

Catching Joy ~ A Study of Philippians

Philippians 1:1-26

As we now jump into the letter to the Philippians, let's keep in mind that, quite literally, we are reading somebody else's mail...from nearly 2000 years ago. There are inherent challenges in this endeavor. Thankfully, there have been faithful stewards and scholars over the centuries who have cut some paths for us to follow so that we're not starting from scratch. Nevertheless, it might be good for us to familiarize ourselves with the challenges of reading ancient letters whose authors did not envision us reading them. For that (and this will come as no surprise to you) I offer up a couple of Bible Project videos that can function as brief tutorials for us. (This comes from their 19-episode series "How to read the Bible"...which is well worth your time to watch all the episodes...but for now, these two will suffice.)

<https://bibleproject.com/videos/new-testament-letters-epistles-historical-context/>

<https://bibleproject.com/videos/new-testament-letters-literary-context/>

1:1-2 ~ Greeting & Salutations

The letter opens with a fairly standard greeting of the time...noting the sender(s) and recipient(s). It also contains Paul's trademark intro--some version of "grace and peace"--which is stated in all his letters, along with who he represents (which is almost always "God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"). Keep in mind that this letter was written about a decade after Paul, along with Timothy, had started the church in Philippi. While a handful of people would have had firsthand memories of Paul and Timothy, many newer folks would not.

Along with who they represent (Jesus), it also mentions their relationship with Jesus...servants. Recall that one of the primary lessons Jesus wanted the leaders of His kingdom movement to understand was that leadership within the kingdom, represented by the church, is drastically different from leadership in worldly organizations/entities. *"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave--just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."* (Matthew 20:25-28, emphasis added) It appears that Paul understood the posture that was expected of him.

Of the 13 letters in the New Testament attributed to Paul, six of them include Timothy in the greeting; two were written directly to Timothy; and two others mention Timothy somewhere within the letter. All that to say, Timothy, Paul's young protege, was a major player on the church scene of the first century.

A couple other notes of interest...

- Paul calls the recipients of this letter "saints" (or holy people). In our day and age there is a tendency to think of "saints" as those special over-achievers of the faith...people who have done something particularly noteworthy. But that's not how the writers of the New

Testament used or understood that word. For them, ALL God's people were "saints". It wasn't based on anything extraordinary they had done, but based on what God had done in Christ and their positive response to that. All that to say, you and I are saints...which carries the expectation to act like it...not "holier-than-thou" but consistent and faithful to the One who makes us saints.

- This is the one and only time in Paul's letters that he directly addresses the "*overseers and deacons*" in the introduction. Hmm, is that significant? Probably. Considering a couple of the major themes of the letter are humility and unity, and later in the letter he specifically addresses two women who weren't getting along (Euodia and Synthyche, see 4:2), there's a good chance that these two ladies were overseers or deacons.
- *As you understand it, what is the role of overseers and deacons within the church? (Suffice it to say that it has evolved over the centuries and can vary a bit between traditions/denominations.)*

(Wow! One whole page from two verses. Don't worry, I won't tease/wring out that much for every verse...let's hope 😊)

1:3-11 ~ Thanks & Prayer

While humility and unity are major themes of the letter, **joy** is the overriding theme and tone of the letter and makes its first appearance in 1:4. Joy and gratitude are what Paul experiences when he thinks about the Philippians, and he expresses that in prayer for them.

- *Who causes you to experience gratitude when you think about them?*

We immediately encounter another key idea in Philippians with the word "partnership". This is the word "koinonia" in Greek, often translated as "fellowship"...though "partnership" is probably a better, more accurate translation. It comes up again in 2:1; in that case it's fellowship/partnership with the Spirit. A variation of the same Greek word is found in 1:7, "*all of you share in God's grace with me*" or "*you all are partakers with me in God's grace.*" (emphasis added). My point is, as N.T. Wright puts it, "*The Philippians, then, are 'partners in the gospel' (verse 5), 'partners in grace' (verse 7); they are in the gospel business, the grace business, along with Paul...*" To be Christians means to be in a unified effort with one another, and with the Spirit, toward a common goal. To say it another way, the family business is the spreading of the gospel and making disciples out of those who positively respond to the gospel.

- *What ideas and images come to mind when you hear the word "fellowship"? What ideas/images come to mind when you hear the word "partnership"?*
- *What difference would it make if we thought of ourselves and fellow church members (as well as members of other congregations) as partners in a joint venture? Or, to ask it a different way, does your experience of being part of a church feel like a partnership in a joint venture? If not, what does it feel like?*

Last week we explored the question of what's God's role and what's our role in the life of faith, the with-God-life? We are reminded again that God does the bulk of the work, as Paul says, "...being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (1:6) From beginning to completion this is God's work. The role of the believer, our role, is to trustingly yield to the process...to trust and obey...and leave the results, the fruit, to God.

