

“A Happy Man”
Philippians 1:1-11
November 21, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

We begin a new series today on Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Throughout the letter Paul’s attitude is marked by a strong note of joy. I wanted to work through this letter in a sermon series primarily for this reason. All our lives have been affected to one degree or another by twenty months of a pandemic, by political division in our nation, and by numerous other personal challenges unique to each individual. Is it possible to suffer such things and still be happy? This letter gives a clear and resounding “Yes” to that question.

Happiness is sought by men and women everywhere. In the spring semester of 2018, Yale University offered a class on happiness taught by psychology professor Laurie Santos. The course’s formal title was “Psychology and the Good Life,” and over 1200 students signed up for this elective class. There was such keen interest in the topic that the professor decided to offer it as a ten-week course available for free over the internet. As of March of this year, over 3.3 million people have signed up for it. Over the next several months, we’re going to be working together through a course on happiness in the form of this letter.

We begin today by simply noting that Paul was a happy man, even though he wrote this letter while imprisoned. He prayed with joy for his brothers and sisters in the Philippian church (1:4). He rejoiced that Christ was preached, even if the motives of the preacher were corrupt (1:18). He gave his life to make others joyful (1:25). It gave him joy to see the church marked by unity (2:2). His concluding command to his friends in Philippi was to “rejoice in the Lord” (3:1). He refers to his converts as his “joy and crown” (4:1). He repeats his command to rejoice in the Lord (4:4) and was filled with joy in their kindness to him (4:10).

We’re beginning our study with Paul’s joyful prayer for the Philippians. Like many prayers, it divides into the two categories of thanksgiving and petition. We see in both these sections something of Paul’s values, and in those values lies the key to his happiness.

I. A Happy Man Giving Thanks – v. 3-8

Like many letters of his era, after Paul identifies himself and the recipients of the letter, he gives thanks for them. He does so in lavish terms, saying that every remembrance of them brought a smile of gratitude to his face. He says

that whenever he prayed for them, he was filled with joy (v. 4). Specifically, he is thankful for their **“partnership in the gospel from the first day until now”** (v. 5). This phrase, “partnership in the gospel,” gives us the first clue to Paul’s happiness. He was committed to the progress of the gospel, a key theme that we will encounter repeatedly in Philippians. He was filled with joy because the glory of God through the gospel was his highest priority, and this commitment to the gospel brought him into fellowship and partnership with other Christians.

The Philippians partnered with Paul in the gospel, which has the primary meaning that they supported him financially. The Philippian church had heard of Paul’s imprisonment and its associated difficulties, and they determined to help him with financial support. They did this even though, according to 2 Corinthians 8:2-3, they were a poor congregation. They sent one of their key leaders, Epaphroditus, to deliver the gift and then to stay and minister to Paul’s needs. Then tragedy struck. Epaphroditus fell ill in route to Paul and almost died (2:26-27). The Philippians heard of his illness and were quite distressed. He eventually recovered and made it to Paul to deliver the gift. Paul refused to let him stay, knowing the distress his absence was causing the church in Philippi. So he sent him back, together with this letter.

It is clear that Paul had a special relationship with this church. They were loyal to him when others were not. For a time, they were the only church supporting him financially (4:15). There is a special bond that forms between soldiers fighting and suffering together, and it seems that just such a bond was formed between Paul and the Philippians. As their leader, Paul was leading the charge to take enemy territory from Satan. He looked back to see that there was only one church following him, and it was this Philippian church.

Let’s consider some applications of this little phrase “partnership in the gospel.” First, Paul’s joy and that of the Philippian church was tied to their mutual commitment to the advance of the gospel. His entire life was committed to this goal, and it is a goal certain of fulfillment because of the power of God. This is the big story to which God calls all of us. We are not made for the little story of personal fulfillment and satisfaction. The irony is that once we come to live in God’s big story of the advance of the gospel, personal fulfillment and satisfaction are given to us.

A second application is that we are not called to pursue this alone. As gifted as Paul was, he needed the partnership of the Philippians. The advance of the gospel is a team effort, requiring work from us all and using the various gifts God has given to each of us. Are you using your gifts in pursuit of this common goal for the advance of the gospel? This brings us to a third application. Deep fellowship comes as a benefit of this partnership in the gospel. The word for “partnership” is the well-known Greek word *koinonia*. Paul speaks in verses 7-8 of his deep love for the Philippians, a love borne out of this partnership. In his

book *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis notes that friendship begins when two people find themselves “side by side, absorbed in some common interest.” Before moving on, then, let me offer a very specific challenge to you. Will you pray with me that God would use our church to see people won to faith in Christ during the coming year. Will you partner with me and our church leadership in making this a central focus of your prayers and your efforts?

There’s a second feature of Paul’s giving thanks that was also a source of joy for him. It is found in the well-known statement of verse 6. **“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”** Paul believed in the sovereignty of God and that gave him great joy. Notice that Paul attributes the salvation of the Philippians to God’s work. God began this work in them, and Paul credits God as the author of the good work of salvation. He also states that the same God who was sovereign over their salvation is also sovereign over their sanctification and glorification. I will sometimes begin a project and not complete it. The reason is usually a miscalculation about what is actually involved in the project. That never happens with God. He knows full well what is involved in our complete salvation, and he would never begin it if he did not intend on completing it. That is why Paul can say, **“I am sure of this.”** If it were dependent on the fickle nature of human will, certainty of its completion would be impossible.

