

Joy in Spite of Trouble

Scripture: Philippians 1:12–14

Code: 50-7

INTRODUCTION

The theme of Philippians 1:12-26 is joy in ministry. The keynote is Paul's declaration, "I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice" (v. 18). He wrote that statement in the midst of some very difficult circumstances. Yet in spite of the difficulties, Paul rejoiced in the ministry God had given him.

A. The Believer's Joy Amidst Difficulties

A believer's spiritual maturity can be measured by what it takes to steal his joy. Joy is part of the fruit of a Spirit-controlled life (Gal. 5:22). We are to rejoice always (Phil. 4:4; 1 Thess. 5:16). In all circumstances the Spirit of God produces joy, so there ought not to be any time when we're not rejoicing in some way.

Yet though we should not allow circumstances to make us sullen, bitter, or negative, the one thing that will rob our joy is sin. It's then we cry out like the psalmist, "Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation" (Ps. 51:12). Nothing short of sin should steal our joy. But change, confusion, trials, attacks, unmet desires, conflict, and strained relationships can throw us off balance and rob us of our joy of we're not careful.

We ought to expect trouble. Jesus said, "In the world you [will] have tribulation" (John 16:33). The apostle James said, "Consider it all joy ... when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance" (James 1:2-3). God has His own profound purpose in our afflictions, but it's never to take away our joy. To maintain our joy we must adopt God's perspective regarding our trials. When we yield to the working of His Spirit in our lives, our difficulties will not overwhelm us.

B. Paul's Joy Amidst Difficulties

The apostle Paul seems almost larger than life because his joy knew no bounds. As you read through his letters, it seems that the greater the trial he faced, the greater his joy. His life is a living illustration of severe affliction mingled with supreme joy.

Paul was in Rome when he wrote to the Philippians, which is exactly where he wanted to be for many years (Rom. 15:23). He had written the Roman church that he had wanted to minister to them (Rom. 1:11) and perhaps use Rome as a base from which to reach out to Spain (Rom. 15:24).

But when Paul wrote to the Philippians, his circumstances were not in accord with what he had planned. He told the Romans of his desire to "have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come

to [them]" (Rom. 1:10, KJV). But instead he came to Rome in chains as a prisoner and only after being shipwrecked.

1. His journey to Rome

Acts 21-28 explains how Paul ended up in Rome. It began with his return to Jerusalem after his third missionary journey. To affirm he was still living in obedience to the law, he went to the Temple to participate in a ceremony. There he was accused of teaching against the law and violating the Temple, was attacked by a mob. He might have been killed had he not been rescued by Roman soldiers. They kept him in custody to protect him from his Jewish enemies.

As time went on, Paul became a point of contention between the Jewish and Roman authorities. Hearings before Governors Festus and Felix, and an audience with King Agrippa brought no disposition of Paul's case. As a result he languished for two years as a prisoner in Caesarea (where the Roman army was garrisoned). Eventually he appealed to Caesar and was dispatched by ship to Rome.

On arrival in Rome he spent another two years in prison (Acts 28:30). During that time he wrote what are known as the prison epistles, including Philippians. He was given an initial opportunity to defend himself (perhaps alluded to in Philippians 1:7). At that time he probably spoke of his belief in Christ and his calling to preach the gospel. The Roman emperor at the time was Nero, so when Paul wrote to the Philippians, he was waiting for Nero to make up his mind regarding his case. Months may have passed while awaiting word of release or execution.

2. His house arrest

The conditions of Paul's imprisonment were unusual. Acts 28:16 says, "When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him." He was not put in a prison with other criminals--he had not committed any crime against Roman law. The Roman authorities probably realized there was no real criminal charge against Paul, yet because they could not release him before his case was adjudicated, they allowed him to be a private prisoner in his own quarters.

Paul was under constant guard. Verse 20 records his saying to Jewish leaders in Rome, "I requested to see you and to speak with you, for I am wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel." The Roman government was sufficiently anxious about Paul that he was kept chained to a guard twenty-four hours a day. Roman custom provided for a change in guard every six hours, so Paul would have had four different men chained to him during the course of a day.

Nevertheless, Paul had many freedoms. He was allowed to see visitors (vv. 17, 23) and stay in a private residence (v. 30). He was allowed to preach and teach there, and may have been allowed to leave for the same purpose (vv. 30-31). The sphere of his preaching and teaching was essentially unhindered, and included a captive audience--the Roman soldiers chained to him.

