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THE PATH TO JOY

Acts 16:6-40
(Introduction to Philippians)

By

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Philippians, Lesson 1

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Newsweek (3/6/95, p. 10) recently reported that a number of Los Angeles area Protestant churches are turning their pews into comedy clubs, inviting stand-up comics to come in and tell clean jokes. Why are they doing this? Because regular nightclub comics have become too raunchy. There is a picture of a comedian with a cross in the background with the caption, "Yucks at Bel Air Presbyterian."

It's a sad day when the church of Jesus Christ turns into a comedy club, trying to entertain its members with silly jokes. I would suggest that what God's people need is not more superficial laughter, but genuine joy in the Lord. Jesus promised fullness of joy to His followers (John 15:11; 16:24). The second fruit of the Spirit (after love) is joy (Gal. 5:22). Of all people on this earth, Christians should be marked by deep, abiding joy.

By joy, the Bible does not mean going around with a continuous grin on your face. Nor does it mean denying grief or sorrow in times of trial. But it does mean an inner state of contentment and thankfulness toward God for His abundant grace and goodness toward us in Christ. Godly joy is marked by hope in the promises of God concerning our salvation and future with Him. It is a solid, steady-flowing stream that is not diminished by difficult circumstances, because its focus is not on circumstances or self, but on God and His purpose.

Paul's letter to the Philippians overflows with the theme of joy. He mentions joy, rejoicing, or gladness at least 19 times in these four short chapters, and that in spite of his circumstances which seemed to militate against having joy. In our studies, we will discover the path to true, lasting joy that comes from God.

BACKGROUND:

To understand the epistle to the Philippians, we need to know about the background of the church in that city, which we discover

in Acts 16:6-40. On Paul's second missionary journey, he and Silas were traveling through Asia Minor (modern Turkey) when they came to the town of Lystra. The fact that they went to Lystra shows Paul's courage, because on his first missionary journey, in Lystra he had been stoned and dragged out of the city as dead (Acts 14:19). But God miraculously raised him up and he left behind there a small church, among whom was a young man named Timothy. By Paul's second journey, Timothy had established himself as a faithful disciple, and so Paul invited him to accompany them on their mission.

So the three men, Paul, Silas, and Timothy, traveled toward the northwest. For reasons we are not told, the Holy Spirit forbade them from speaking the word in the western part of Asia Minor, so they sought to go to Bithynia, an area on the north of Asia Minor, on the southern shore of the Black Sea. But again, for unknown reasons, "the spirit of Jesus did not permit them" (Acts 16:7). When they arrived in Troas, on the far northwest coast of Asia Minor, Paul had a vision that directly affects you and me: He saw a man of Macedonia appealing to him to come there and help them. And so the gospel came to Philippi and other cities of that region. The reason that vision affects you and me is that in turning west, the gospel spread into Europe and from there eventually came across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States. If Paul had instead turned back toward Asia, who knows whether the gospel would ever have moved in our direction as it did.

Before leaving Troas, Paul, Silas, and Timothy were joined by a fourth man, a Gentile physician named Luke (the author of Luke and Acts; we know this because in Acts, Luke shifts from "they" to "we" at Acts 16:8, 10, 11). We can also surmise that Paul left Luke behind to pastor the fledgling church at Philippi, because the narrative shifts back to "they" in 17:1 and remains that way until Paul sails from Philippi with Luke in 20:5, 6, about seven years later.

The city of Philippi, founded by Alexander the Great's father, Philip of Macedon, in 356 B.C., was located about ten miles inland from the port city of Neapolis in a region that was a gateway between Europe and Asia. Its population reflected its location, being a mixture from east and west. Philippi was proud to be a Roman colony, which meant that the citizens enjoyed the protection of

Roman law, they were exempt from paying tribute, and they were free from the provincial governor, answerable only to Rome. Veterans of the Roman army were often given property there.

So about A.D. 50, Paul and his companions came to this city in response to his vision. In spite of the broad mixture of the population, there were not many Jews in Philippi. We surmise this because to start a Jewish synagogue required ten men; but Philippi lacked a synagogue. After a few days, Paul and his companions went to the riverside, where a small group of Jewish women met for prayer. As Paul spoke about Jesus as the Messiah, the Lord opened the heart of a woman named Lydia to respond in faith. She was a businesswoman from Thyatira in Asia Minor who sold purple fabrics. She was probably a widow. She and all her household (any children and relatives, plus servants) believed and were baptized. She apparently had a large enough house to accommodate the four evangelists, who stayed there. Later, the church seemed to meet there (16:40).

As always happens when the gospel begins to take root, the enemy becomes active in opposition. In this case, it was a demon-possessed slave-girl who brought her owners much income through her ability to tell fortunes. As with the demons in the gospel accounts who recognized and shouted out Jesus' identity, this demon recognized Paul and his companions and cried out, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation" (16:17). This went on for many days, but finally Paul grew annoyed and cast the demon out of the girl. Luke doesn't tell us whether she was converted, but I'm inclined to think she was.

Whenever the preaching of the gospel deprives greedy sinners of their money, there will be trouble! These unscrupulous slave-owners who lost their source of income dragged Paul and Silas before the authorities, had them beaten and thrown into jail, where their feet were fastened into the stocks. Perhaps only Paul and Silas were apprehended because Timothy was half-Gentile, and Luke was Gentile. The charges against Paul and Silas included the fact that they were Jews, and as such they were painted as being anti-Roman (16:20, 21). It was about this same time that the Roman emperor Claudius had expelled all Jews from Rome. Anti-semitism

would have been strong in this colony that prided itself on Roman citizenship.

