

Joyful Prayer

Philippians 1:1-11

Good morning! It is good to be back together isn't it? And on a Sunday morning even – of all the revolutionary ideas! Who is thankful for air conditioning and lights and running water?

We praise God for his **mercy on Tampa** and that the impact was not more severe here. We are praying for those more affected in Florida and the Caribbean and are discussing how we might be able to serve people as a way to share the love of Christ with them. It certainly seems to me that this is ***an opportunity to engage with people*** about the brevity of life, the awesome power of GOD and the importance of being in a reconciled relationship with Him through Jesus.

Now, if we ever get to thinking that we have it tough...

Imagine the life of the Apostle Paul as he wrote this letter to the church in Philippi. He is sitting under guard in Rome awaiting a verdict from the Emperor that could result in his freedom or his execution – either outcome equally likely. With this uncertainty hanging over him, with a Roman guard literally chained to him and with no support or encouragement coming from the local believers in Rome, Paul does not choose to focus on himself or his circumstances but chooses instead to focus on Jesus and because of that he writes his most joyful letter.

As he lifts his pen to write you can imagine the Apostle **remembering** the work God had done to start the church in Philippi **praising** God for the many people that were drawn to salvation in Jesus.

From the moment they stumbled on Lydia's prayer meeting to the earthquake that released them from prison Paul saw God's hand clearly at work in their lives – and he rejoiced to remember it. The jailer desperately concluding the prisoners were all gone and contemplating his death suddenly found new life in Christ when he asked "What must I do to be saved?" Acts 16:31

God used the unfair arrest of Paul and Silas, their brutal beating and imprisonment to make their miraculous release from prison that much more visible. Paul gratefully remembered how the name of Jesus was honored there in Philippi and how the church there focused on Jesus by supporting him and sending his team on with the Gospel to Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and then Corinth. And the Philippians stuck with him even in his lonely and difficult season in Rome.

The immediate reason for his letter was **to send Epaphroditus** back to Philippi – the church representative they had sent to Paul with gifts for his care on the long and dangerous journey to Rome.

On this journey Epaphroditus almost died – travel was dangerous back then, as Paul’s three shipwrecks demonstrate. But he brought Paul much needed supplies and encouragement at a time when the closer **believers in Rome had utterly abandoned Paul** and had even come to revile him and promote their own agendas. When others left, Epaphroditus came. When other churches abandoned him, the Philippians stuck with him.

We can see from this verse in 2 Timothy that most of the Christians had deserted him *“May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains, but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me earnestly and found me.”* 2 Tim. 1:16-17

This servant of the Lord had to search all over Rome just to find Paul. So the believers there had neglected Paul for so long they had even forgotten where he was! And remember that prison in those days wasn’t like it is now – with a private cell, three meals a day, library resources and a nice exercise yard. **Prisoners depended completely on care from friends** and family. If no one brought you a blanket you shivered at night. If no one brought you food you went hungry and eventually starved to death.

So imagine **Paul – sitting alone** day after day except for the rotating Roman guards who were chained to him. Cold and hungry. Discouraged about the church in Rome and frustrated that he can’t follow his calling and passion to bring the Gospel on to Spain. Add to that the rumors he is hearing from the churches he had planted in Galatia and Corinth that were following false teachers.

In Galatia they were embracing the legalism of the Judaizers who required circumcision and obedience to the Torah to be considered truly Christian. And **in Corinth** they were being led astray into a mysticism that separated body from spirit so it didn’t matter what you did with your body, even if you, say, slept with a temple prostitute. It’s just your body! Your spirit is fine!

Lawless immorality on the one hand and legalistic self-righteousness on the other. Two churches that had taken their eyes off of Jesus.

So Paul puts pen to paper and sends **a thank-you letter** to his faithful sending church in the hands of Epaphroditus, their brave and faithful messenger. *“I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus... your messenger and minister to my need... So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.”* Philippians 2:25,29

While this letter is filled with gratitude and joy it also contains important exhortations to protect the young church from dangers both inside and outside the church.

