

“THROUGH THE BIBLE”

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PHILIPPIANS 1-2

The British people were angry. Their princess was dead, yet the flag wasn't flying at half-mast over Buckingham Palace. Not even the death of Princess Diana could change a royal tradition. The Queen's Standard never flies at the Palace, *not even at half-mast*, unless the Queen is in the house.

It's been said, “Joy is the flag that indicates King Jesus is in residence in the palace of our hearts.” The book of Philippians is all about joy - but its message is that at times the flag flies at half-mast. The joy of the Lord is present even in the midst of tough times and trails and heartbreak. The believer's joy is not dependent on smooth, happy circumstances.

It's amazing that this letter on joy begins with a couple of guys in jail... Chapter 1, “Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ...” It's the year 62 AD. Paul is in a Roman prison awaiting his day in court before the wicked emperor, Nero. Whether he lived or died was about to be decided. It could go either way. The book of Philippians is one of four letters - along with Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon - that we call “*The Prison Epistles*.” They were written during Paul's incarceration in Rome. He's behind rusted bars, yet he is brimming with joy. *It's joy from a jail cell.*

But also imagine... A doctor just diagnosed a cancer, but God has given you a peace... You just got a pink-slip, but you know God is in control... Your friend died in an accident, but your sure he's in a better place... **Joy at half-mast** is the theme of Philippians!... And how to experience it in the midst of any situation is the secret that's revealed in it's four chapters.

Paul writes, “to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi...” The town of Philippi was in the region of Macedonia. It was one of Paul's initial stops after sailing across the Aegean Sea, from Turkey to Greece. Acts 16 recounts the start of its church. The Philippians were some of the very first Europeans to receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

He writes to “*all the saints... with the bishops and deacons...*” “*Bishop*” means “*overseer*” - “*Deacon*” means “*servant*.” These were the two categories of leadership in the early church that helped the pastors. The bishops, or elders, concerned themselves with ministering to the spiritual needs of the Church. Whereas, the deacons were the *designated doers*. They served the physical needs of the fellowship.

To all the church Paul writes, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” My daughter, Natalie, is having twins - a boy and a girl. And I love how she informed us. When we cut into her cake half the slice was pink, and the other half of the cake was blue. Two colors made up the same slice. And this is also true of the Gospel. It's a slice of God's blessing in two colors. Grace drew Jesus to the cross. Peace now reigns in the aftermath. The NT is all about God's grace and peace.

Verse 3, "I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ..." One of the reasons Paul could rejoice - could literally *take joy* - in any circumstance is that He was totally confident that what God had started He would finish. I'm notorious for starting projects I don't finish. I have jobs that just keep rolling over to the next honey-do list. But I'm not the only one... Michelangelo was a genius - a sculptor, and a painter. His statues of Moses and David are among the world's masterpieces. Yet there's an entire museum in Florence, Italy that's dedicated solely to [Michelangelo's unfinished works](#).

But not so with Jesus. [What He starts - He finishes](#). I know you're discouraged - you've tried and failed - but take heart, Jesus hasn't begun His work in you to leave you high and dry. He doesn't abandon us in midstream. He intends to *hang in there with you*, so you *hang on to Him*. Jesus has no unfinished projects!

Verse 7, "Just as it is right for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as both in my chains and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers with me of grace. For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ." I love this beautiful statement Paul makes of the Philippians, "*I have you in my heart*." Paul's life was full of joy and here's a reason why... [His priority was people](#). Not stuff, but people. Paul wasn't concerned with the clothes on his back, or the roof over his head - there's no joy in those things. His life revolved around the friends in his heart.

At his retirement party, a fellow made this statement, "[As I look back on my career my fondest memories are not of the money I made, or the goals I accomplished, but the relationships I formed](#)." As Paul said of the Philippians, "*because I have you in my heart*." Life gets joy-less not when we go through tough times, but when we go them alone. The road is hard, but don't let it get lonely. Keep your heart full of people.

And Paul prayed for his friends, "[And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment...](#)" As your pastor I have a very real fear that the more you get to know me the less you'll like me. People see me up front, and think, "[wow, Sandy seems like a really cool guy](#)." They come up afterwards, and make nice comments, and I smile - but in the back of my mind I'm thinking... "[What's going to happen when this person realizes I'm not the perfect pastor. I make mistakes, I pick my nose, I fight with my wife](#)." Getting to know me is risky!