There are some who make the mistake of thinking that if God is sovereign over our salvation, then we have no role in it. Paul did not think so, as we are going to see in the petition he makes for them beginning in verse 9. Paul had a role to play in their complete salvation and the Philippians also had a role to play, even though God is sovereign. This blend will be seen clearly in the next chapter where Paul tells them to work out their own salvation, and then follows that command immediately with the promise that it is God working in them **“both to will and to work for his good pleasure”** (2:12-13). The sovereignty of God, when properly understood, motivates us to take action rather than to become passive. Imagine there is a dream job you would like, and you happen to meet the CEO of the company offering that job, and he tells you that you are certain to land the job you want. You don’t conclude, “The job is mine, so I’m not going to do anything.” On the contrary, you make application and undergo the interviews with confidence and joy. That’s the way it is with our salvation.

II. A Happy Man Petitioning God – v. 9-11

Paul believed in the power of prayer. Because of his imprisonment, his activity was limited. But because God answers prayer, his influence was only as limited as God’s abilities, which is to say that it was unlimited. Paul reminds me of William Carey’s sister. You may remember that William Carey is sometimes referred to as the father of modern missions, serving in India in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. He suffered greatly in this endeavor, but God

used him to catalyze the great 19th century missions movement. What you may not know is that William Carey had a sister who was ill and bedridden for years. Unable to do much of anything else, she gave herself to prayer for her brother and his work. In his limitations, Paul did the same.

If you believe in the power of prayer, then you will want to make sure to ask for the right things. In his love for the Philippians and his faith in God's promises to answer prayer, he prayed **“that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment”** (v. 9). He is vague about whether he is praying for their love for one another to abound or their love for God. His lack of specificity I interpret to mean he wants them to have both a love for one another and for God. He doesn't just pray for love in general to abound, but for a particular kind of love, the kind with knowledge and discernment. Greedy people love money and narcissists love attention, but those are the kinds of love that degrade and demean. He wants them to love what they were created to love, and they will need knowledge and discernment for that to happen.

Paul prays for the right kind of love to abound because he knows that love is definitive for the choices we make. We do what we love. The Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith has written an entire book on this topic. *Desiring the Kingdom* has as its core argument that “human beings are fundamentally lovers; that is, we are not primarily ‘thinking things’ or ‘believing animals’ but rather desiring agents with a passional orientation to the ultimate—to a vision of ‘the kingdom.’” It is easy to flatter ourselves into thinking that we will always go wherever the evidence takes us. We think of ourselves as rational creatures led by logic and clear thinking. But that's not the way the human heart works.

That's why Paul goes on to pray, **“so that you may approve what is excellent.”** If they love what they should love, it will affect their values. The New Living Translation captures the meaning well when it translates verse 10, “I want you to understand what really matters.” What really matters to Paul is the advance of the gospel, and he wants that to matter to the Philippians too. To love what really matters results in being **“pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.”**

On May 20, 2000, 40,000 Christian college students were spread out in a grassy field in Memphis to hear a sermon by John Piper at the fourth annual Passion Conference. It had rained the night before and the field was wet and the air foggy. John Piper said later that he was nervous before he spoke. He had never addressed such a large crowd before. When he was in high school, he was so afraid of public speaking that his mother took him to see a counselor about it. But here he was, standing before 40,000 college students. The sermon

he delivered that day was a famous one, and it illustrates Paul's prayer perfectly.

Three weeks ago, we got news at our church that Ruby Eliason and Laura Edwards were killed in Cameroon. Ruby Eliason—over 80, single all her life, a nurse. Poured her life out for one thing: to make Jesus Christ known among the sick and the poor in the hardest and most unreached places. Laura Edwards, a medical doctor in the Twin Cities, and in her retirement, partnering up with Ruby. [She was] also pushing 80, and going from village to village in Cameroon. The brakes give way, over a cliff they go, and they're dead instantly. And I asked my people, "Is this a tragedy?" Two women, in their 80s almost, a whole life devoted to one idea—Jesus Christ magnified among the poor and the sick in the hardest places. And 20 years after most of their American counterparts had begun to throw their lives away on trivialities in Florida and New Mexico, [they] fly into eternity with a death in moment. "Is this a tragedy?" I asked. "It is not a tragedy," I'll read you what a tragedy is. [He pulled out a page from *Reader's Digest*.] "Bob and Penny . . . took early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast five years ago when he was 59 and she was 51. Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida, where they cruise on their 30-foot trawler, play softball, and collect shells." That's a tragedy, and there are people in this country that are spending billions of dollars to get you to buy it. And I get 40 minutes to plead with you—don't buy it. With all my heart I plead with you—don't buy that dream. . . . As the last chapter before you stand before the Creator of the universe to give an account with what you did: "Here it is, Lord—my shell collection. And I've got a good swing. And look at my boat."

CONCLUSION:

This passage reminds me of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount. **"Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you"** (Matt. 6:33). Paul found that to be the case. He sought first God's kingdom, and added to him were joy and close relationships with people who cared for him. What would it look like for you to seek first God's kingdom? Wendy sent me a quote while I was writing my sermon. "What is it like to be a parent? Imagine you are straining to carry every single grocery bag and someone tosses you a priceless vase." Of course, you drop the groceries and catch the vase, because you know what really matters. The gospel matters, and if you want to have joy, it needs to matter to you as well.