The central command of this letter is found in chapters three and four – **REJOICE IN THE LORD**. That is our theme for the next fourteen weeks – it is our north star so we can all orient ourselves toward this directional guidepost. That is the key for Paul to being content even in one of the lowest points of his life as he braces himself for the possibility that this might be the very end of his earthly life.

But Paul is *joyful even in his suffering* **because his joy is not attached to his circumstances but to his Savior**. His joy is **IN** THE LORD.

James Montgomery Boice was a powerful Bible preacher in Philadelphia until his death in the year 2000. When he first arrived at the church there in 1968 he decided to preach his first sermon series through the book of Philippians because it is “so simple and at the same time so profound that it speaks profitably to Christians at every level of spiritual understanding, age and maturity” (Boice 9).

Boice summarized Paul’s secret to joy even in his suffering like this: “The secret is a simple one: ***Paul had filled his mind with Christ***... The human mind cannot think of two things at once. You cannot be thinking about the pain in your back in the same moment that you are thinking about crepes suzette. Similarly, you cannot be thinking about your problems in the same moment that you are thinking about Jesus Christ.”

Boice goes on to observe that the word **joy appears 14 times** in the 104 verses of the book – which makes it a central and important theme. But the name **Jesus or Christ appears 17 times** in the first chapter alone. Boice concludes, ***“To be filled with Christ is the secret of real Christian living. It is the secret of true happiness.”***

The only way to find happiness beyond our happenings is to rejoice in the Lord: to make Jesus the central joy of our hearts and the central focus of our minds; to fill ourselves with Christ. This was Paul’s secret to joy in the midst of suffering – Paul’s joy was not attached to his circumstances but to his Savior. **Our joy should not be attached to our circumstances but to our Savior.**

Today, as we walk through the first part of chapter one, we will see that the first step to building a life that is filled with Jesus is to have ***a life that is filled with prayer.***

Paul opens this letter by identifying himself and Timothy, his helper, as **SERVANTS** of Christ Jesus. This was Paul’s central identity: not just a household hired hand, but a *doulos* – a bondsman of Jesus. He belonged to Jesus body and soul, his life was not his own – but was bought with a price. He embraced the mind of Christ who took the very nature of a servant. So Paul calls himself a slave of Christ.

Similarly, he calls the believers in Philippi **“Saints in Christ Jesus.”** directing them from the opening lines of the letter to fix their joy and confidence in ***who they are IN CHRIST.***

Brothers and sisters, be encouraged right here at the outset of our study by this address – we are SAINTS in Christ. **We are not defined by our sin but by our Savior.** In our flesh, we are slaves to sin. But in Christ we are saints – holy and righteous ones – forever free from the penalty and power of sin!

“Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” He will teach the church in chapter four to stop worrying and instead pray about everything with the promise that, **“The peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”** Here at the beginning he greets them with the grace and peace of our loving, Almighty, Triune God.

You can see how the book is beautifully woven together from beginning to end. And as bookends we see first **Paul’s example to begin with prayer** for the church in Philippi and then **at the end his exhortation, commanding them to pray.**

But what is the one thing that we so often neglect? Prayer. What gets crowded out by other urgent and “important” tasks? Prayer.

Though we know that prayer is essential to the Christian life and to fruitful ministry, we can all – myself included – be so quickly seduced to **trust in ourselves with all of our hearts** and to lean heavily on our own understanding, in all our ways we give lip service to God and place our faith firmly and strongly in our own ideas and efforts.

But not Paul. Paul was first and foremost a man of prayer. And so he begins his letter in verse 3 **“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy.”** *Philippians 1:3*

Here we see **the hallmark of Paul’s prayer life – Joy.** If you had to sum up your prayer life in one word, would it be joy? Or would you say, “In every prayer of mine for you all, making my prayer with...” **duty... obligation... making my prayer with frustration... distraction... making my prayer with apathy... the snooze button...**

The key to praying with joy is being like Paul and being filled up with Jesus. Paul could have focused on any number of things but he chose to fix his heart and mind and life and identity on Jesus and Jesus alone. And **by choosing Jesus, he chose joy.**

CHOOSE JESUS → CHOOSE JOY

We can all make the same choice today. As you decide what to focus on – in your life and in your prayers – to choose Jesus is to choose joy.