Yet that was a far cry from the freedom he previously enjoyed journeying throughout a large part of the Roman Empire, founding and strengthening churches, and training leaders. He was always on the move to realize his apostolic commission to the greatest extent possible. He still sought to fulfill his commission even though he was imprisoned in Rome. Yet he did not have the solitude that the man of God craves for his personal worship. Even for the little tasks of life he knew no privacy. In

sleep, while writing, while eating--he always had to endure the presence of the soldier he was chained to.

3. His response to the Philippians

The Philippians hadn't heard from Paul in a long time, yet by some means were aware that he was in prison at Rome. They loved him deeply and had always been compassionate and sympathetic toward him. So they were concerned about him and sent Epaphroditus to Rome to seek the answer to two questions: What was Paul's condition, and what was the condition of the gospel? They also sent along a monetary gift (Phil. 4:18-19) and commissioned Epaphroditus to help Paul as a loyal friend and companion (Phil. 2:25-30).

Paul wrote to the Philippians to answer their questions. Paul's letter is full of joy and rejoicing because, in spite his circumstances, the gospel was going forward and he had joy in his ministry. He didn't want the Philippians to worry needlessly about him, so he emphasized his joy throughout his letter to them.

- a) Philippians 1:3-4--"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all."
- b) Philippians 2:17--"I rejoice and share my joy with you all."
- c) Philippians 3:1--"Rejoice in the Lord." d) Philippians 4:4--"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!"

Paul's joy was unrelated to his circumstances. If his joy had been tied to pleasures on earth, possessions, freedom, prestige, outward success, or a good reputation, he wouldn't have had any joy. Paul's joy was centered on his ministry and was indifferent toward all other things. He had joy in spite of trouble as long as Christ's cause advanced. He had joy in spite of detractors as long as Christ's name was proclaimed. He had joy in spite of death as long as Christ was exalted. And he had joy in spite of the flesh as long as Christ's church was assisted.

LESSON

I. JOY IN SPITE OF TROUBLE (vv. 12-14)

"Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear."

Paul had joy in spite of trouble. Even though he was in chains he rejoiced because he knew Christ's cause progressing. That's in contrast to what we might think. Because of Paul's circumstances, it would be natural think his ministry had been totally crippled.

When Paul said, "I want you to know," he was using a phrase often used in ancient letters. Today we might write, "I want you to understand this," and we would be saying much the same thing Paul meant. The phrase is significant for two reasons: Paul was pointing to the importance of what he was about to write, and he was signaling that it could be easily misunderstood and therefore needed to be

read carefully. It is a positive way of restating the phrase, "I do not want you to be unaware" (Rom. 1:13; 1 Cor. 10:1; 12:1; 1 Thess. 4:13). The Philippians might have thought his imprisonment was a terrible thing, but Paul wanted them to understand it was just the opposite.

Paul called the Philippians "brethren"--a term of endearment used three other times in this epistle (3:1, 13; 4:1). That expresses the intimate fellowship that existed between Paul and the Philippian church. They were dear friends bonded in love as children of God. It was important to Paul that his dear brethren know that his circumstances, rather than hindering the gospel, had actually advanced it.

Paul knew that God had worked out a far better plan than he could have on his own. His ministry had not been shut down but expanded. The New American Standard translates verse 12 to read, "For the greater progress." A better translation would be, "Rather for the progress," which better reflects the meaning of the Greek text. Paul was emphasizing that things had turned out differently than one might have expected.

What Makes You Tick?

The progress of the gospel was the passion of Paul's life. How about you--what motivates you, sucks up your energy, dominates your time, makes you tick? It was of little consequence to Paul what happened to his own body or career. In Acts 20:24 we find him saying, "I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, in order that I may finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus." Life, possessions, clothes, recognition, reputation, and prestige were all yielded up to one goal: "to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God" (v. 24). To the Roman church Paul wrote, "I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome" (Rom. 1:15). In 1 Corinthians 9:16 he said, "Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel." Paul was driven to see the progress of the gospel--a model for every Christian. Are you that kind of person?

The Greek word translated "progress" (prokope) refers to something moving forward in spite of obstacles, dangers, and distractions. Commentator William Barclay said it was "specially used for the progress of an army or an expedition. It is the noun from the verb prokoptein, which means to cut down in advance. It is the verb which is used for cutting away the trees and the undergrowth, and removing the barriers which would hinder the progress of an army" (The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians, rev. ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], p. 20). The chief obstacle for Paul was his imprisonment, but that proved to be no obstacle to the advancement of the gospel.

"The gospel" refers to the message of salvation. It is mentioned in verses 5, 7, 12, 16, and 27. That repetition shows the extent to which the gospel was on his heart. He lived to preach and advance it. And he had learned that every means used to stop the message of Christ only ended up furthering it.

