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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“JOY WITHOUT BOUNDS”**  
**Philippians 1:12-18**

{Gal 4:15} Have you noticed the deficit of joy among believers in the US? **“What has happened to [our] joy?”**

There is no shortage of disquiet, no shortage of fear, no shortage of anger, no shortage of gloom among us. Joy is not entirely missing; still, it appears to be in short supply.

{Neh 8:10} **“The joy of the LORD is [our] strength.”**

Why is the Church in this land weak?

{Jn 15:10} Messiah has come **“that [our] joy may be complete.”** Why is joy incomplete among many believers?

{Gal 5:22} **“The fruit of the Spirit is ... joy.”** Why are a lot of American churchgoers producing a scant yield?

I do not want to overstate the problem. There is joy – sometimes great joy – in this congregation.

And if your joy is running low, it is not my intent to make you feel guilty. That would only decrease your joy.

Neither do I wish to misrepresent life in Christ. The Lord does not numb our pain; he heightens our capacity to feel the whole range of human emotion, including pain.

? Nevertheless, which of us does not need purer joy, deeper joy, more abundant joy?

📖 {EDOT} To be clear, biblical joy is not the absence of adversity or sorrow. Joy is **“a delight... that runs deeper than pain or pleasure.”** It is **“a gift of God,”** **“a quality of”** the soul, and **“an integral part of ... relation to”** him.

Real joy does not deny grief and discomfort. It *transforms* it.

☐ Please turn with me to Philippians 1:12-18.

■ Take a look at verse 18. The last phrase in today’s text is **“I rejoice.”**

☆ **“I rejoice.”** That is quite a statement, in light of Paul’s situation. And what is his situation?

■ {Php 1:7} In verse 13 he references the **“palace guard”** and says, **“I am in chains.”** Next in verse 14 he speaks of **“my chains.”** The apostle is writing to the Philippians from behind bars. He is in custody, not for some heinous act, but for **“defending and confirming the gospel.”** He is **“in chains for Christ.”**

{II Co 11:24-27, NLT, TNIV} This is nothing new.

Earlier, in Second Corinthians, Paul said,

**<sup>24</sup> Five different times the Jews gave me thirty-nine lashes. <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> I have labored and toiled and often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.”**

{II Co 12:7-9} These miseries preceded Philippians by up to five years. A lot has happened since then,

including his current imprisonment. And don't forget his chronic illness or disability, his **“thorn in [the] flesh.”** **“Three times”** he begged the Lord **“to take it away,”** but God declined his request. Even so Paul declares, **“I rejoice”!**

? Let us step back and ask, what is the biggest obstacle to joy? What is most likely to rob us of joy?

★ I suspect that, if we were to survey 100 (or 1,000 or 1,000,000) people, the top answer would be unpleasant circumstances.

The basement floods. You get a bad grade on an important test. Your car breaks down. You lose your job. Your husband is diagnosed with cancer.

The problem doesn't have to be all that serious. Life gets hard and joy evaporates.

Paul had it at least as bad as us. He started following Christ and from then on it was all uphill, with a burden on his back and a gale-force wind in his face. In spite of that he said, **“I rejoice”!**

■ Bad circumstances were not all Paul had to deal with. 1:15: **“some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry...”** And verse 17, they **“preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.”**

These are not strangers. They are not outsiders. They are members of the Church!

{Gal 6:10; Eph 2:19; Jn 1:13; Mt 12:50; Phm 16} The Church is a **“family of believers,”** **“members of [God's] household.”** We are **“children... born of God”** the

Father, siblings of his Son. If anyone is in Christ, he or she is our **“dear brother”** or sister.

{I Co 12:24-26} The Church is **“the body”** of Christ. He has **“put [us] together”** in such a way that **“If one part suffers, every part suffers...; if one part is honored, every part rejoices...”**

{Eph 2:21-22; 1 P 2:5} The Church is **“a holy temple in the Lord.”** We, **“like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house,”** **“joined together”** **“to become a dwelling in which God lives.”**

{Mt 19:6} The Triune God has made us to be a family, a body, a temple. **“Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”**

Yet some Christ Followers are taking an adversarial stance against Paul. Their goal is to take his place. Their strategy is to undermine his authority and sabotage his ministry. Their tactic is to **“stir up trouble”** in his absence.