- We can choose to focus on **ourselves** – our struggles and pains, our fears and worries.
- We can choose to focus on our **sins** – our temptations, desires and failings...
- We can choose to focus on our **achievements** – our successes and reputations...

- We can choose to focus on ***our situations*** – our plans, our things, our ups and downs.
- Or we can choose to focus on Jesus. That is the single choice that can fill us with joy no matter what is going on in our lives.

I have **a friend named Daniel** who I started to get to know at his father's funeral a couple of years ago. Daniel's dad had been a successful physician in the country of Jordan, but he was first and foremost a follower of Jesus and he had a strong burden to pray. One day Daniel's dad called the whole family together and said he felt led to start a **family prayer altar** that would be burning all day, every day.

And so from when Daniel was 11 or 12 years old he would see his mom and dad taking turns throughout the day praying for an hour at a time. Dad would stay up from 10 pm until 2 am praying, then mom would get up and pray from 2-5 am. **Every day**. At 5 am it was his turn, as the oldest son, to get up and pray from 5-6 am. Then his sister would take her turn and so on throughout the day.

If that was my house that pattern would go on for about 45 minutes. But in Daniel's house that pattern continued for the next ***forty years***, right up until the day his father died. Much fruit came from this, such as an ongoing international prayer ministry and a fruitful evangelistic broadcast into the Middle East that has reached thousands upon thousands of Muslims.

But the takeaway I want to share with you from this is what struck me when Daniel spoke at his father's funeral. He said when he was young and was just learning how to pray for a whole hour his father taught him a key lesson. He said if you come to pray and **it is simply work**, simply a task, your mind will wander, you will be bored and you will probably fall asleep. But if you come to pray and **it is WORSHIP** and you spend the time praising Jesus and delighting in the wonder and majesty of the Lord, you will find the time flying by with joy and much fruitfulness.

That is the key difference. Is prayer WORK for you or is it WORSHIP? **To turn prayer from work into worship focus on Jesus.** Make your prayer time all about Him and you will get caught up in His goodness and power and mercy and grace and you will find that you are no longer watching the clock but you are ***simply enjoying being in the presence of your God.***

- Choose Jesus and you will choose joy. Focus on HIM not yourself or your circumstances.

Rejoice in the Lord. One more secret to joyful prayer: **Use your Bible. To turn prayer from work into worship focus on Jesus and use your Bible.** And especially use the Psalms which have been the prayer book of God's people for thousands of years. Use one

Psalm each day, or one prayer of Paul, or another passage that is meaningful to you and let that guide and enrich your prayer time. For example, look at Psalm 37.

“Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.” Psalm 37:4

- This is one of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible. But its meaning is so clear! ***If you delight yourself in the Lord*** – if your joy is fixed in Him so that He is your supreme delight, then you will HAVE the desires of your heart already because HE will have become the desire of your heart!

This is not a promise that if we pray sincerely enough or long enough God will give us whatever is on our latest wish list. This is a promise that if we learn what it means to delight in the Lord we will find **our wish list has changed** and there is only one thing on it: Jesus.

Choose Jesus and choose joy. That is the secret of prayer.

Now let's look at **Paul's pattern of prayer**. The way that Paul prayed that should shape how we pray. Paul's prayer could be summarized in the acronym GRACES. His prayer was **1) Grateful, 2) Relational, 3) Adoration 4) Confident and 5) Emphasizing 6) Spiritual needs.**

It is important that Paul begins with **gratitude**. ***“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you.” Philippians 1:3***

This was Paul's standard opening in his letters to the churches. He would begin by thanking God for the work the Lord had been doing in the hearts and lives of the people at the churches he was writing to. In Ephesians and 2 Corinthians he used the Jewish expression, “Blessed be the Lord,” which was also an expression of gratitude and worship.

It is a wonderful pattern to begin our prayers with thankfulness. This is our standard family pattern in prayer, “Dear heavenly father, thank you for...” Usually we have some requests as we pray for loved ones or missionaries with specific requests but sometimes that is the extent of our prayer time is simply to express gratitude to the Lord for how He is working in and around us.