A. The Advance of Christ's Cause Outside the Church (v. 13)

"My imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else."

Paul always saw himself as a prisoner because of Christ--never because of crime. He was in chains because he believed in, preached, and represented Jesus Christ.

Acts 28:20 says that Paul wore a chain, and in Ephesians 6:20 Paul speaks of himself as "an ambassador in chains." The usual Greek word for a prisoner's bonds is desmos (e.g. Acts 26:29). But in the above two instances, Paul's bonds are described as halusis--a short chain attached to the wrist of a prisoner and his guard. That was the kind of chain that bound Paul to his guard twenty-four hours a day. Escape was impossible and privacy non-existent.

1. Paul's ministry among the guard

The result of such close confinement was that the cause of Christ had "become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard." They were the men chained to Paul night and day. From the point of view of the Roman government, Paul was a captive chained to a Roman guard. But from Paul's point of view, the Roman guards were captives chained to him! What an opportunity to evangelize! Far from being a burdensome condition, Paul had been given the opportunity to witness for Christ to each guard assigned to him, at six hours a stretch. Perhaps Christians in Rome were praying for the opportunity to reach Caesar's household and the elite praetorian guard. And perhaps there had been no way to do it. Yet the Lord in His wisdom provided the very opportunity that man could not--He made the whole praetorian guard captive to Paul so he could evangelized them.

What did those soldiers see? Paul's godly character, graciousness, patience, love, wisdom, and conviction. As a result many of the guard may have become a second line of local evangelists, telling all they knew about this unique man who was a prisoner because he preached about Christ. It soon became well known that Paul was in chains because of his zeal to preach Christ. As the praetorian guard was converted, salvation spread beyond them to "those of Caesar's household (Phil. 4:22).

In the King James Version Philippians 1:13 reads, "My bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace" (emphasis added). The Greek word praitorion could refer either to a building (such as a commander's headquarters, a general's residence, a wealthy person's house, or the emperor's palace) or the group of men who made up the Roman imperial guard. Since Paul was not in the palace but a private house, most commentators think praitorion here refers to the imperial guards who were in charge of guarding Paul. They were associated with the emperor's palace because they guarded the emperor and furthered his interests.

Paul's impact was derived from more than just his ability to articulate the gospel and his godly lifestyle. The intense affliction Paul endured must have lent tremendous credence to his message and actions. The guards all knew how he suffered and that his life was on the line. That must have produced a certain awe in them toward Paul. So Caesar's household began to fill up with saints.

The commentator F.B. Meyer wrote, "At times the hired room would be thronged with people, to whom the Apostle spoke words of life; and after they withdrew the sentry would sit beside him, filled with many questionings as to the meaning of the words which this strange prisoner spoke. At other times, when all had gone, and especially at night ... soldier and Apostle would be left to talk, and in those dark, lonely hours the Apostle would tell soldier after soldier the story of his own proud career

in early life, of his opposition to Christ, and his ultimate conversion, and would make it clear that he was there as a prisoner, not for any crime, not because he had raised rebellion or revolt, but because he believed that He whom the Roman soldiers had crucified, under Pilate, was the Son of God and the Saviour of men. As these tidings spread, and the soldiers talked them over with one another, the whole guard would become influenced in sympathy with the meek and gentle Apostle, who always showed himself so kindly to the men as they shared, however involuntarily, his imprisonment....

"If there had been the least divergence, day or night, from the high standard which he upheld, his soldier-companion would have caught at it and passed it, and passed it on to others. The fact that so many became earnest Christians, and that the Word of Jesus was known far and wide throughout the praetorian guard, indicates how absolutely consistent the Apostle's life was" (The Epistle to the Philippians [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952], pp. 36-37).

2. Paul's ministry to the city

Beyond the praetorian guard, Paul's confinement gained him attention throughout the city. Acts 28 tells us that many Jewish people visited Paul, and some believed (vv. 23-24). For the two years of his confinement Paul "was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching concerning then Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered" (vv. 30-31).

Paul became headline news--he became known "to everyone else" (Phil 1:13). Rome wasn't so big that word of Paul and his message couldn't spread. In our own country, if an entire branch of government was significantly impacted by the gospel, the whole country would know. "Everyone else" embraces the whole of Rome.

