Philippians for their faithful support.

Philippians 4:14-16 Nevertheless you have done well that you shared in my distress. 15 Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only. 16 For even in Thessalonica you sent aid once and again for my necessities.

Too many Christians are living defeated lives when they should remember that they are the victors in Christ, not victims in life. Philippians is a special Book that shows us how to live above the present circumstances, rising above adversity; not just by surviving, but by thriving in the joy of the Lord.

D. ONE OF THE MOST FREQUENTLY QUOTED BOOKS IN THE BIBLE

In my opinion, many believers in the Lord quote the verses or hear somebody quoting out of this Book:

1:6, 1:21, 2:5-8, 2:10-11, 2:12, 3:7, 3:10-11, 3:13-14, 4:4, 4:6-7, 4:8, 4:13, 4:19

to name a few. This little Book is packed with great stuff.

E. THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

In a way, the joy reflected in Philippians is like a gem. And with each chapter, Paul reveals a different facet of that joy.

In chapter 1, we will learn that there is “Joy in living,” even when we don’t get what we want; when there are difficult circumstances; or when there are conflicts. To find joy in living, there has to be something more than good feelings and comfortable settings. And that something, Paul points out, is Someone – Jesus Christ!

What the people who are looking for joy, peace, and happiness don’t realize is that they really cannot find anything real outside of Jesus. They can have temporary joy, peace, and happiness, but soon it becomes empty. They have to look for more in some other person or places. It is like the broken cistern the prophet Jeremiah talked about.

In chapter 2, we will learn that there is “Joy in serving”.

It starts with the right attitude: humility. Joy is maintained through right theology and is encouraged by the right models, such as Christ.

How can anyone really understand joy in serving unless the person is in Christ? They can not. Without Christ, serving becomes either just another job or despises the fact that they have to do and despises the people whom they serve.

In chapter 3, we will learn that there is “Joy in sharing”.

Paul shares a warning, his own testimony, a goal of living, and a command to follow his example. He was so confident in the Lord that he could tell others to follow his example as he follows the Lord. Now that is the kind of legacy we all would love to leave behind as we depart this world.

Finally, in chapter 4, we will learn that there is “Joy in resting”.

In one of the finest pieces ever written on contentment, Paul explains how to find a joy in resting in Christ that is not controlled by circumstances.

How many people search for that peace which cannot be found any other places than in Christ Jesus? They cannot. That is why they don't have joy, peace, and hope in their lives.

Before we close this survey of the Book, we need to take a close look at one portion: *Philippians 4:4-7 Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! 5 Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand. 6 Be anxious for nothing, 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 minds through Christ Jesus.*

During the early years of my Christian walk, I used to wonder in my puny brain, "Why did God allow us to have our own free will to choose between sin and righteousness as well as the Lord and satan?" The reason is because He doesn't want to force His way to us with His raw power, but He wants us to love Him by our own choice.

By the same token, we have a choice between worrying or rejoicing as well. When the Lord tells us, "Rejoice," we often worry instead. Do you know why we'd rather worry instead of trust Him? Pride. We somehow think that we can do better and our ways are better than His.

Let's think about this worry. The Old English root word from which we get our word "worry" is "to strangle." Isn't that a great description of that word? It strangles us physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Worry is the greatest thief of joy. However, it is not enough for us to tell ourselves to "quit worrying," because that will never capture the thief. Worry is an "inside job," and it takes more than good intentions to get the victory.

The antidote to worry is rejoicing in the Lord. How can we rejoice while we are in a neck deep horrible situation? It is the faith in the Lord that makes us rejoice – faith in His attributes, promises, character, and His PERFECT track records.

Then what happens? When we have joy of the Lord in our hearts, the peace of God guards us and guides us. With that kind of protection, why worry?

The peace of God not only guards us, but it also takes us a step further into His blessings. This does not mean the absence of trials on the outside, but it does mean a quiet confidence in God, regardless of circumstances, or things.

We need to stop worrying about the things we can't change or control and start praying about them instead. Let's turn our worry list into a prayer list, and commit each one of those issues that agitate, frighten or burden us into God's hands.

Once we start to rejoice in the Lord and trust Him, we get to have a lot of time left over, because we used to spend all that time worrying. Now it is ours again and we need to fill that time with something helpful so that worrying doesn't come back.

F. APPLICATIONS

1) Our joy in the Lord does not depend on what is around us or the circumstances we are in, but our faith in Him.

2) Too many Christians are living defeated lives when they should remember that they are the victors in Christ, not victims in life.