

“Transformed by Joy”

A study of the Biblical Book of Philippians

Part 4 - Joy through Faithfulness

Chapter 2: verse 19 - Chapter 4: verse 1

We continue our journey through the biblical book of Philippians. Let us review where we have been. We are taking the theme ‘Transformed by Joy’ and we saw in our first session how Paul found joy through participating with the Philippian church in the work of the gospel. He was instrumental in founding the church in Philippi, and now he was in prison, they were doing their best to take care of him.

In our second session we talked about the joy found through endeavor. He encourages the church to find unity through lifting each other up in their prayers and concerns... through endeavoring to truly be a community with Christ at their center.

Last time we talked about ‘Joy through Obedience’ and saw how Paul lifted up the life of Jesus Christ as the greatest example of serving and joyful obedience we could ever have. Paul urges us to ‘follow him following’ Christ. This time I’m calling our session ‘Joy through faithfulness’ and we will take a look at Philippians Chapter 2:9 through Chapter 4:1.

We begin by Paul talking of two of his most faithful friends in the work he had been doing, Timothy and Epaphroditus (verses 19 through 30)

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news of you. I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But Timothy's worth you know, how like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. I hope therefore to send him as soon as I see how things go with me; and I trust in the Lord that I will also come soon.

Still, I think it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus-- my brother and co-worker and fellow soldier, your messenger and minister to my need; for he has been longing for all of you, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. He was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one sorrow after another. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, in order that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honor such people, because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me.

Timothy is mentioned many times in the New Testament letters as being Paul’s young companion. He is mentioned in connection with the churches in Thessalonica, Collosae, Corinth and Ephesus. He was with Paul when the church

in Philippi was founded and was well known to them. We have two letters in the New Testament that bear Timothy's name. Our letter began with greetings from 'Paul and Timothy'. Timothy's great use was that whenever Paul wished information or to send advice to a church and could not go, then Timothy was always prepared to be the messenger. And Paul had total trust in Timothy - and commends him for being whole-hearted in his service of Christ.

Epaphroditus was a member of the Church in Phillip whom they had sent to be with Paul during his time of imprisonment. Their intention was that he should probably stay with Paul till such a time as he was released. Unfortunately, whilst in Rome he had taken seriously ill, and almost died.

Communications in the Roman world did not include telephones, e-mail or texting. It could take a while for information to travel from place to place. It sounds as though the Philippians had heard something about Epaphroditus being unwell, but had not had the whole story.

Paul speaks highly of him, and encourages them to receive him home with the honor he deserved. He had literally put his life on the line for the sake of the gospel. It was probably Epaphroditus who took this letter we are studying to them.

His words about both Timothy and Epaphroditus remind us of the joy that faithful friendship can bring to our lives. If we are fortunate in our lives to have those kind of trusting and fulfilling relationships with a few truly good friends, then we are truly blessed.

From speaking in a personal way about two good friends, Paul now offers some advice about some matters that seem to have been troubling the church at Phillippi. They have to do with the way Paul saw Christian faith as being a matter of receiving the grace of God, rather than observing outward rituals or having to do with where you were in the social or spiritual pecking order.

God's grace, found through faith in Jesus Christ, was something that transcended all barriers, welcomed everybody and Paul became angry when folk tried to impose restrictions and create 'insiders and outsiders' amongst the people of God. Grace was something to be rejoiced in, and something that had changed his own life in dramatic ways.

Let us look at verses 1 through 6 of chapter 3.

Philippians 3:1 Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard. Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! For it is we who are the

circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh-- even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Paul begins with the words 'Finally' and then goes on to speak for another two chapters! We preachers like that observation because we feel it gives us license to speak as long as we feel like it! However the Greek sense of the word is not 'and so to finish...' as it is to say 'and so now lets get down to business!'

And the business Paul wants us to get down to is 'rejoicing'. Not that he isn't about to say some hard things, but before he does he wants to remind his readers that whatever he is saying to them, he offers it in order that their joy may be complete.

There was a problem that had arisen in Phillip and many other churches. It had to do with an ongoing debate that was taking place. 'How Jewish was Christianity meant to be?' Jesus was a Jew and the first disciples were all Jews. They presumably had submitted to all the conventional Jewish customs such as circumcision.

