

Pastor Don Nelson

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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“THE BUTTERFLY”**  
**Philippians 1:9-11**

☑ In 2014 Beth and I celebrated our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary on Mackinac Island. If you ever go there, we highly recommend a visit to the butterfly house. We went twice.

The “house” is a lush, tropical garden, filled with hundreds, sometimes thousands of individual butterflies, representing dozens of species. One of my favorite kinds is green, white, black, and brown, with a touch of light blue and pale pink, and a wing span of roughly 3 ½ inches.

Here’s a picture of one, resting on Beth’s shoulder. *[photo]*

Some varieties will do that. If you are stationary one might settle briefly, or even remain there for several minutes – as long as you stay still.

This is the thing: if you want one to land on you, you must let *it* to come to *you*. Chase it, and it will desperately attempt to evade you. Catch it, and it will fly away the second it gets the chance – assuming you have not injured it too severely.

☑ Joy is like that. To quote Nathanael Hawthorne, it is **“a butterfly which, when pursued, is always beyond our grasp, but if you will sit down quietly, may alight upon you.”** As Edith Wharton remarked, **“If only we’d stop trying to be happy we could have a pretty good time.”**

We, as a civilization, do not understand this.

We hunt joy and track it and go after it. We catch a glimpse of it and run ourselves ragged in a mad dash to overtake it. Then we lose sight of it and frantically search every nook and cranny, and still it evades us.

Sometimes we grab hold of joy for a moment, only to have it to flutter away or die in our hands. Or it isn’t joy at all, it’s situational happiness; and while that can be lovely, it’s a poor substitute for the real thing.

There is more at stake in this than lost time, wasted energy, and dashed hopes. We can find ourselves doing things we never imagined we would. Some people risk liberty, health, sanity, relationships, even life itself in their no-holds-barred pursuit.

Our desire for joy is not the problem. Since God hard-wired it into us, it is both good and inescapable. Trying to suppress it is futile and self-destructive.

The real problem is that we regard joy as our reason for being when, in fact, it is a magnificent by-product of something greater.

★ The solution to our dilemma is to stop chasing joy, devote our lives to that greater thing, and allow joy to come to us.

‽ The question is: what is “that greater thing”?

Please turn with me to Philippians 1:9-11.

The apostle Paul covers diverse topics in this letter, but he knits them together with the underlying theme of joy. He uses “joy” and related terms a total of sixteen times in Philippians. And although the word

“joy” does not appear in today’s text, it is the undercurrent that moves it along.

□ Verses 9-11:

**<sup>9</sup> And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, <sup>10</sup> so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup> filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.**

● The opening phrase, “**And this is my prayer,**” takes us back to verse 4, which reads: “**In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy...**” In the section in between the apostle explains why he prays “**with joy.**” He “**always**” prays “**for all of [them] ... with joy because**”: (verse 5) they are active co-laborers in the ministry of the Gospel; and “**because**” (verse 6) God has begun in them “**a good work**” of transformation, which he will “**carry ... on to completion**”; and “**because**” (verses 7 and 9) Paul has them in his heart and loves them “**with the affection of Christ Jesus**”; and “**because**” (verse 8), they are funneling God’s grace to him. That is why he prays joyfully for them.

‽ But what is the content of his intercession? What is it that he prays “**with joy**”?

■ Verse 9: “**And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight**”.

Paul is writing in Greek. The language provides him with four words to choose from when he talks about love. He opts for αγαπη [agapē], which is fundamentally different from other kinds of love.

Ερωσ [érōs] is the passionate love of romantic lovers. It depends on feelings of attraction and desire. Αγαπη does not.

Στοργη [storgē] is the domestic love of kin. It depends on family connections, or something approximating that. Αγαπη does not.

Φιλια [philia] is the affectionate love of friends and comrades. It depends on shared loyalties, interests, or experiences. Αγαπη does not.

Αγαπη is unconditional, self-giving love for others, including strangers and enemies. It is manifested in words and deeds of compassion, mercy, justice.

{I Co 13:4-7} Αγαπη is patient [and] kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

Αγαπη does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Αγαπη does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

{I Jn 4:8; Jn 10:10; Ps 103:10} “**God is αγαπη**” in who he is and what he does. He created us for our benefit.

He desires that we all “**have life... to the full.**” When we turn against the LORD “**he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.**”

{Ro 5:8; I Jn 3:1} “**God demonstrates his... love for us**” in countless ways, but above all “**in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**” He seeks us out, but never coerces us into receiving him. “**See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!**”

Each love is splendid in its own way; however, *αγαπη* is superior. The principal commandments, to love the Living God with our whole being and others as ourselves, put *αγαπη* front and center.

{I Jn 4:8} By the power of God at work within us you and I can love like this. Indeed, we must, for anyone who is not doing so “**does not know God.**”

■ Back to verse 9: “**And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight**”.

📖 *Επιγνωσις* [epignōsis] (or “**knowledge**”) is experiential knowledge. It is personal intimacy with YHWH through his Son. It is first-hand awareness of spiritual life and the things of God.

📖 *Αισθησει* [aisthēsei] (that is, “**insight**”) is clear perception. It is the aptitude for accurately “reading” relationships and situations, so that our conduct is constructive and effective.

★ Praying for their love to grow in abundance, maturity, and impact gives Paul joy, for such love brings deep joy to all who are in Christ.

■ “**This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,**” verse 10, “**so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ**”.

{O’Brien} *Αγαπη* shifts our priorities so they align more closely with those of God. The more our love is strengthened by “**knowledge and... insight,**” the better equipped we are “**to distinguish the really important issues in [our] lives together, and to act**” accordingly.

● {Ro 15:16} Having “**the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had**” (Philippians 2:5), and focusing on things that are “**true ... noble ... right ... pure ... [and] admirable**” (4:8), opens us up to be “**sanctified by the Holy Spirit.**” It allows us “**to be conformed to the image of [the] Son,**” so that we are more like him: morally pure in our being, and right in our behavior toward others.

{Lk 12:43} If we are “**able to discern what is best and [are] pure and blameless,**” we will be ready “**for the day of Christ.**” “**It will be good... [if] the master finds [us] doing**” “**what is best**” “**when he returns.**”

★ Praying for their conduct to be spiritually informed, morally excellent, and powered by love gives Paul joy, for such conduct brings deep joy to all who are in Christ.

■ Paul prays that their “**love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight**” so they can “**discern what is best and... be pure and**

**blameless for the day of Christ”** and so they will be, verse 11, **“filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.”**

{Gal 5:22; Mic 6:8} **“The fruit of righteousness”**

consists of ethical qualities such as **“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”** These qualities move us **“To act justly... love mercy and ... walk humbly with ... God”** day in and day out, in every part of our lives.

This **“comes through”** Messiah. The nearer we draw to him, the more we abide in him, the deeper we press into him by means of prayer, worship, study, service, and obedience, the more fruitful we are.

★ Praying for them to bear abundant spiritual fruit in relation to Jesus gives Paul joy, for such fruitfulness brings deep joy to all who are in Christ.

★ All of this is **“to the glory and praise of God”** – and the exaltation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit brings deep joy to his people.

✎ Let us stop chasing the butterfly, devote our lives to the greater things, and allow joy to come to us.

Philippians 1:9-11 is the word of the Lord.