This makes me think of CUMC's 183-year existence. Long before any of us were around, God began a good work here at Castleton. Now here we are...and God is still present and active, moving in and through us to accomplish His purposes. Sure, there have been ups and downs over the past 183 years, but, like Paul, we can be confident that God is (and always is) up to something and that what God begins, God completes. May we cooperate and participate with Him and each other.

We also see Paul's pastoral heart on display in this passage as he says, "...I have you in my heart..." (1:7) and "God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus." (1:8) Paul was not operating simply out of a sense of duty or obligation. He truly loved these people, a love that sprang forth from his love for God. This is the heart and posture we would hope for any Christian leader to operate from.

Additionally, Paul operated with a sense of confidence/security. This is important. The alternative would be operating out of fear/anxiety. What we see in Paul is responsiveness, not reactivity; confidence in God's presence and activity...despite the circumstances (this is a key idea in this letter).

- *How is your perspective affected by your circumstances? Or, how is your confidence in God affected by the situations you find yourself in? (Or, how are your circumstances/situations affected by your confidence in God?)*
- *If you could visit anyone right now (time and money not being an issue) who would you visit? (Or, who are you longing to see?)*
- *Who is someone you have great affection for?*

We see Paul's prayer for the Philippians in 1:9-11. If you're a Table Group leader reading this, I would encourage you to make this your prayer for your group. Pray it regularly during this series. I would also encourage anyone reading this to make Paul's prayer your prayer, for yourself and all those you care about.

Interestingly, for the second time we see the phrase, "...until the day of Christ..." (1:6, 1:10) It is important to remember that we live in the "now...and not yet", between the inauguration of the Kingdom of God and the consummation of the Kingdom. The New Testament shorthand for "the end" (which is really a new beginning) is "the day of the Lord" or "the day of Christ Jesus". I

mention this simply to remind us of what we're hoping for, what everything is moving toward. Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus!

- *How does Paul's prayer in 1:9-11 compare to your prayers?*

We live in a time when it's all about gaining one's own glory and praise (think: social media "influencers", celebrities, athletes, politicians, etc...all of whom, it seems, people want to imitate.) But as Christians our concern is, "...*the glory and praise of God.*" (1:11) So whereas many people want to draw attention to themselves, we want to draw attention to God.

- *How does your life as an individual, and our life as a congregation, bring attention, glory, and praise to God? How do we ensure that the focus is upon God and not ourselves? How do we avoid tooting our own horn in a culture that encourages such behavior?*

1:12-26 ~ Perspective

Obviously the original recipients of this letter already knew that Paul was in prison. In fact, it was due to them having sent financial/material support to Paul, because he was in prison, that Paul wrote the letter in response. But for later readers of this letter, like you and me, it's this section of the letter that clues us into Paul's imprisonment. (Earlier in 1:7 "chains" are mentioned, but if you didn't know better that could be understood as hypothetical. Now it is clear Paul is writing from prison.)

Paul could have easily been sad, frustrated, negative, upset, pessimistic, gloomy, demoralized or defeatist about his situation. But that is not what we see...rather we see someone who is hopeful, optimistic, even opportunistic. Counterintuitively, not even imprisonment could contain the gospel. As a matter of fact, imprisonment simply opened up a whole new audience, "...*the whole palace guard*" (1:13) One of the things that makes Paul so extraordinary is how he prioritized the mission of advancing the gospel over and above his own condition. Also, unexpectedly, Paul's imprisonment emboldened other believers, "*Because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.*" (1:14)

Remember, we have our part in this work and God has His part. This kind of unexpected, unpredictable turn of events is God's beautiful, powerful, mysterious handiwork. Even something as bleak as prison didn't dishearten Paul because he understood God would not be limited and the gospel would not be bound by chains. Even people of ill intent and selfish motivations (see 1:15-18) can unwittingly be instrumental to God's purposes.

We don't know specifically who these people were that were preaching the gospel out of envy, rivalry, insincerity, and selfish ambition and were stirring up trouble for Paul. There always seemed to be some people stirring up trouble for Paul, but he wasn't overly concerned with them. Going back to the idea of God's role versus our role, such people are God's concern and responsibility to deal with, not ours.

If you're like me, I suspect you can easily identify some people whose motivation, means, and sincerity you question. It might be tempting to focus and fixate upon them. How might you release them to the Lord? Remember, Christ wants us focused on Him, not them. He'll deal with them as He sees fit. Can you/we trust Him with that? (Perhaps Paul was mindful of how Jesus confronted and corrected him...see Paul's Damascus road conversion experience in Acts 9)

- *What, or who, are you tempted to be discouraged by? How does Paul's outlook/attitude in this passage challenge and encourage you?*
- *What tends to distract you, or divert your attention from, the priority of making Christ known? Or, what tends to compete with that priority?*

We once again see the theme of joy bubble up, *"And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice..."* (1:18-19) Just as prison couldn't contain/restrain the gospel, neither could it contain/restrain Paul's joy. The activity of the Philippians in his life (through their prayers and their financial/material support) and the activity of the Spirit of Jesus Christ in his life brought Paul such encouragement and joy. Both of these things—his relationships with other believers and his relationship with Jesus—are what we have going for us too. For Paul, this was core to his life, to who he was. What role do they play in our lives—core/primary or peripheral/secondary?

