

PURE AND SIMPLE JOY

In the midst of our hectic schedules and frantic efforts to finish our tasks, do you ever stop and wonder if something is missing in your life? When you take stock of what you are doing does it ever occur to you that you are not happy?

You may feel unfulfilled in your job; it's just a job. Your marriage lacks the spark of when you first married. You students may wonder what the purpose of all this education is and where it's leading. Circumstances like these can get you down and you begin to wonder, "What's missing?"

Where is the joy? Do you have joy in your life? I am not talking about "happiness." The word "happiness" actually comes from the word "happenings." Our happiness is then connected to our happenings, what is happening around us. If our happenings are miserable we are not going to be happy. When an acquaintance you haven't seen for a while walks up and asks "What's happening? What's new?" normally they don't want to hear the bad stuff; they want to know what's making you happy so they can walk away with a smile. Often I don't know what to say when people ask me this.

Joy is so different from happiness. Where happiness depends on what is happening, with joy it doesn't matter what's happening. While happiness is greatly affected by circumstance, joy is rooted deep within. I read this definition the other day: joy is a deep, enduring confidence in God. It doesn't matter what's happening when I have the joy of the Lord. Isn't that something? Do you want this joy?

I am very excited about this series we are starting today. Philippians is a letter Paul wrote that largely speaks of the joy we Christians are supposed to have. I sense from others here too that you are looking forward to an upbeat series from this letter. Paul really spent a lot of time correcting the churches under his care. With Philippi he shared a really significant element of our faith: JOY. As we begin these lessons together we are going to discover the life of joy.

1. Foundations for Spiritual Joy

a) Paul and Timothy – To understand the irony of Paul's joy in this letter we need to understand where he was. If it isn't ironic it certainly is paradoxical since he really needn't have felt joy where he was. Where was Paul?

It is clear that he was in chains when he wrote to the church at Philippi (1:13-14). Worse yet, we gain the impression that he is nearing the end of his life. It may be that he was facing execution at this point as he said in 2:17 that he was being poured out like a drink offering, a reference to sacrifice and thus to death. Tradition tells us that he was imprisoned for two years without trial when he wrote.

Where were Paul and Timothy? Paul was imprisoned four times in his lifetime: once each in Philippi, Caesarea, Jerusalem and Rome. Obviously he was writing to Philippi so he wasn't there, and without boring you about the details, scholars tell us that he was most likely in Rome. That means that Paul's premonition was correct: his life was coming to an end.

So here is Paul, chained up to a guard, under house arrest, facing execution, and he is writing about joy. He has limited movement though he can entertain some guests. He can't go on preaching and visiting the churches like he would like to. He may have grown despondent as he was preaching about the Deliverer, Jesus Christ, but now abandoned to a prison. Yet he speaks of joy...and he gladly begins, "**Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus...**"

b) To the Saints... - This gets crazier yet. Paul remains content to be a servant of Jesus though he is in prison. Then he writes his address, "**To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi...**"

He does not write to the community or to the city of Philippi. Paul specifically writes to the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi. What does he mean by "saints"? Paul means for his letter to be read by those who are "separate in Christ Jesus" and living in Philippi. The word "saint" comes from the root word "holy." God is holy, meaning he is separate from all others because of His goodness and rightness. And God tells his people, "**Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy**" (Lev 19:2). So those who are in Christ Jesus are holy, they are separate, they are saints.

What is really at the heart of the matter is this: to be a saint is not a reaction to our world but a response to it; to be a saint is not a determination to be different from the world, but to be like God. And when we become like God we will just naturally be different. God is joy so to be like God is to be joyful. That will cut like a bright light in a despondent world.

c) Grace and Peace – This is not just a mere greeting. You know how some people throw out a “God bless you” and you think “Yeah, whatever.” It’s not heartfelt; it’s not sincere. Well, Paul means this from the bottom of his heart and mind: **“Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”** (v. 2). These are the elements of our joy.

These two words pack a punch. They are the essence of our salvation. With grace we understand that God has been gracious in that he chose to show incredible favor towards helpless and bankrupt sinners. Grace is God coming to us in free, unprovoked love, to give us the opposite of what we deserved. We have come to know this grace through the blood of Christ which is an experience of “the riches of his grace.”

Through that grace we now have peace with God. But peace is more than the end of hostility between us and God. Peace here in Philippians is an inner assurance and tranquility that God gives to believers. This peace is our confidence even when we are facing troubles of many kinds.

The result of grace and peace in the heart of the believer who has understood what he or she has received is this: the joy of their salvation. When you have grace and peace through God and his Son Jesus, you have the gift of joy.

This is the basis of Paul’s reality in Christ.

2. The Joy of being Incomplete

Joyful people are people who can give thanks to God in any circumstance. Paul was very thankful for what he saw in the church at Philippi. What makes you rejoice over our church and our faith?

a) Give thanks for the Church – Paul was thankful for the church at Philippi, and with good reason. He wrote, **“I thank my God every time I remember you”** (v. 3).

In my studies I found that there was a kind of cryptic message in this sentence. Peter O’Brien suggested that buried in this short string of words was a “thank you” for the gift the Philippians had sent. This gift is mentioned more directly in 4:18. What is implied here is that this is a church that cares. They care about the missionary, the founder of their church. They care that he is suffering and want to provide for his needs. They don’t see a leader who has it all together but they go out of their way to see a need and offer help.

For Paul this was a special church. These believers took the gospel to heart and showed that they wanted to live it out. Paul wrote later in this letter about them, **“...as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only...”** (4:15). As new believers they were quickly impressed with the calling to share with others and help make the gospel known.

b) Give thanks for your partnership – Paul continues to give thanks, almost repeating himself: **“In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now...”** (4-5).