Joyful, Christ-centered prayer ***rightly begins with gratitude*** because it recognizes that God is actively working in and around us. Look at verse 6 – ***“I am confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion until the day of Jesus Christ.” Philippians 1:6***

God started the work in you and He promises to finish that work. Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith. If we focus on Jesus and all He has done for us, then our prayers will be filled with gratitude.

Second, joyful Christ-centered prayer should be **relational**. It should be focused on PEOPLE. Look at v. 4 ***“Always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy.”*** **Philippians 1:4**

Paul uses the southern “y’all” here to show he is praying for the entire church in Philippi but it’s clear from this book and from Paul’s other writings that he prayed for people by name and prayed over specific situations.

Flip over to chapter 4. ***“Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.”*** **Philippians 4:1-3**

Paul’s prayer life was fueled by his **love for the Lord** which filled him with **love for God’s people**. “My brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown.” Paul was an apostle and missionary **but he was also a pastor**. He loved people.

Back in chapter 1 and verse 7 listen to how he writes: ***“It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart... For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.”*** **Philippians 1:7**

The love of Christ compelled Paul to love the body of Christ. Paul loved and served the church of Jesus Christ and that is what compelled Paul to make prayer for the people of God one of his top priorities. Paul prayed **for PEOPLE**. He prayed relationally.

What does your prayer list look like? What do you pray for regularly? For whom do you pray regularly? Do you have a lot of organizations you pray for? That is good and important. But our prayer time should **PRIMARILY be for PEOPLE**.

John MacArthur wrote this in his commentary on Philippians: “An infallible test of godly joy is the degree to which a believer prays more earnestly for the benefit and blessing of others than his own.” John MacArthur

How much do we pray for ourselves as opposed to praying for other people? If you’re honest and you look over the things you’ve prayed about this past week, how many of them were for YOU and how many were for OTHERS? A joyful believer is one who prays more for other people than for himself.

Around 10 years ago I went to see a Christian counselor for some **marriage advice**. Like many who go into counseling I wanted him to fix my wife and eventually came to realize that I was the one who was broken. One of the assignments that helped me discover this was to pray frequently for my wife.

Pray for her. So simple. And yet, if I was honest, I wasn't very regular about it. That single habit has helped our marriage more than anything else. Pray for your wife. Pray for your husband. The best way you can love another person is by praying for them. Praying for others also produces the wonderful result of JOY!

MacArthur draws that connection – joyful believers pray more for others than they do for themselves. He also makes the converse observation that joyless believers are prayerless believers. “Joyless believers are self-centered, selfish, proud, and often vengeful, and their self-centeredness inevitably manifests itself in prayerlessness.” (22)

Paul poured himself out for believers. He constantly gave of himself to build up the church. And one of the main ways that he loved and served other believers was by praying for them.

Notice his first specific prayer FOR the believers there in v. 9, “***And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more.***” **Philippians 1:9**

Paul expressed his love for the believers and how that love moved him to pray for them. Then he prayed that THEIR love would abound and increasingly overflow.

The object of that love Paul does not specify which probably means that Paul intends both ***a love for God and a love for other people***. The two tend to grow and abound together. The more we love God the more we will love people and the more we will pray for them. Joyful prayer is relational prayer – it is PEOPLE-focused prayer.

Third, joyful prayer is **Adoration**. “***Filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.***” **Philippians 1:11**

As noted in the Secret to Joyful Prayer, we turn prayer from work into worship by focusing on Jesus, by making prayer about simply delighting in Him, enjoying being with Him and in His glorious presence. When we choose Jesus we choose joy. The fruit of righteousness comes only through Jesus Christ.

We cannot be justified apart from trusting in Jesus and we cannot grow toward maturity apart from Jesus – our righteousness comes THROUGH Jesus Christ from beginning to end. And because of that, our growth and service and evangelistic fruit is all to the glory and praise of God. We don't get the credit – Jesus gets all the credit.