{II Co 10:10; Gal 2:4-5} This is nothing new. He is regularly targeted for innuendo, rumors, and false blame in the Church. Rivals ridicule his appearance, mock his preaching, and slander his character.

Even so Paul declares, **“I rejoice”!**

? Let's consider, what is the second biggest obstacle to joy, after harsh circumstances?

★ I suspect the answer is unpleasant people.

You love learning, you have great teachers – but there are those bullies who love to torment you.

Your work suits you perfectly, and the pay is excellent – but your colleagues make your skin crawl.

You’ve got a beautiful home and you adore your kids – but your wife has turned into a raging alcoholic.

Everything else can be going right. It only takes one or two disagreeable people to steal our joy.

Paul knew at least as many of these as we do. He had plenty of true friends; yet he was also plagued by false friends, pseudo-allies, and outright enemies. In spite of that he said, **“I rejoice”!**

**“I rejoice”** in the face of traumatic circumstances. **“I rejoice”** despite dislikable people.

? How can we have such joy?

■ Look at verse 12: **“what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.”**

■ Verse 13: **“it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.”**

■ Verse 14: **“because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.”**

■ In verses 15-17 Paul contrasts those who **“preach Christ out of goodwill”** and those who are driven by **“envy and rivalry.”** **“But,”** (verse 18) **“What does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this”** – not only what is stated in verses 15-17, but in 12-14 as well – **“I rejoice.”**

✪ His joy knows no bounds because God is utilizing unpleasant things to advance the Gospel!

We tend to over-individualize, over-spiritualize, and over-simplify the Gospel. People could be excused for thinking that belief in Jesus is about getting your sins forgiven and going to heaven when you die.

That is like saying getting married is about dressing up and having a party. It is accurate, insofar as it goes; but it is woefully incomplete.

📖 {Rev 11:15} The Gospel is the Good News that **“The kingdom of the world [is becoming] the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever.”**

📖 {II Co 5:29; I Jn 3:1} It is the Good News that **“in Christ God was”** – and is! – **“reconciling the world to himself ... not counting people’s sins against them, that we should be called children of God!”**

📖 {Lk 7:22} It is the Good News that in Christ **“the blind [see], the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the [Gospel] is preached to the poor.”**

📖 {Mt 22:37; Mic 6:8} It is the Good News that in Christ we can **“love the Lord our God with all [our] heart and with all [our] soul, all [our] mind”** and **“love our neighbor as”** ourselves, as we **“act justly... love mercy, and ... walk humbly with [our] God.”**

📖 {Ac 2:24; Ro 6:5} It is the Good News that Jesus died and rose again **“because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him,”** and **“if we have**

**been united with him in a death like his we will ... also be united with him in a resurrection like his.”**

📖 {Rev 5:9-10} It is the Good News that Christ **“was slain, and with [his] blood [he] purchased... [some from] every tribe ... language ... people and nation ... to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God.”**

And so on. We have barely scratched the surface! The glorious Gospel is so much richer, more beautiful, and more complete than we imagine it to be.

🌀 {II Ti 1:8; Php 3:10} One astonishing thing is that **God invites us to “[suffer] for the gospel,”** not as a punishment but **as a “participation in” Jesus and his “sufferings.”** And whether in comfort or discomfort, whether by living or dying, there is no greater joy than to be intimately, intensely, increasingly united with the Son!

❓ How can we activate this in ourselves? How can we take it from theory to practice, from hypothesis to actuality, from talk to tangibility?

✈ We alter our lives so that we are centered on, and devoted to, the Gospel! This is beyond us. We cannot do it in our strength, by our own will.

{Php 4:8-9} Yet Christ in us is well able to accomplish this in us as we cooperate with him. As we press into Messiah, surrender to his Lordship, attend to what is **“true ... noble ... right ... pure ... lovely ... [and] admirable,”** and **“put... into practice”** what we have received in his Word, our perspective shifts.

As our perspective shifts, we begin to see that everything that happens is a fresh opportunity to participate

in the Gospel. Bad circumstances and interactions with difficult people are bearable because we know God will use them to advance the Gospel. Pleasant circumstances and relationships with likable people are icing on the cake.

{II Co 7:4} Elsewhere, the apostle Paul declared: **“In all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.”**

You and I can have such joy! That can be us!

It will be, when our lives are centered on, and devoted to, the Gospel.

Philippians 1:12-18 is the word of the Lord.