This is why if you want to experience joy its crucial you fix your eyes on Jesus, and no one else. Jesus is the only person of which it can be said, "[The more you get to know Him, the more you're going to like Him!](#)" He has no downside. He is thoroughly cool! Remember that when you pray for someone. All that keeps that person from falling head over heels in love with Jesus is to get to know Him better. [Our love for Jesus abounds as we grow in our knowledge of Jesus](#).

Paul also prays, "[that you may approve the things that are excellent...](#)" It's easy to choose *good from bad*, but it's more difficult to pick *the best from the good*. When you first become a Christian God called on you to clear out the evil, and replace it with what's pure and holy. You chose between good and bad, right and wrong - and the choices were pretty clear cut. But God's wants more for you. Not just good things, but He desires the best that life can bring. It's been said, "[The good can become the enemy of the best](#)." *Good things* can crowd out *the best things*. We all need to pray for the discernment to pick out the "[things that are excellent...](#)" - to pick the best over the good.

“That you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ...” Pray for a lingering, lasting sincerity. In every Christian's life there's a gap between what *we are* and what *we should be*. At first, our goal is to shrink that gap. We want to maintain a genuine faith. But over time we tend to ignore that gap, or become content with the gap as it is, or even deny a gap exists. Paul prays that God will keep the Philippians on the cutting edge of their commitment - that they won't grow dull to either where they're at or where they need to be. He prays they'll maintain the sincerity of their faith.

He continues his prayer for the Philippians in verse 11, “being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” Pray that your life is stamped with God's fingerprints. If someone asks, “Does he know God?” They can check me for prints... and hopefully, the evidences of faith will be found all over me... love, joy, good works... When you pray for me... *pray that my love for Jesus abounds as my knowledge grows... that I'll be able to discern the best from the good... that I'll stay sincere... and the fingerprints of God will be found on my life...*

Verse 12, “But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ...” Here's another reason Paul rejoiced in difficulties - *God was in charge!* God saw to it his imprisonment had advanced the Gospel. Paul had turned *prison* into a platform. At every opportunity He preached Jesus to the palace guard. The word “*furtherance*” in verse 12 is a translation of the Greek word, “*prokope*” which referred “*to a group of woodcutters clearing the way through a dense forest for an advancing army.*” Paul saw his jail time as an opportunity to take the Gospel to people who otherwise would've never heard. “*His chains*” are in Christ's will.

Most of us would be bummed out to be thrown in prison. We'd moan, and whine, and probably accused God of abandoning us. *We need to retrain ourselves to view our inconveniences as God's opportunities.* Cliff Barrows was Billy Graham's right-hand man for 60 years, but its interesting how they first teamed up. Barrows and his new bride were on their honeymoon. They'd scraped together enough money to buy two train tickets and hotel reservations. But when they reached their destination they found the hotel where they were to stay had been shut down. They ended up in a vacant room over a grocery store.

The next day the owner of the store heard Cliff playing Christian songs on his trombone. He told him about a rally being held that night. A young evangelist named Billy Graham was in town. Barrows went... That particular night the man in charge of the music didn't show up, and Cliff Barrows was asked to help. The rest is history. What seemed a disaster was for “*the furtherance of the Gospel.*” When you're delayed or sidetracked realize it could be God rerouting you.

Verse 14, “And most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.” Paul's boldness had inspired other Christians to come out of the closet with their witness. If Paul could witness behind bars, then they could do it in open air.

“Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from good will: The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel.” Paul knew this sudden rash of Christian witness was coming from a mixture of motivations...

Some of the preachers were truly inspired by Paul. Others figured while he was out-of-commission they could make a name for themselves. They saw Paul's imprisonment as a chance to increase their popularity.

He says in verse 18 **“What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.”** Understand, Paul is not suggesting motive doesn't matter in ministry. 1 Corinthians 3 teaches that it's not just the **quantity** or **quality** of what we do for the Lord that matters, it's the **motive** behind it that determines our reward. God judges the heart of the minister.

The right motives are a must for God - but it may not be that important to the person receiving the ministry. Where the pure Gospel is preached people come to Christ, even if the preacher's motives are suspect. Isaiah 55:11 reads, **“So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.”** God's Word is powerful, and one of the proofs of its power is its ability to shine despite some of the shady people who preach it.