That word “partnership” comes from the Greek word “Koinonia”. You may have heard it many times before. It is often translated as fellowship, but it best thought of here as partnership or cooperation. The word originally had commercial overtones. If two men bought a boat and started a fishing business, they were said to be in koinonia – a formal business partnership. They had a common vision and invested all they had in seeing it become a reality.

So fellowship isn’t about coffee, it’s about having the same vision for sharing the gospel and investing personally to make sure that happens. Paul could see that the Philippians did just that. He saw

it in their prayers for him (1:19), in their own proclamation of the gospel (1:27), and in their willingness to suffer with Paul (1:30) despite the embarrassment of being in prison.

I like the word “partnership” or koinonia. At our first meeting with our new deacons I shared that as a pastor I didn’t want advisors on this board. Rather, I wanted partners. Advisors are like armchair quarterbacks who know the right plays but never get in the game. Partners in contrast, will throw themselves into the game and invest their energy for the gospel. But there is no fear in KEMC because I have seen a lot of koinonia here, and I am thankful for you all.

c) Give thanks for God’s faithfulness – The third and key element that Paul is thankful for is God’s faithfulness in his plan for you and me. Paul said, “...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” (v. 6).

This is great cause for joy and we need to hear this. This is the joy of being incomplete, yet still in process. Paul’s confidence can be broken down into three parts here: 1) God began a good work in you (salvation); 2) God will continue what he began (sanctification); 3) God guarantees the outcome (glory).

I know when you think of the day you came to accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you remember it as something you did. We all remember it that way. Lydia might agree saying how she heard Paul preach and was convinced that what he was saying was true and she chose to believe in Jesus. Lydia was baptized right there in a stream close to Philippi. But read how Acts 16:14 describes her experience: “The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.” Now clearly she chose Christ, but God opened her heart to do so. It was God who began the good work in her and in you and in me. You can be certain of this, that if God willed my salvation, he will complete it. And if someone you know has not chosen Christ yet, they are in the Lord’s hands, it is not your burden to make it happen. Our burden is to pray and to witness, but God is the one who makes it happen.

You can also look at yourself and critique your weak faith and your poor service, as you see it in your own evaluation, and know that you are wrong. God is not finished with you yet. You are not yet what God has intended. Not perfect? Join the club. But God ain’t done yet. Take great joy in this truth.

The guarantee that God will carry it on to completion until Christ returns is not just for future consideration. It is also a guarantee that in every experience of every day God is putting on the finishing touches on you. Good news, bad news, difficulty, blessing, unexpected happiness, unexpected trouble – you can know this: it all has a purpose.

3. Joy of Sharing a Common Vision

Pastor Pete talked about vision a couple of Sundays ago and we could tell it got people thinking. When a church like ours defines its vision and has a sense of where it is going there is a greater joy in the journey. What I mean is, we band together for a common purpose and an excitement grows for what can be.

Paul and the Philippian church had this common vision. Paul said, “It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me” (v. 7).

The assurance Paul had was that even if he was chained up, or, as the text suggests, in court before Roman authorities, he knew there were others doing the work of Christ where he could not. We even see in later verses that some were preaching Christ out of selfish ambition or to steal some of Paul’s fame, if that were possible. But because of his love for the gospel, for Christ himself, Paul could shrug and say “So what?”

So what? This is part of the common vision he had and which can be ours as well. It is a vision of who Jesus is and how our relationship with him affects everyday life. Some of this is best summed up in Paul’s words to the Corinthians: “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are

achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Cor 4:16-18).

This is incredible when you think of what Paul went through. He was shipwrecked a few times, stoned and left for dead, imprisoned, had a price on his head, and was often chased by mobs of angry people. But he says, “So what?” This is nothing compared to knowing Jesus, because as I said in the beginning, Jesus is the source of his true joy. In comparison, everything is “no big deal.”

Kind of makes you think, doesn't it? Your son doesn't clean his room after you asked for the fifteenth time; gas prices continue to climb and you wonder if you can afford a fuel efficient car; or you just can't seem to catch a break in life...are we going to allow these light and momentary things to steal our joy? Are we going to allow the little things to anger us? Or can we say with Paul, “So what?”

What mattered to Paul was the gospel of Jesus Christ. When Paul and Silas cast a demon out of a girl in Philippi, the city thanked them by throwing them in jail. Remember, an earthquake came and opened the jail and the jailer thought everyone had escaped. He was going to kill himself but Paul said they were still there. The Jailer asked Paul and Silas, “Sirs what must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...” (Acts 16:30-31). Later Paul preached to the jailer's family and it says this, “...the whole family was filled with joy, because they had come to believe in God” (v. 34).

You see, that's all that mattered. Believing in Jesus was all that mattered and this faith brought such joy. Does your faith do that for you? Do you share that vision of Jesus?

Conclusion

Let's compare happiness and joy again. Happiness is external (depends on happenings); joy is internal. Happiness is based on circumstances; joy is based on Christ. Happiness is based on chance; joy is based on choice.

Choice! There is the rub. Will you choose with me to be joyful? The joy of believing in Jesus Christ is so pure and simple it eludes us. We go looking for the experience that will make or break our moods. We search for meaning in life by what we do. We yearn with all our hearts to find purpose. And everything we need is beneath our proverbial noses in the Word of God. We miss it! We honestly miss the pure and simple joy of knowing Jesus. May the Lord open our hearts to respond to this simple message.

Paul confidently believed in God's testimony: “God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ” (v. 8). And God knows how I too long for all of you to know the joy that comes from believing, simply believing in Jesus Christ.

AMEN