And our prayers should reflect this Gospel truth. We are simply adoring Jesus, delighting in and enjoying Him as we pray.

Fourth, joyful prayer is **Confident**. “***And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus.***” **Philippians 1:6**

Our prayers are not flimsy wishes but bold requests to our loving and Almighty Heavenly Father. While we can't have total certainty about WHAT we ask for we can be totally confident in **HOW God answers**. He has a perfect plan that sees the end from the beginning.

He is in control of everything that happens and will use even the most difficult and painful things to maximize His glory and our joy in Him. We should have Paul's certainty to say, **"I AM SURE OF THIS** – that he who began a good work in you WILL bring it to completion."

Our central confidence should be the simple fact that God DID begin a good work in each of us individually and in our church as a local gathering. Paul wrote this to a specific church at a specific time filled with specific believers. This promise was for each of them individually and especially for their little church. Paul saw something in their faith that he was profoundly grateful for – and it was clear evidence of the work of God in and through them.

When you look at your life can you clearly see **God's hand at work in you?** Can you see the beginning of that work when God humbled you and the Holy Spirit brought you a deep conviction of your sin? Can you remember the time or the season in which you came to realize that Jesus Christ is Lord and that you owe Him everything?

Do you still remember **your first love** and the joy you felt when you surrendered your heart and life to Jesus and experienced His forgiveness and grace? Can you see how the Lord has grown and shaped you since that time, helping you better understand the greatness of God and your desperate need for Him? Have you seen how the Lord has worked through you to minister his love to others in the church and to lost and dying sinners in the world?

Let me pause here with an exhortation – if those things ring hollow to you or if you are at all uncertain – listen to Philippians 2:12 and **"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."** **Philippians 2:12**

Nothing is more important in this life than to be crystal clear about where you stand with God and to be absolutely certain that he DID begin the work of salvation in you so that you can have confidence that he WILL bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus. If you are uncertain about this or unclear what it means, please contact me or Dave or one of the elders so we can sit down together soon!

It is the great privilege of the child of God to KNOW that we belong to Him. The Holy Spirit promises to confirm this in each of our hearts – so invite Him to do that and give you that blessed assurance that God WILL finish the work He started in you. **"Those he predestined he also called, those he called he also justified, those he justified he also glorified."** (Rom. 8:30)

And so we pray with confidence in God's unstoppable sovereign plans, His eternally unchanging goodness and His constant loving presence with us. Nothing can separate us from His love! No one can snatch us out of His hand.

Our pattern of prayer is grateful, relational adoration that is confident and finally that emphasizes **SPIRITUAL needs**. ***"Making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel... And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment."*** Philippians 1:5,9

Later in chapter one Paul will invite the believers to pray for his deliverance from prison – so he is not unconcerned with physical needs. But Paul's clear and consistent focus in all of his prayers is the spiritual needs of his brothers and sisters in Christ.

His gratitude for them is focused on their partnership with him in gospel ministry. This is the familiar Bible word for fellowship – **koinonia**. Koinonia means so much more than having a warm gathering over a lavish potluck. It means ***a shared participation*** in a common vision for the glory of God and the advance of the Gospel. Fellowship means **engagement**, laboring together to reach people with the Gospel and train them as followers of Jesus.

And this is precisely what the church in Philippi had done since Paul's first encounters with them. They had become a partner church – a sending church. They did not just give lip service to his needs as a missionary but invested substantially in him so that he can write in chapter 4 ***"I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent."*** Philippians 4:18

Paul's gratitude was focused on the shared vision and partnership he had with the church at Philippi and his prayers for them were also focused on spiritual needs. Look at the details of what Paul prayed for them in vv. 9-11 ***"And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment,¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."*** Philippians 1:9-11

He prayed for ***abounding love*** – and this is not a wishy-washy sentimental emotionalism, this is a love that abounds with knowledge and all discernment. This is a love rooted in truth, in Scripture. The result of this abounding love is holiness – the ability to distinguish good from evil and better from best in order to be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness.

Oh brothers and sisters, may this describe all of us and our fellowship. May we be a church that is filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God!