

Catching Joy ~ A Study Of Philippians

Week 4 ~ Philippians 2:12-30

Whenever we see a “therefore” (see 2:12), we want to know what it’s there for...as a professor of mine used to say. Paul had just shared the great Christ hymn (2:6-11), which highlights the example set forth by Jesus, and now tells his readers to follow that example of obedience by “...*working out your salvation with fear and trembling...*” (2:12). That sounds rather intimidating, but then Paul quickly adds, “...*for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose.*” (2:13, emphasis added)

Recall in week 1 of this series we discussed God’s part/role and our part/role. Remember also, in week 2, we discussed “*partnership*” (often translated “fellowship”)...emphasizing that the Christian life is a “joint venture” with us and God (as well as us with each other). Additionally, though I didn’t highlight it in week 3, Paul also used the phrase “*fellowship with the Spirit*” in 2:1. All that to say, God is always present and active...and one of the main ways God is active is in and through His people, again, “...*to will and to act according to His good purpose.*”

Or as another version/translation puts it, “...*it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for His good pleasure.*” (That’s the NRSV, BTW...I typically use the NIV...just FYI...aren’t initials/abbreviations fun?)

This is very consistent Pauline theology...how Paul understands God. In Colossians 1:28-29 (which was written during the same imprisonment as Philippians) Paul writes, “*We proclaim Him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone complete in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all His energy, which so powerfully works in me.*” (emphasis added) It is because of this beautiful, powerful, mysterious, spiritual partnership that Paul could confidently say earlier, “...*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.*” (Philippians 1:6)

- *How have you experienced God working in and through you? How have you been a recipient of God working in and through someone else?*
- *As you consider God’s part and our part of this “partnership” (or what we could simply call “life”) what questions come to mind?*

So what is “salvation”? And what does Paul mean by “*work it out with fear and trembling*”? (We broached the question of salvation in week 1 with the Philippian jailed asking, “*What must I do to be saved?*” Acts 16:30) As a working definition, let’s say salvation is an interactive life with God, living in the present reality of His kingdom.

As Jesus humbled Himself, emptied Himself, and became obedient, so we are to follow suit. This is the Christian life. In other words, the Christian life is one of surrender, of yielding, to God, trusting that He knows best. This is the basic question/test going back to the opening chapters of the Bible...will we trust God’s way or go our own way? “Salvation” is God’s work from beginning

to end (that's why we call it "grace"), though we do have a part to play. Our part is obedience. In fact, we need to be saved (salvation) as a result of our lack of trust and obedience. Humbly acknowledging our tendency/propensity to go astray is likely what Paul had in mind with the words "*fear and trembling*". Relationships (with God or people) take a fair amount of work and attention. Relationships are not static. And the type of relationship we have with God is not meant to be transactional, but rather vital, vibrant, and the most important relationship we're a part of. We need to give it the attention and effort it deserves, by His grace (His activity in our lives).

So what does this look like in practice? Paul goes on, "*Do everything without complaining or arguing...*" (2:14) (Some translations might say "*murmuring and disputing*".) Hmmmm, of all the things Paul could say at this juncture, he brings up complaining/murmuring and arguing/disputing. Interesting.

Perhaps you're familiar with the adage, "*Attitude is everything.*" That seems to be where Paul is taking this conversation. Our attitude betrays so much...like what we really think and feel. Remember that the major themes of this letter are joy, humility, and unity. A negative, complaining, grumbling, quarrelsome attitude completely subverts and sabotages joy and unity, and often demonstrates pride and ego.

Now Paul is not advocating the denial of reality or the wearing of rose-colored glasses. Remember, he's writing from prison...I think it's safe to say he understands the ugly side of life. But he also understands that we are formed by what we fixate upon. Yes, there are negative, destructive, horrible things that can occur in life. BUT...there is Jesus...there is resurrection...there is the present reality of the Kingdom...there is love, compassion, mercy, beauty. AND, God is ALWAYS present and at work. So what are we going to focus/fixate upon?

The temptation to complain, grumble, murmur, argue...these are signs for us that we've lost our focus and signal us to turn our attention back to Jesus...by whatever means necessary. We have tools and resources (think spiritual disciplines/practices) as well as community and fellowship that can help do that.