You may find yourself thinking, I can't go and preach the gospel. I can't be an evangelist, a missionary, a pastor, or a Bible teacher. I'm stuck with my job. But the lesson here is that it doesn't matter whether you're chained to a desk, an assembly line, a classroom, a car, or a sales position--they all provide opportunities for you to further the gospel. Whatever you're chained to, you must live in a way that makes the gospel believable. The worse your confinement, the greater the opportunity for a godly life to shine. People often tell me how hard it is to witness where they work. My reaction is that it is generally harder to witness under ideal conditions than in more difficult situations. That's because in difficult situations the reality of a transformed life is more apparent and that can't help but be attractive.

B. The Advance of Christ's Cause Inside the Church (v. 14)

"Most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear."

Paul's imprisonment also had an impact within the church at Rome. The implication of verse 14 is that before Paul's imprisonment, the church in Rome lacked courage. Paul's witness from his place of confinement was having a marvelous effect on the church's boldness.

The church's lack of boldness is understandable. The Jewish leaders in Rome had told Paul that Christianity was "spoken against everywhere" (Acts 28:22). Paul himself was a living example of the current hostility to the gospel. Doubtless many in leadership were saying, "We don't want to end up in jail! If we want to keep our freedom we better not say very much."

They might also have feared that their imprisonment would halt the progress of the gospel. We often see that attitude among Christian leadership in our own country. In our hurry to maintain our religious freedoms, we forget that in Communist China the church has flourished better without freedom than the church in the United States has with freedom. God overrules obstacles and purifies His church through adversity.

When the church in Rome saw God provide for Paul and enable him to have an incredible opportunity for outreach, "most of the brethren"--the majority--confidently proclaimed the gospel. They realized that since God could minister through Paul in his condition, He could minister through them as well. As Paul's strength became theirs, the leadership in Rome began "to speak the word of God without fear" (v. 14).

Paul's joy was strictly related to the advance of the gospel. His chains benefited not only the church but also had become an effective line of communication to the elite soldiers of the Roman empire, who were in the position of carrying the gospel to the ends of the earth.

CONCLUSION

Does your joy ebb and flow according to the tide of earthly benefits? Do pleasure, possessions, prominence, prestige, reputation, comfort, and fulfillment of your own ambitions propel your joy? If they do, your joy will ebb and flow according to the shifting tides of life. But if your joy is tied to the progress of the gospel, it will never diminish. Fix your heart on the progress of the gospel and your joy will be as constant as the extension of God's kingdom (cf. Matt. 16:18).

Focusing on the Facts

1. What is the theme of Philippians 1:12-26?
2. What is one measure of a believer's spiritual maturity?
3. Nothing short of _____ should steal our joy.
4. When we yield to the working of God's Spirit in our lives, our _____ will not _____ us.
5. How were Paul's circumstances in Rome different from what he had originally planned?
6. Explain how Paul ended up in Rome.
7. Explain the unusual circumstances of Paul's imprisonment.
8. How did the Philippian church react to Paul's imprisonment?

9. What was Paul's joy centered on?
10. What is significant about the phrase "I want you to know" in Philippians 1:12?
11. What does the term "brethren" express about Paul's relationship with the Philippian church?
12. True or false: in verse 12 Paul was emphasizing that things had turned out exactly as one might expect.
13. Explain the meaning of the Greek word prokope and give an illustration of it.
14. What is the probable meaning of the Greek word praitorion in Philippians 1:13? Explain why.
15. What were the results of Paul's ministry in the city of Rome (Phil. 1:13; 4:22)?
16. Why is it generally harder to witness under ideal conditions than in more difficult situations?
17. What marvelous effect did Paul's ministry have on the church in Rome (Phil. 1:14)?

Pondering the Principles

1. In a world wracked with pain, violence, and heartache, a person who radiates joy is a rare commodity. Yet joy is to be the distinctive of every Christian, making him or her winsome to those seeking spiritual answers in an unbelieving world. The Puritan Thomas Watson wrote, "Spiritual joy is a sweet and delightful passion, arising from the apprehension and feeling of [God's goodness and favor], whereby the soul is supported under present troubles, and fenced against future fear" (A Body of Divinity [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965], p. 267). Who does not desire such joy? Is your life characterized by a joy that makes unbelievers wonder what you have that they don't?
2. To have joy in the midst of trials requires a mind fixed on something trials cannot touch. Thomas Manton said, "If a man would lead a happy life, let him but seek a sure object for his trust, and he shall be safe: 'He shall not be afraid of evil tidings: his heart is fixed, trusting the Lord' [Ps. 112:7]. He hath laid up his confidence in God, therefore his heart is kept in an equal poise" (cited in The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations, I.D.E. Thomas, ed. [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977], p. 160). What determines the joy in your life--your circumstances, which shift like desert sand, or the Lord Jesus Christ, the rock of salvation (cf. Matt. 24-27)?

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