Sadly, not every pastor has the best of intentions. Remember, God spoke to Balaam through the mouth of a donkey. Just because God chooses to use a man to share His truth doesn't mean He's placing His stamp of approval on everything else going on in his life. It just means that God loves people, and will use any means available to save them and heal them.

Paul continues, **“For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ...”** Paul knows that if the Philippians pray, the Lord Jesus will bring deliverance. But Paul has a goal more important than his release.

He says in verse 20, **“according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.”** Far more important to Paul than his *deliverance from jail* was *his witness for Christ*. His **“earnest expectation and hope”** - his strongest desire and deepest longing - is that he won't buckle under to the fear of death, or the pain of torture... But he'll shine brightly for Jesus until the last ray of light is extinguished from his life. Whether Paul lives or dies his passion is to magnify and glorify Jesus!

“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” I love how this reads in the Living Bible, **“to me, living means opportunities for Christ, and dying - well, that's better yet!”** Here's why Paul could take joy in any situation - **all that mattered to him was Jesus**. Paul put all of his eggs in one basket. Jesus wasn't simply a slice of his pie - Jesus was the whole pie. Everything else in his life gained significance only as it related to Jesus. Jesus was all that mattered to Paul. Even his survival paled in comparison to the importance of Jesus in his life. If he lived, he could be used for Christ's glory. If he died, he'd see Jesus face to face. You can't lose when Jesus is all that matters!

But what if Paul had said, **“To live is money...”** - he'd then have to say, **“and to die is to leave it all behind.”** Or **“to live is fame... to die is to be forgotten.”** Or **“to live is power... to die is to be stripped of it all.”** Or **“to live is stuff... to die is to take nothing with me.”** Paul not only placed all his eggs in one basket - he put them in the right basket! Jesus is all that matters - and joy is found when you really begin to live like it!

I have a favorite scene from the movie, **“The Wind and the Lion.”** Sean Connery plays the Rozooli. He's the leader of the Berber bandits that fight against Western Imperialism in the deserts of Morocco. At the end of the movie his army gets trounced. In the final scene he and his right-hand man are on horseback, riding on the beach. His sidekick mourns, **“Rozooli we've lost everything. We've lost everything.”** But with a

roguish laugh the Rozooli rides off into the sunset, and he shouts as he leaves, "Ahh, isn't there anything in your life worth losing everything for?"

This is how Paul saw Jesus. Paul was caught up in something far more important than him - or his comfort, or his convenience, or even his plight in this life. He realized all that's important is the glory of Christ. No sacrifice is too large. He'll go anywhere, do anything for Jesus. And ironically, in the end no one lived a fuller, more satisfying, more joyful life than Paul.

In verse 22 Paul is weighing out his options, "But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you." It was *heaven or hell*. Death would be heavenly, but to live would be more opportunities to count for Jesus. I'm not sure you can really live your life to the fullest until you're first ready to die. Paul was not disappointed by unpleasant circumstances on Earth, because Earth was the least of all he had to look forward to. Paul's hope was in heaven, and that's why he could take joy even in the midst of earthly difficulties.

"And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith, that your rejoicing for me may be more abundant in Jesus Christ by my coming to you again." After thinking it through Paul was confident he'd be released. He felt he still has some work to do...

"Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel..." Paul is like a father encouraging his children to make him proud. He wants them and us, to *stand fast*, *stand together*, and *stand up* for the Gospel. The word translated "*striving*" speaks of an effort that drips with blood, sweat, tears - that goes beyond exhaustion... *Leave it all out on the field for the Gospel.*

High School football is a dreadful sport. You practice five days a week for 16 weeks to play just 10 games. You dress in heavy equipment, go through rigorous exercises, endure the heat of summer, take a beating every day, and risk getting injured - and for what? You get no pay, and very little recognition.

But here's why you do it? On those Friday nights when it all gels. When everyone clicks - when the team is successful - when the gun sounds and the scoreboard shows that you're on the winning end - there's a joy that swells up inside. Everyone hugs and passes out high-fives. It's a wonderful feeling - a sense of accomplishment - you were a part of something bigger than yourself - and all that practice and striving and agonizing really paid off.

This is the same joy I hope you find in church. You come week after week. You labor with little or no recognition. You put up with the heat of conflict and risk getting hurt. And why? Because when it all clicks, and God does get glorified - there's this incredible joy! You've been part of a team - you've become a part of something bigger than yourself. Life has meaning!