There were those in the early church who therefore believed that in order to be a 'true' Christian, then it meant having to be circumcised as well as observe other Jewish laws, such as those about what you could eat and what days you should observe as holy.

For Paul, this imposing of the Jewish customs that he believed Christ had transcended, was something that robbed the gospel of it's true power. The whole reason for Christ's death was to do away with empty ritual and sacrifice and bring in a new era of grace, in which people were accepted by God, not because of what they put themselves through, but because of what Jesus had done for them.

People were placed into a right relationship by faith, by grace and by trusting in the action of the Holy Spirit to renew them and create order out of the chaos of their lives. To return to a religion of law and ritual, of circumcision and external actions, would be a huge step backwards.

And he didn't care how loudly his critics complained, or how great their credentials were. As far as Paul was concerned, they just didn't get it! Here's how the Message Bible transliterates verses 2 and 3.

"Steer clear of the barking dogs, those religious busybodies, all bark and no bite. All they're interested in is appearances—knife-happy circumcisers, I call them. The real believers are the ones the Spirit of God leads to work away at this ministry, filling the air with Christ's praise as we do it. We couldn't carry this off by our own efforts, and we know it"

Lest anybody should doubt his own sincerity he reminds them of his personal pedigree. If anybody was in a position to make a judgement call on the place of rituals and circumcision then it was him. He had been circumcised in the right way at the right time. He was a descendant of Israel, the special name God had given to Jacob. He was a Benjamite. The tribe of Benjamin were the aristocracy of the nation. King David had been a Benjamite. They were the elite. He was a Pharisee who had taken his duties with the utmost seriousness. His heritage was as purely Jewish as any purely Jewish person could possibly be.

What did he make of his privileged position? Not a lot! He tells us in verses 7 through 11.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Though at times Paul may appear rather obscure, here he speaks plainly. All of the power and prestige and position that he once knew, he now counted as nothing but garbage. Why? Because through his relationship with Jesus Christ he had found something that was infinitely more valuable.

And it was a relationship based upon his faith, not on his ability to live up to the expectations of the laws he once so rigidly sought to obey. He talks about *'not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ'*.

I cannot help here but think of Martin Luther's great struggle that gave birth to the reformation. Luther struggled so hard to find acceptance from God and did everything that the teaching of the church expected of him. It left him empty, despairing and desperate.

He wrestled with the scriptures and in particular with the Book of Romans. Through that study the realization broke through to him that Christianity was not about his ability to meet certain standards or prove himself worthy of God's

acceptance. It was through accepting that he was helpless and that Jesus Christ alone could be his salvation in this life and the next that he found peace. The watchwords of the Reformation became 'saved, by grace, through faith'.

We have been talking in Philippians about joy. When we realize that there is nothing we can do for our salvation except rest upon the grace of God, then it can be a tremendously liberating thought.

I can't speak for everybody, but I know in my own experience I have had those times when sub-consciously I have believed that my relationship with God was built upon my ability to do the right things (or avoid doing the wrong things). It is as though I had a report card and needed to get just enough check marks and gold stars upon it to get me through the 'God' test. Then God will hear my prayers. Then things will go well with my life. Such is a highly addictive view of religious life that reinvents itself in every generation.

Paul is warning the Philippians that to return to such a 'righteousness by the law' way of being would sap away all their joy and leave them in a worse state than they had been before ever hearing of Jesus Christ. Their acceptance by God had nothing to do with ceremonies and rituals and who they were and where they were from and who they knew... all of that was just so much garbage! Instead they were called to trust and have faith in God's grace.

One aspect of that grace was the forgiveness they found through Christ's death upon the Cross. The other side was the hope that could flood their lives through knowing the power of His resurrection. Paul writes in verse 10 *"I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the sharing of His sufferings by becoming like Him in His death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead."*

Paul was aware that even his experience of Christ, amazing though it was, was still incomplete. There was more he had to learn. He had not fully been transformed by resurrection love. He was willing to face whatever life may bring his way because of his allegiance to Christ. Somehow it was all leading somewhere glorious, even though his words could not adequately describe what that looked like! Never mind if he didn't have all the pieces in the jigsaw... he was pressing on!

Which just happens to be the focus of our next verses... 12 - 16

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same

mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.

Joy through faithfulness. Pushing ahead to a goal that will only finally be seen when it is reached. The key words in this section are *“I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own.”* Paul is enthused by the gospel because he had this unwavering belief that He belonged to Jesus Christ simply because God was a God of grace who desired that all people should know the love of Jesus Christ and the workings of the Holy Spirit within their lives.

