

Preacher: [Insert Name Here]
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Introduction

One thing that clearly stands out in Paul's letter to the Philippians is his strong emphasis on 'Joy'. In fact the Greek word for 'Joy' and 'Rejoice' is found no less than 16 times in these 4 short chapters. This is, after all, the letter where Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"

And you know that would be pretty amazing under normal circumstances. But how much more amazing when we remember that Paul was in fact a prisoner. He was in chains, probably in Rome, awaiting his trial and potential punishment, or even execution. So his situation was really the very opposite, you would think, of joyful, it called for the opposite response to rejoicing. At least that was true from an outward, worldly, circumstance-based perspective.

But the whole point is that this man did not base his joy on outward, worldly, circumstances. Instead he based it on something far more substantial, far more significant and far more profound. That's why we've called this Philippians sermon series, 'Deeper Joy'. For in this letter Paul describes that far deeper joy that he's discovered in his own life. And he invites the Christians in Philippi, just as he invites us here at Riverbank today, to discover that kind of joy in our lives as well.

Joyful Prayer

So we see this already in verses 3 and 4 of our text. For after his conventional opening, Paul goes straight on to say, "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy". This reminds us that because of his imprisonment, Paul couldn't go to see or speak to or spend time with the believers in this city. But yet that couldn't prevent him from thinking of them and remembering them in prayer. No matter what this world might take away from us, it can never take away what lies within, our inmost thoughts, our relationship with God and our heartfelt prayers.

But Paul also says that whenever he remembers this church, he always prays for all of them, and he always prays with joy! And this is incredibly positive. Unlike some other churches that he wrote to, this one was going so well, it was on the right track, there were no big issues to address. But that raises the question of why? Why was Paul was filled with such joy when he prayed for this particular congregation? What were they doing that lifted his spirits so high?

The Reason For Paul's Joyful Prayer

Well we find the heart of it in verse 5. For Paul says "I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel". "I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel". So what does that really mean? Well this term 'partnership' is often translated as 'fellowship'. But the problem is that when we think about fellowship, we generally think of sitting down together for a cuppa and a chat. But the original word had strong commercial overtones. It spoke less about having tea and biscuits together and more about going into business together. And thus we have the more accurate translation, 'partnership'.

Now imagine for a moment that you and I are going into a business partnership. What sort of relationship would that be? Well it would have to be a very strong and committed relationship. We'd have to invest heavily together, we'd have to work hard together, we'd have to share trust and

priorities together, and we'd have to aim for the same goal together. This could not be a casual, indifferent or selfish relationship, but rather dedicated, faithful and self-less. And that's the kind of partnership Paul's talking about. In his book 'Basics for Believers', Don Carson says "*The heart of true fellowship is self-sacrificing conformity to a shared vision.*" And what's that shared vision? Well Paul says it's the gospel.

The partnership that the Philippians were involved in was a fellowship in the gospel. It was a partnership in a message, in the most important message that's ever been heard. And that message is all about God's solution for humanity's deepest problem, his response to our rebellion and sin, his plan for salvation, reconciliation and restoration for this world. This was a partnership they shared with each other, and with Paul, and with every other Christian as well. It was a partnership in which they shared in believing and trusting and obeying and living and promoting and spreading the glorious good news of our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who suffered and died so that we might live.

And Paul explains that this was no short-term project. For he says it was a "partnership in the gospel from the first day until now". Again quoting Carson, Paul "*is thanking God for the fact that these brothers and sisters in Christ, from the moment of their conversion ..., rolled up their sleeves and got involved in the advance of the gospel.*" We know that they'd been busy witnessing and growing the church in Philippi. But we also know they'd been deeply concerned for Paul and his ministry, praying for him faithfully and sending him money to support his work. In fact in verse 3 the words "I thank my God every time I remember you" could be better translated, "I thank my God every time you remember me".

But Paul was also supremely optimistic for the future. For he adds, "being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ." Paul did not fear that these Christians would ever lose their salvation, for salvation is a work of God that can never be reversed. The Lord promises that all those who genuinely believe will persevere in their faith until the end.

But Paul was also confident that the gospel work these Christians were doing would never disappear either. For he knew that this church was truly doing the Lord's work, and the Lord's work can only be done in the Lord's strength. But more than that, it is in fact work that is done by the Lord himself, through us. And so he promises that he's in control, that he's growing his kingdom and calling his elect, and he'll never stop until the last day, the day of Jesus Christ. So my friends, we begin to see here the reason for Paul's deeper joy. For he told the Philippians that he always prayed with joy because of their partnership in the gospel.