Joy comes when we *stand fast*, *stand together*, and *stand up* for Jesus - and when we do so, we're not afraid - verse 28, "and not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God. For to you it has been

granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear is in me." I'm not sure the Philippians saw persecution as an honor, but Paul did. It's always an honor to suffer for Christ sake. *Even persecution is a reason to take joy!*

Chapter 2, "Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy..." And in Christ there is certainly an abundance of all the above! A Christian's joy comes not from his circumstances, but from the work of God in his heart. The comforts of being in Christ are *not situational, but spiritual.*

Since God is at work in you, Paul encourages the Philippians, "fulfill my joy by being likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind." Years ago a small rural community in Minnesota met to decide on a name for their new town. It didn't take long for differing opinions to surface and for tempers to rise. The meeting grew contentious and ugly. Finally one of the leading citizens pounded the table, shouting, "Let's have harmony." His words just hung in the air. Until someone else saw their relevance and shouted it out, "Yea, let's have harmony!" And just like that the town got its name: **Harmony, Minnesota.** We'll find out in Philippians 4 that all was not well in the church at Philippi. Some sisters were squabbling. Here Paul is shouting out, "Let's have harmony!" Let's focus on Jesus - be of the same mind and heart.

"Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others." Here's a wonderful formula for harmony in a church! Put aside selfish ambition. Esteem each other. Seek to serve rather than be served. *And where would we get such an idea?* Verse 5, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation..."

Here's the Phillips translation, "For He, who had always been God by nature, did not cling to His privileges as God's equal, but stripped Himself of every advantage..." Jesus was God, but stripped Himself of the advantages of being God. He became fully human. The word translated "*made*" means "*emptied.*" He laid aside the clout and privileges of being God. When Jesus became a man He didn't stop being God, but He emptied Himself of His divine advantages.

Jesus took "the form of a bondservant..." The great composer, Leonard Bernstein, was once asked, "*What's the most difficult instrument to play?*" He replied, "*Second fiddle... anybody can be first violin, but it takes humility to play second fiddle.*" Jesus deserved honor and pleasure and glory, but He laid that all aside to work out a salvation for us.

"And (Jesus came) in the likeness of men." A few years ago I ran across an description of what life would be like if our next President were a dog... All public buildings would have a doggy door. The title "*Mr. President*" would become "*Here Fella.*" The Washington Monument would be replaced with a one-hundred-story fire hydrant. A new law would pass requiring everyone to drive with their head hanging out the window. If the next President were a dog you'd have to become a dog to understand his policies, and embrace their relevance. And likewise for God to grasp the ethos and feelings of the human predicament He had to become a man. Jesus was God in human flesh. The Almighty God got down on our level. He identified with our struggles. In Christ He let us know just how much He cares.

Verse 8, “**And being found in appearance as a man...**” Notice, when God came to Earth He took a Y chromosome. He became a man - not a woman. Jesus is the man all men are meant to be, and here’s His greatest act of masculinity... “**He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.**” This is history’s manliest moment. God’s strength was on display throughout the OT, but on the cross in Jesus, God revealed His humility. What made Jesus the man above all men wasn’t that He could *dish out pain and enforce His will*, but that He could *endure pain to accomplish God’s will*. He was capable of costly obedience. This is the mark of a man.

Verse 9, “**Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.**” In the end God exalts the humble! And He’ll start with Jesus! The One who descended so low, will be exalted to the Highest. Everyone will bow to Jesus. Either you’ll bow your knee willingly, or He’ll break your kneecaps. But in the end, everyone will bow.

“**Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.**” Here’s Christianity in a nutshell... **we work out what God has worked in.** You and I are never required to *work for* or *work on* our salvation. Jesus’ final breath was, “**It is finished.**” God worked *for us* and *in us* on the cross. His Spirit plants in us new desires and new dexterity. God “**works in us both to will and to do for His good pleasure.**” *But what God works in spiritually – we work out practically.* **God has a part. We have a part.** God is the *catalyst* - the change agent - but we are the *channel*.