Paul also seems to understand the contagious impact negativity can have on a community/family of faith. Unfortunately, negativity spreads much faster than positivity. (Think bad news, gossip, conspiracy theories, etc...all of which can wreak havoc on our mental and emotional health and the health of a community. In fact, this is how social media and the algorithms that drive it work...by tapping into our most base functioning.) This is largely due to an evolutionary mechanism known as negativity bias. We are "hardwired" for this neurologically and hormonally...BUT we can be transformed spiritually and learn new/better/higher ways of coping/functioning.

- *When are you tempted to complain? Or, what causes you to become negative? In those instances, what are you focused on? How do you tend to rationalize/justify your negativity (and whatever springs from it)?*

- *When you find yourself in a negative state of mind/heart, what (or who) helps you get through/past it?*
- *What practices do you have in place to reduce negativity?*

High Christology (see 2:6-11) naturally leads to High Ecclesiology (view/understanding of the Church...i.e. Christians collectively). Remember, Jesus is “*exalted to the highest place*” and is “*the name above every name*” (2:9). So what does this mean to those who follow Him? Check out what Paul has to say about that, “...*that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life...*” (2:15-16, emphasis added) Wow! That seems pretty elevated/exalted too, doesn’t it?

This is what Christ has done for us...He has made us a part of His family, His children (that’s His part...the heavy lifting). But keep in mind that we, too, have a part/responsibility: the aforementioned no complaining or arguing, but also the holding on to the word of life (that is Jesus). To say it another way, as we abide in Jesus (see John 15) the resulting fruit is that we become blameless, pure, without fault, in contrast to the “*crooked and depraved generation*”. Now let’s be careful here. This DOES NOT mean that we are better or superior to other people. Rather, this is the work of, and result of, Christ in us. He gets the glory, not us. But this does point to what God has always desired for humanity...to reign alongside Him. But that comes with/through being united to Christ.

We are children of God...and other parts of the New Testament clarify/specify that we are adopted children. Have you ever known families that have adopted? Often, the adopted children come into their new family with a variety of issues. I think the same can be said of us as we come into God’s family. And just as an adopted child needs to learn to trust, and become securely attached emotionally, and learn their place in the new family, so must we learn to trust God more and more and acclimate to our new family. But “*fear and trembling*” should not be understood as the fear of losing something, as much as the fear of not fully living into the potential that is offered to us. Perhaps you’ve known a family with an adopted child who really struggled to accept the love of their new family. Instead, Paul is hoping/wanting his readers to fully trust and embrace their membership into their new family.

- *What have you gained from being in the family of God? What struggles have you experienced in being part of God’s family? (Or, what trust issues do you have that you brought with you into this new family?)*

For Paul, getting to serve God and his fellow humans by helping them attain what God has always wanted for them was his life’s work. For Paul, this made it all worth it, no matter what he faced. This is why he could say, “...*even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you.*” (2:17, emphasis added) Paul sees his life as an offering to God. Paul uses similar imagery in Romans 12, “...*I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.*” (Please note: The

Biblical idea and image of worship is one of offering and sacrifice...not so much receiving inspiration as we often think of it today.)

- *How is your life—all of life—an offering to God?*

Just as we tend to think of “saints” (1:1) as spiritual over-achievers, when in reality that’s just a term for “normal” Christians, we also tend to think of those whose life is lived as a sacrifice as somehow above and beyond the call of duty, when in fact that’s what the normal Christian life is expected to be. Sadly, we too often settle for a subpar experience of the Christian life. On that note, it’s also tempting to place Paul into some sort of “super-Christian” category. But notice what Paul does as he continues.

Paul shifts the focus away from himself and on to two others...Timothy and Epaphroditus. We have a little bit of background on Timothy. (See Acts 16 where Paul first encounters Timothy and has him join the missionary journey in which the Philippian church was first established; we can fill in a bit more based on the two letters Paul wrote to him.) But we know very little about Epaphroditus...just what we find in this letter. (Some have wondered if Epaphroditus and Epaphras—another name that pops up as a traveling companion of Paul’s—are the same person, but we don’t have enough information to conclude that.)

Notice what Paul says about Timothy, *“I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.”* (2:20-22) That is pretty high praise. Paul is also setting up Timothy as an example for the Philippians of what he meant back in 2:4, *“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”* It’s nice to have a living example, whom they actually know, to point to. Paul doesn’t put him forth as special, but as standard.

Notice what Paul says about Epaphroditus, *“...my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs.”* (2:25) Y’all know I like to emphasize the Church as a family over and above an organization and institution. Part of where I get that is how the early Christians related to one another. Notice how Paul referred to Timothy as a “son” and Epaphroditus as a “brother”...very familial.

