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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“ALWAYS WITH JOY”
Philippians 1:1-8

{Jn 15:11} Let’s talk about joy. Christ Jesus has revealed the love of God **“so that”** (quote) **“my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”**

{Gal 5:22; I Co 6:19} **“The fruit of the [Holy] Spirit is ... joy.”** And since he indwells God’s people he will produce joy in us, if in fact we are receiving life in Christ.

{Neh 8:11} In the words of the prophet Nehemiah **“the joy of the LORD is [our] strength.”**

The Gospel requires that we believe in joy, and it virtually necessitates that we experience joy.

This presupposes a distinction between biblical **“joy”** and natural happiness or pleasure. The fundamental difference is that while the latter two depend on circumstances or willpower, **“joy”** is found in God.

Then again, there is a degree of overlap between joy, happiness, and pleasure. It would be ridiculous for us to claim we have joy in Christ if we only ever scowl or perpetually weep bitter tears.

But that does not describe us! Modern American Christians are, as a group, quick to put on a happy face. We listen to radio stations that are “positive and encouraging.” We flock to preachers who promise us our Best Life Now. Ask how we are doing and most of us instantly answer, “Fine!” or “Great!” or “Blessed!”

On the other hand, that happy face is, sometimes, a façade – one which might be getting harder to maintain. There is among believers in this country a growing undercurrent of fear, anger, and gloom.

Have you noticed it? I have. Between personal hardships, seismic shifts in the culture, and the erosion of the Church’s prestige, privilege, and power, discomfort among Christians in the U.S. is on the rise.

That is not all bad. Adversity might inspire us to repent of idolatry, rediscover lament, and devote ourselves to justice, mercy, and disciple-making. In any case, an honest frown is more constructive than a false grin.

Still, life in Christ is not compatible with unrelenting despair. Joy – joy that does not deny sadness but transforms it – is integral to discipleship.

? But is such joy possible?

¿ Is joy possible for believers who are confronted with one disaster after another? Is joy possible for Christians who grieve the immorality, injustice, and idolatry corroding our civilization? Is joy possible for Christ Followers whose brain chemistry all but guarantees clinical depression?

{II Co 11:27} Consider the apostle Paul. He frequently endured deprivation and exhaustion: **“I have labored and toiled and often gone without sleep; have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.”**

{II Co 12:7-9} Paul suffered an unspecified chronic bodily torment, which he referred to as **“a thorn in [his] flesh.”** Quote: **“Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me,”** yet God declined to heal him.

{II Co 11:24-26, NLT, TNIV} Paul was repeatedly subjected to severe persecution and physical danger:

²⁴ Five different times the Jews gave me thirty-nine lashes. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own people, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers.

{II Co 10:10; Gal 2:4-5} Paul was often the target of innuendo, rumors, and false accusation within the church. Competitors ridiculed his appearance, mocked his preaching, slandered his character, contested his doctrine, and attempted to sabotage his ministry.

{II Co 11:28-29} Paul had to contend with a nearly constant barrage of church crises: sexual immorality in Corinth, legalism in Galatia, conflict in Philippi, heresy in Colossae, idleness in Thessalonica, etc. **“I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches,”** he wrote.

{II Co 11:23} Paul’s timeline was punctuated by deprivation, exhaustion, chronic illness or disability, danger, persecution, opposition, and church calamity. To

those who boasted of their sacrifices for Christ, he said: **“I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.”**

- {II Co 7:4} If anyone had reason to be dour and dreary, Paul did. And yet he declared, **“In all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.”**

If Paul could be joyful, any Christ Follower can be joyful. He proves that joy is possible!

- How can we have joy like that?

- ∴ How can we have joy, real joy that does not deny sorrow or trouble but transforms it?

- ∴ How can we have joy in disaster, joy in this world of misery, joy despite our brain chemistry?

- Please turn to Philipians chapter 1. I planned to preach the first 11 verses today, but we will only make it through verse 8.

Paul is writing to thank the church for their generosity, update them about his circumstances, strengthen them for persecution, exhort them to humility and unity, commend his co-laborers Timothy and Epaphroditus, and warn against legalists and libertines. That is a lot of topics crammed into four chapters!

Yet the letter is not disjointed. Paul artfully knits it all together with the underlying theme of joy. **“Joy”** and related words appear a total of sixteen times, in every section of the book. That is why Philipians is called the “Epistle of Joy.”

- Verses 1 and 2 consist of a standard greeting:

¹ **Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,**

To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers [that is, pastors] and deacons:

² **Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

■ The “meat” of the epistle starts in verses 3-4: “³ **I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy**”.

Paul opens with thanksgiving and “joy”: “**I thank my God**” and “**I always pray with joy.**” This sets the tone for the whole letter.

{1 Th 5:16-18} Elsewhere, the connection is made even more explicit: “**Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.**”

In today's text, Paul's gratitude, prayer, and joy are focused on the Philippians themselves. His bond with them in Christ is a source of great gladness.

■ “**I always pray with joy,**” he says, “**because of**” (verse 5) “**your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.**”

📖 Paul uses the Greek word *κοινωνία* [koinōnía]. This can also be translated “**fellowship**”; but here, as in most texts, it implies active participation instead of a static condition.

These Philippians are not passive beneficiaries. They have joined forces with Paul to live out the gospel in ministry to each other and mission to the world.

✈ If we want to have joy, let us work shoulder to shoulder with our brothers and sisters in Christ in service to the kingdom of God.

■ Paul “**always [prays] with joy**”, verse 6, because he is “**confident... that [God] who began a good work in [them] will carry it out to completion...**”

These Philippians do not just believe and belong to the Church. By the grace of God, they are new creatures! He is conforming them to the likeness of his Son Jesus in thought, word, and deed, from the inside out.

✈ If we want to have joy, let us spur each other on to substantial growth in grace, knowledge, holiness, fruitfulness, and strength.

■ Paul “**always [prays] with joy**”, **verse 7a**, because he “[has them] **in [his heart]**” and, **verse 8**, he “[longs] **for all of [them] with the affection of Christ Jesus.**”

First, Jesus is the center and basis of their life together. No natural differences can destroy their relationship. No natural connection can take priority.

Second, God's love for the Philippians energizes Paul to love them. Not only so, it empowers him to like them. His love is not abstract; he feels affection for them.

✈ If we want to have joy, let us cultivate relationships of mutual care and warmth with Jesus at the center.

■ Finally, Paul **“always [prays] with joy,”** verse 7b, because **“whether [he is] in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of [them] share in God’s grace with [him].”**

Paul uses **“in chains”** and similar phrases in verses 13, 14, and 17. In verse 13 he references the **“palace guard,”** and in verse 16 he speaks of being **“put here.”**

“Here” is prison. He is writing from behind bars.

“You share in God’s grace” is not so much a theological statement that they are recipients of God’s mercy and kindness, as it is an acknowledgement that they are conduits of God’s goodness. Paul clarifies this in chapter 4, when he thanks them for meeting his material needs in prison.

✈ If we want to have joy, let us generously share our time, energy, knowledge, skills, and material abundance with brothers and sisters in need.

Paul’s life story proves that it is possible to have joy, regardless of our circumstances – real joy that does not deny sorrow or trouble, but transforms it.

We can find joy in Christ-centered relationship with our brothers and sisters – relationships marked by ministry partnership, shared growth, mutual warmth, and practical care.

This isn’t all there is to joy. But it’s a good start!

Philippians 1:1-8 is the word of the Lord.