But that makes you wonder, doesn't it, what would Paul say if he was writing a letter to us? If he wrote to Riverbank Christian Church today, would he say "In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel"? Well of course the answer depends on whether or not we actually are partners in the gospel. It depends if we're in a true fellowship with each other and all believers that involves self-sacrificing conformity to a shared vision. It depends if we truly do share in believing and living and spreading the good news of Jesus Christ.

You know perhaps a good way to measure this would be to consider what keeps us together as a congregation here at Riverbank? What's the actual reason that we come to this church? What's our level of commitment and involvement and sacrifice? What do we really care about, what are we really passionate about?

Maybe for you it's all about tradition. The only reason you come is because you've always come and it just doesn't feel right if you don't. And so your highest priority is to keep things the same,

and if they change then you're up in arms, regardless of the reasons. Maybe what ties you to this church is family and friends. This is actually the hub of your social life and so that's your main topic of conversation. What are we doing for your birthday? You want to come over and watch the game? Why don't we go on a shopping trip, or a camping trip? And you know in your heart that if your family and friends weren't here then you wouldn't be either. Or is the reason you come because you like the way things are done, you like the buildings or the soft seats, the style of the preaching or the worship, you like the way Sunday School is run or the care you receive? And so your highest concern is that your experience of church continues to satisfy your own desires. And if it doesn't then you'll either complain, or look for somewhere better, or maybe both.

Again Don Carson writes about this. And this quote's a bit longer. Carson asks, *"What ties us together? What do we talk about when we meet, even after a church service? Mere civilities? The weather? The FA Cup draw? Our careers and our children? Our aches and pains? None of these topics should be excluded from the conversation of Christians, of course. In sharing all of life, these things will inevitably come up. But what must tie us together as Christians is this passion for the gospel, this fellowship in the gospel. On the face of it, nothing else is strong enough to hold together the extraordinary diversity of people who constitute many churches: men and women, young and old, blue collars and white collars, the healthy and the ill, the fit and the flabby, people from different races, with different incomes, different levels of education, different personalities. What holds us together? Is it the gospel, the good news that in Jesus God himself has reconciled us to himself. This brings about a precious God-centredness that we share with other believers. This means that in our conversations we ought regularly to be sharing in the gospel: delighting in God, sharing with one another what we have been learning from his Word, joining in prayer for the advance of the gospel (not least in the lives of those to whom we have been bearing witness), encouraging one another in obedience and maturing discipleship, bearing one another's burdens and growing in self-sacrificial love for one another for Christ's sake. In short, we must put the gospel first. And that means we must put the fellowship of the gospel at the centre of our relationships with fellow believers."*

So what do you think my friends? Ask yourself, can I genuinely say that I'm in partnership in the gospel? Is that why I'm here? Does that shine through in my conversations? Does that drive my involvement in a growth group, and in the ministries of this church? Does that affect my giving and my praying and my witnessing? Does it influence how I use my time and make my decisions and set my priorities?

Maybe if you're honest, you have to admit that these words don't really describe your situation, that you're not really a partner in the gospel? Maybe you have to admit that you're more of a spectator, a consumer, a pew-warmer and an armchair critic? Well then my friend, maybe it's time for things to change? Maybe it's time to start playing your part in the life of God's church? Maybe it's time to roll up your sleeves and get involved in the advance of the gospel?

Or perhaps you already do, perhaps you can honestly say that according to your gifts and your opportunities and your situation in life, that you're indeed in partnership in the gospel? Well then, my sister, my brother in Christ, realise that this is reason for joy, for deep, real, heartfelt joy. For you are playing your part in God's church and his kingdom. You're encouraging and supporting and building up believers in their faith. You're doing your best to pray and give and work to spread the good news about Jesus.

And this kind of joy will uphold you and cheer and inspire you regardless of outward circumstances. For even if you're battling with illness, even if you're poor or unemployed, even if

you're a widow, even if you're tired and stressed and feel like a failure in life, even if you're in prison, you will know that you're still a vital part of something far more significant. For you're part of God's plan of salvation, and you can be confident that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

The Result Of Paul's Joyful Prayer

But now there's 2 more points to draw from this passage, both a lot shorter than the first. So we've seen the reason for Paul's joyful prayers, and that is their partnership in the gospel. In other words, their strong ministry relationship.