It’s been said, “**Man can do nothing without God, and God will do nothing without man.**” *God* revs up the engine - but *you* let off the brake and pop it in gear. God puts in you *the life of Christ*. Then you take on *the mind of Christ*. God changes me. Then I change my mind. God lights a spark. Then I begin to steer. This is working out your salvation. Believe deeply and seriously, then start living out what you believe.

Verse 14, “**Do all things without complaining and disputing...**” Once, two groups of Maryland firefighters - from neighboring counties - arrived at a burning house simultaneously. It was unclear as to which fire department had jurisdiction, so a fight ensued over which crew was responsible for putting out the fire. And irony of all ironies, the house burned while the cops tried to separate the firefighters. Sadly, this is the story in too many churches. We complain and argue with each other while hell rages.

Paul continues, “**that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world...**” Everywhere people gather today squabbles erupt. I think the most obvious way for Christians to stand out is to simply get along. It reminds me of the High School principal who encountered a down-and-out 9th grader in the hall. The principal asked, “**How are we today?**” The student answered, “**Awful. I don’t understand that math teacher and all his crazy logarithms and postulates.**” The principal tried to calm him, “**I’m sure we can’t find it all that bad, can we?**” The boy shot back, “**Sure we can say that! But the you half of we doesn’t have to learn that stuff all over again with the me half of we.**” And this is our problem in the church... We allow ourselves to split “**we**” into the “**you half**” and “**me half.**”

We need to shine, and we shine brightest... Verse 16, “**holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.**” Here’s the best way to preserve unity and stay like-minded - keep your nose and heart in the Bible. “**Yes, and if I**

am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. For the same reason you also be glad and rejoice with me.” In the OT the drink offering was poured out on the sacrifice to soften and season the meat. Once it was applied it was no longer seen. It was absorbed into the meat. The only one who appreciated its taste was the one who ate the sacrifice. Spiritually speaking, the Philippians were the *sacrifice* - Paul was the *seasoning*. He was the steak sauce, the meat tenderizer. He willingly poured his life into the Philippians, and with no desire for recognition. He didn't mind if only God tasted his contribution. Is this the kind of influence we have on one another? Do we tenderize, and add flavor - and do it in a way that no one really notices but God? Do we add to each other's life, or do we irritate and pollute one another?

Paul continues in verse 19, “But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, that I also may be encouraged when I know your state. For I have no one likeminded, who will sincerely care for your state.” Timothy knew Paul's heart. Paul trusted Timothy to represent him well. “For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus.” Christian ministry attracts more than its share of inflated-egos. “But you know his proven character, that as a son with his father he served with me in the gospel.” Timothy was a known-quantity. Apparently, Paul had led Timothy to Christ, and served as a spiritual mentor to young Timothy. Paul was a spiritual dad to Timothy.

“Therefore I hope to send him at once, as soon as I see how it goes with me. But I trust in the Lord that I myself shall also come shortly.” Paul will send Timothy, but he was going to send another friend - but couldn't. Paul writes, “I considered it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier, but your messenger and the one who ministered to my need...” In the Roman prison system if you ate or were clothed it was up to friends or family. There was no such thing as a guaranteed bed, a prison suit, color television, and three square meals. If the folks on the outside forgot about you, then you went hungry. Apparently the Philippians had sent Paul provisions through a messenger named Epaphroditus.

Verse 26, “Since he was longing for you all, and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick. For indeed he was sick almost unto death; but God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow.” While he was in Rome, Epaphroditus got seriously sick - and notice this, Paul, the great healer, was powerless to help him. Obviously, Epaphroditus' illness was not the result of some sin in his life. He got ill doing the will of God.

Despite what certain preachers say, Christians are not immune to sickness and disease. God has left us in a *fallen world* and in *fleshy bodies*. We're subject to the effects of sin. All Paul could do was pray for his pal. Epaphroditus' recovery was not credited to a miracle or a gift of healing - God just had mercy on him.

The chapter closes, “Therefore I sent him the more eagerly, that when you see him again you may rejoice, and I may be less sorrowful. Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness, and hold such men in esteem; because for the work of Christ he came close to death, not regarding his life, to supply what was lacking in your service toward me.” Sometimes what we think are simple tasks end up far more threatening. Epaphroditus was just a courier. His job was to carry supplies to Paul - *simple enough* - but he almost died. The distinguishing trait of Epaphroditus is that he persevered. He finished the mission he started. And that's being like Jesus. Remember 1:6, “*being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus*”