The King James version translates the latter part of this key verse 12 **“that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.” (Phi 3:12 KJV).** As a fan of British cop shows the word ‘apprehend’ has definite meaning! Villains are the ones ‘apprehended’ and put into custody by the good guys. It is as though Paul were saying; *“I want to be in the custody of the gospel message because I have been arrested by Jesus Christ. I am held captive by Christ’s love; He has apprehended me through His Holy Spirit”*

So he encourages us. Hold On. Stand firm. Don’t be distracted. Not by things outside of themselves, like folks demanding they follow Jewish regulations, nor by the struggles inside themselves, desires which Paul, in our next passage, describes as ‘appetites’.

Finally (in an English sense, not a Pauline one) Chapter 3 verse 17 through to and including verse 1 of Chapter 4.

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Whenever Paul spoke about the grace of God it seems there those who managed to twist it. Their argument went something like this. ‘If we can’t do anything to earn God’s good favor then what we do doesn’t really count for anything. Grace covers everything, which means that we can live however we please!’

Paul challenges this twisted idea by inviting them to look at the way he was living. Had grace led him to living a careless or immoral life? Look at Timothy... had it affected him that way? What about Epaphroditus? Or any other of the Christian leaders they saw as great examples of faith? Had their experience of grace led them to feel they could live however they please?

It broke Paul's heart that some had interpreted God's grace in the wrong way. Christ had died to set them free, but when they used their freedom for purposes that were destructive and the opposite of the humble life exemplified by Christ's service, it put them in a place where they stood against everything He died for!

Again the Message bible confront us with the imagery in this passage. Verse 19 is transliterated... 'Easy street is a dead-end street. Those who live there make their bellies their gods; belches are their praises; and all they can think of is their appetites.'

Paul isn't here singling out the sin of gluttony, rather using it as a crude example of how there were those in the Christian community who played a dangerous game. They claimed to be following Christ but in reality were so focussed on the things of this world that their true commitment was highly questionable!

Earlier in our letter Paul has used 'citizenship' imagery that was appropriate to the folk at Phillipi, proud as they were of their connection to the Roman Empire. So he now reminds them that *"Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."*

The question is sometimes raised as to whether Paul was expecting Jesus to return to earth in the immediate future. You may have come across those today who emphasize the 'Second Coming of Christ' and picture the event as something that could be 'any day now!' Such is a view popularized by such series as Tim La Hayes 'Left Behind' series of novels.

We can never know exactly what Paul's perspective on the future was. What we can say is that in some of Paul's earliest letters there does seem to be the implication that God might be about to blow the final whistle. However in letters from other later sources, such as 2 Peter 3:8-9 we read *'Beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance'*.

To explore that theme further is way beyond the scope of this study! What I would stress is that for Paul, whenever or however the world will come to an end, it is going to be a joyous occasion! Joyous because it will bring about the final transformation of our world from being merely full of potential to actually being all that creation could be! And all of this because of the work of Jesus Christ!

'Joy through faithfulness'. Paul tells his beloved Philippians that to those who remained faithful there was much to look forward to! He encourages them to keep pressing forward and not be side-tracked by those who would steal grace away from their lives. He encourages them to follow his example and the faithful example of people such as Epaphroditus and Timothy. Such was a pathway towards experiencing the joy that characterized his own experience of Jesus Christ.

To those who seek to live a faithful life Paul offers numerous sources of joy in this passage.

- There is the joy of close friends who share in our aspirations and are there for us when we need them most.
- There is the joy of knowing we are forgiven by God, not because of what we have done, but because of what Jesus Christ has done for us. We are set free to serve by the grace offered to us through the Holy Spirit.
- There is the joy that comes through knowing that in God's eyes it doesn't matter where we are from, who we are, who our friends are, how influential our family may be, what educational attainments we may have attained, what our occupation is, what our income is, how capable we are of getting things right and wrong, all that... says Paul... is garbage. What matters is that we are God's children and God loves us...just because...
- There is the joy of knowing we are all on a journey of discovery to know Christ '*and the power of His resurrection*'
- There is the joy of knowing that whatever the future may hold, God is taking care of it!

But there's more!

Next Time: Joy through Contentment.