But next we want to see the result of Paul's joyful prayers. And we see that in verses 7 and 8. For he says, "It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus." These verses show us is that the strong ministry relationship that Paul shared with the Philippians resulted in a strong personal relationship. Paul says it's right for me to feel joyful because our partnership in the gospel means that I now have you in my heart. He says God knows that I long for you with the affection of Christ.

In other words, because of their work advancing the gospel together, because they've persisted through both easy and hard times, because they share in nothing less than the very grace of God, Paul now carries them within his heart with great warmth and tenderness, deep love and care. This is an intimate relationship far deeper than you'll have with any acquaintance or neighbour, any workmate or teammate, anyone who's just a friend or even a family member. For this is the relationship of those who've been in the trenches together, making sacrifices, fighting the good fight, encouraging each other, making an eternal difference, and doing it all for the sake of Christ. And maybe you've experienced this too.

If you want to develop a long and lasting bond with other believers, well it will never happen by sitting together in this auditorium on a Sunday morning, or by chatting afterwards about the weather, or by waiting at home for someone to contact you. But it will happen if you teach Sunday School together, or cook sausages for City Mission Snagchat, or spend time in a mentoring relationship. It will happen if you visit a young Mum to encourage her, or pray with someone whose marriage is in trouble. It will happen if you go on a mission trip, or commit yourself to a growth group, or join the GO Club or the Music team or the Pastoral Care team. It will happen if you lead in Cadets or GEMS or join a Welcoming Team or help at Mainly Music or serve as an Elder or a Deacon.

You know maybe you've been wondering why you don't have strong personal relationships in this church? Well could the reason be because you don't have strong ministry relationships in this church? My friends, anyone can do it. Even if you were totally restricted, you could still make an encouraging phone call, write a card or an email to someone who's struggling, pray for the children in this church. And let's be honest, the vast majority of us can do a lot more than that, so long as we're willing.

Paul reminds us that the deep joy of partnering in the gospel, of real ministry relationships, leads to the even greater joy of real personal relationships, borne out of serving the Lord together.

The Content Of Paul's Joyful Prayer

But the 3rd and final point is that after seeing the reason for and the result of Paul's joyful prayers, he also reveals their content. For in verses 9 to 11 he says, "And this is my prayer: that your love

may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.”

Paul is just so encouraged by both his ministry and personal relationship with these Christians. And so he wants that to grow. And so this is what he prays.

He prays, first of all, that their love would abound more and more. Now Paul doesn't provide an object for their love, he leaves that open. But I'm sure that he wanted them to abound in love for the Lord, the one who saved them. I'm sure he wanted them to abound in love for the lost, for those who so desperately need that salvation. And I'm sure that he wanted them to abound in love for each other, helping each other to grow in faith and obedience. And that may sound familiar, or at least I hope it does. For it sounds like Paul's vision for this church was for them to be a people who love God, love their community and love the church. For that's exactly what the Bible calls us to do.

But Paul didn't want their love to be a mindless sentimental kind of love but rather one that's discerning. So he prays that their love might abound in knowledge and depth of insight, so that they may be able to discern what is best. Paul wanted them to love God, not driven by their imagination but by the Word. He wanted them to love the lost, not just to make their earthly lives better but bringing the gospel of eternal salvation. He wanted them to love each other, not just to be social but for the sake of discipleship.

And Paul finally adds that this discerning kind of love would lead to God glorifying righteousness. For he prays that in love they might be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.” Paul wanted their love for God, the lost and each other to have an impact on their own lives, as they were transformed and renewed in the image of Christ. And by so doing they'd fulfill their ultimate calling, to give glory to the Lord.

Conclusion

So my friends today we've seen that despite his own chains, the apostle Paul had discovered a deep, deep sense of joy, a joy that sustained him even in his darkest days. But have we discovered that kind of joy too? We all go through difficult times in life, there is no doubt, but yet they don't have to leave us in misery and despair. For like Paul we're part of something far more important.

People of Riverbank, let's strive to be a church where every one of us are genuinely in partnership in the gospel. Let's be a congregation who truly work together to build each other up in faith and to reach out to the lost for Christ. Let's strive to be a church where we seek our joy in strong ministry relationships. And may that partnership lead to strong personal relationships, and may that partnership be what drives our conversations, our thoughts and our prayers.

Let's not be mere spectators in God's Church. But let's encourage each other to get involved, to use our gifts, to play our part. For when we truly find our purpose in our gospel partnership, when we truly focus on eternal things, then our joy will run deep, and our lives will give glory to the Lord. Amen.