We learn toward the end of chapter two that Epaphroditus fell ill (we don’t know from what) and almost died (see 2:27). Apparently this was quite a stressful situation (see 2:27-28). We also learn that it was through Epaphroditus that the Philippians had sent Paul help/support. This is also a perfect and practical example of partnership/fellowship that Paul mentioned in 1:5.

I think we see something interesting in this section. Earlier Paul said, *“to live is Christ and to die is gain”* (1:21) and seemed bold and fearless at the thought of death. Here we see him talk about *“sorrow upon sorrow”* (2:27) at the thought of losing a friend to death. While it might be tempting to think Paul was being inconsistent, I would contend Paul was simply being human. The loss of a friend, to death or otherwise, is a grief-worthy experience. Sure, death could be

seen as a “gain” for the one who passes (see 1:23), but it’s still a loss for those left behind. That’s not a contradiction. It’s an emotional reality. While Christians don’t grieve like people who have no hope (see I Thessalonians 4:13), we still grieve...just differently. I say all that to say, it is good and important to be honest about our feelings/emotions, and I think we see that with Paul here.

This might be a good time to point out that imprisonment back then was not like what we think of prison today. Prisoners were not fed or taken care of. If you were in prison you had better hope you had some people who cared about you enough to take care of your needs. Evidently Paul had that...in this case the Philippians. Along with whatever financial support they sent, they also sent Epaphroditus. We should understand Epaphroditus as more than a delivery guy. Beyond whatever other ministry-focused work Epaphroditus was helping Paul with, it’s quite possible he was the scribe that Paul dictated this letter to, and would then be the one who delivered it to the Philippians and read it to them.

Timothy and Epaphroditus were just normal guys caught up in the life of Jesus and the work of the gospel. So too, the Philippian church was just a normal church (for its time and place), also caught up in the life of Jesus and the reality of the Kingdom. This is just normal Christian living. Believers, Christians, followers of Jesus, then and now, are simply people who see reality differently and live consistently with that understanding of reality. (We call that reality the Kingdom of God.) It’s a way of life that transforms us from the inside out as we, like Jesus, empty ourselves. We see this way of life, this following of Jesus, in Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus. Again, this is just the normal, standard, typical, customary Christian life...and this is God’s plan for restoring humanity and creation as a whole.

- *How would you describe the “normal” (standard, expected) Christian life? How would you describe the difference between a Christian life and a non-Christian life?*
- *Would you describe yourself and your church family as being caught up in the life of Jesus and the work of the Kingdom? Describe/elaborate.*
- *Who has been a “Paul” to you (someone more advanced in the faith who you’ve intentionally learned from)? Who has been a “Timothy” to you (someone you’ve been an intentional model/example to in the faith)? How are you cultivating such relationships? (Hmm, I feel a Soul Training Exercise coming on...)*
- *Paul offers up a couple of “regular guys” as examples to follow. Who have been “regular folk” who have been examples to you?*
- *How might the relationship between Paul and the Philippian church inform our understanding of “missions”?*
- *What stands out to you, or speaks to you, in this week’s passage that you’d like to discuss as a Table Group?*

Soul Training Exercise ~ Considering, Exploring, Cultivating Paul/Timothy Relationships

In today's vernacular we might call the relationship between Paul and Timothy a mentor/mentee relationship. It was a basic rabbinical, discipleship/apprenticeship type relationship...similar to what Jesus had with the disciples, and what Jesus instructed prior to His ascension..."*Go and make disciples...*" (see Matthew 28:19)

Who has been a mentor to you, specifically in the area of your faith/spiritual life? Who have you been a mentor to, again, specifically in the area of faith/spiritual life?

These sort of relationships ought to be a "normal" part of a Christian life, as well as a standard, expected part of congregational culture.

The invitation this week is to consider who you might intentionally develop a relationship with in order to learn from...AND...to consider who you might intentionally develop a relationship with in order to allow them to learn from you.

Who can you identify that is more advanced/experienced in the faith that you would like to learn from? Consider developing a relationship with the express purpose of maturing as a Christian.

Who can you identify that might benefit from what you have to offer in the development of their faith?

(Feel free to think beyond our congregation if you want...it's about the Kingdom, not any one congregation, after all.)

If this idea seems a bit intimidating to you, then consider "spiritual friendships"...i.e. connecting with another person or two or three to intentionally develop/mature in your Christian faith together.

There are two keys here...

- Intentionality (spiritual formation doesn't happen by accident)
- Normalization (making intentional relationships that develop us in our faith par for the course)