Even though imprisoned Paul seems upbeat, positive, and optimistic that he'd likely be released. But he also realized that it was not guaranteed. What is important for us to notice is Paul's outlook and priority, *"...that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by. For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."* (1:20-21) Was this just bravado? Was Paul simply being rhetorically cavalier?

No, rather Paul was simply being consistent to his beliefs and the teachings of the One he followed. Since we recently finished going through the Gospel of Matthew, please allow me to remind us of something we read in it...

- *"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matthew 10:28)*
- *"Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for My sake will find it." (Matthew 10:39)*
- *"If anyone would come after Me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me will find it." (Matthew 16:24-25)*

Jesus' teaching is echoed in the Gospel of John, *"Whoever loves their life will lose it, while whoever hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves Me must follow Me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves Me."* (John 12:25-26)

It is tempting to try to explain away or downplay such teachings of Jesus. But when we see it actually lived out in a follower of Jesus, such as Paul, it forces us to reexamine our

understanding, and perhaps even our life. Do we truly understand what we signed up for? Paul clearly did. During this same imprisonment Paul wrote a letter to the Colossians in which he states, “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you will also appear with Him in glory.” (Colossians 3:4, emphasis added)

Such sentiments have been passed on by many Christians throughout the centuries. Closer to our time, missionary Jim Elliot said, “*He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.*” When I was in college a chapel speaker (recall I went to a Christian college in which chapel was mandatory...though I personally rather enjoyed it) whose name I don’t recall, asked, “*Are you living for something worth dying for?*” Martin Luther King Jr. said, “*If you’ve got nothing worth dying for, you’ve got nothing worth living for.*”

The point is that this all flows, and is in alignment, with what Jesus taught...and, more importantly, with what Jesus experienced and promised...RESURRECTION. Without the resurrection such ideas/sentiments would be foolhardy. But, friends, the resurrection changes everything. It gives us hope and confidence that this world as it is isn’t all there is, and so we can expend ourselves on Kingdom priorities without fear of loss. Because of the resurrection we know that in Christ death is a new birth. This is the perspective Paul functioned from and the perspective we ought to function from.

To say it another way, our faith, our following of Jesus, is meant to be an ALL of life thing, not a part of life thing. Or, the illustration you’ve heard me use before, does our faith function like an app or the operating system in our life? For Paul, it was clearly the operating system...as it’s intended to be.

On a very practical level, there is incredible freedom that comes with having nothing to lose. Or, as Kris Kristofferson (writer) and Janis Joplin (singer) said in the song, “Me and Bobby McGee”, “*Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.*”

- *As you inventory your life, what could you not stand to lose? How does that limit your freedom?*

Now before we start thinking that Paul was super-human, it should be noted that he also experienced times of less optimism, upbeatness, and confidence. For example, in both of his letters to the Corinthians that we have preserved for us in Scripture he said, “*I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.*” (I Corinthians 2:3), and “*We do not want you to be uninformed about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.*” (II Corinthians 1:8-9)

I bring this up simply to point out that Paul was very human, subject to all the emotional ups and downs we all face, confidence ebbing and flowing. And also to remind us that faith development is a process. Two steps forward, one step back is sort of par for the course.

Nevertheless, our hope and confidence come not from ourselves, or our circumstances, but from the risen and reigning Jesus.

- *The mortality rate for all of us is 100%. How does your faith in Jesus help you deal with that reality? How does your faith in Jesus give shape to your priorities in life?*
- *Reflecting on 1:22-26...Paul was torn in what he wanted more: to depart (death) or to continue in ministry. He saw both as good options. Describe a time when you've been torn between two good options.*

Before we end for this week, I just want to point out how Joy comes center-stage again, "...I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me." (1:25-26, emphasis added) Now might be a good time to offer a practical working definition of joy. Joy is what we experience when people are happy to see us and/or have us around. The Philippians could have joy because Paul and Jesus were both happy over them.

- *Who brings you joy...i.e. who is happy to have you around? Who can you bring joy to be letting them know how happy you are to have them around?*

Soul Training Exercise ~ Write a Letter

It's not too hard to see the connection here—Paul wrote a letter to people he cared for and was fond of, so the invitation this week is to do the same. Not an email or text message...an actual pen-to-paper letter, in an envelope, addressed, with a stamp, sent through the mail letter. (OK, a greeting card will work too...geesh, I'm such a pushover.)

Think of someone you haven't seen in a while, or haven't connected with in a while, but really would like to because they are dear to you. And write them a letter. Let them know that you're thinking of them. Let them know what they mean to you. Catch them up on your life. Ask about their life. You get the gist. Maybe say a little prayer for them when you pop it in the mail.