Where was God in all this? Remember, the Lord had seemingly led these men to Philippi in a distinct way. Had He forgotten them? Had Paul missed the signals? No, as the timely, powerful earthquake showed, God was still in charge! The earthquake led to the dramatic conversion of the jailer and his household. So when Paul left town, he left behind Luke and a small, but powerfully converted young church.

By the way, Paul's insistence that the local magistrates personally come and apologize was not a case of asserting his rights for his own sake. He did it to protect the church. If he had quietly been let out of jail and left town, the church would have been ridiculed as being started by some Jewish rabble-rouser. But when news of the magistrates' mistake spread, it gave credibility to the church, because the word spread that it was founded by a Roman citizen.

The setting for the writing of Philippians was about 10-12 years later. During those years, Paul had re-visited Philippi at least twice. He probably wrote Second Corinthians and Galatians from there on one of those visits. But now Paul was in prison in Rome, not in a dungeon, but in his own rented quarters, yet chained constantly to a Roman guard. He was not able to work at making tents, and so was in a tight spot financially. The Philippians heard of Paul's situation and sent a gift in care of one of their faithful members, Epaphroditus. He stayed on with Paul for a while, helping in his ministry in Rome. But he became sick to the point of death. News of his condition had reached Philippi, and they were concerned about their brother. But God had mercy and restored Epaphroditus to health. The Philippians were also concerned about Paul's impending trial.

On his part, Paul was concerned about some friction in the flock at Philippi, and also about how the church was bearing up under some persecution from the outside. He was also concerned about the pervasive, insidious teaching of the Judaizers, men who dogged Paul's steps and taught that in addition to faith in Christ, a person must be circumcised and follow the ceremonial laws of Moses to be saved.

So Paul wrote Philippians to inform them of his situation; to tell them of Epaphroditus' recovery and to insure a warm welcome for him on his return; to encourage the church by expressing his thanks for them and their gift to him; to encourage them to stand firm under persecution; to exhort them to unity; to warn them about the legalistic Judaizers; and, to encourage them to joy in the Lord in all circumstances. It is one of Paul's most personal letters, oozing with his love in the Lord for these people.

With that background sketch, let me draw a few lessons from the account in Acts 16 of the founding of the church in Philippi and relate these lessons to the letter of Philippians. The main lesson Acts 16 presents, which also permeates Philippians, is:

The path to joy is the path of obedience
to the Great Commission.

"The Great Commission" is Christ's final charge to His followers to make disciples of all nations (peoples), teaching them to observe all that He commanded (Matt. 28:19-20). This is much more extensive than simply evangelizing all peoples, although that is the core of the commission. Making disciples who obey all that Christ commanded includes the whole task of the local church in shepherding Christ's flock. Thus all Christians, whether gifted in evangelism and missions or in serving and showing mercy, have a vital role to fulfill in obedience to the Great Commission. Four lessons from Acts 16:

1. There is joy in obedience to God's sovereign call to proclaim the gospel.

God is sovereign in the task of evangelism. He devised the plan of salvation and sovereignly chose certain individuals to salvation before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). He sovereignly sent Jesus Christ as Savior at the appropriate time (Gal. 4:4-5). He sovereignly directs His chosen servants, forbidding them from going to certain locations and revealing to them that they should go to other locations to proclaim His good news (Acts 16:6-10). When those servants obediently go and proclaim the gospel, as many as have been appointed to eternal life believe (Acts 13:48; 18:10), while others oppose the messengers and are hardened in their unbelief (Acts 13:50; 18:12-17).

You may be thinking, “Well, if God is sovereign in the process of evangelism, then we don’t need to worry about it. He will save whomever He wishes to save apart from what we may do.” But Scripture is clear that part of God’s sovereign plan is for His servants to be obedient to His call to proclaim the gospel. Thus in Paul’s vision, he saw the man from Macedonia appealing to him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:9). God has chosen to use His people to help lost people learn the way of salvation. Lost people today need our help in finding Christ.

When we go in obedience to Christ’s commandment, whether it is to talk with a lost neighbor or to a stranger we happen to meet here in town, or to cross cultural or national borders to take the good news to people such as the Durango Aztecs, we experience great joy as God is pleased to save some from their sins and place them in His eternal kingdom. As you read Philippians, you see Paul’s joy overflowing; and the reason he was filled with joy is that he had been obedient to God’s call to proclaim the gospel there, and they had responded (Phil. 1:3-5). Even in his present circumstances, being imprisoned, the gospel was going forth, which caused Paul to rejoice (Phil. 1:12, 18).

Over the past few months I have been ministering to an elderly couple who have come to this church for many years, George and Mary Cramer. Mary is quite frail, and may be facing the end of her life on this earth soon. But they are both filled with God’s joy and peace in this time of trial. For years, their focus in life has been to let people know about our Savior. Every time they leave their house, they pray that God will use them to tell someone about Christ. They carry a supply of “Our Daily Bread” booklets to give to people.

Over the years, they’ve seen college students who worked at Burger King come to know Christ. Mary would sit on the bench outside Safeway and talk to whoever sat down beside her while George shopped. Although she is in the hospital and very weak, they view this as an opportunity to tell people there about the Lord. George called me earlier in the week because he feared that his usual order of 125 copies of “Our Daily Bread” had been lost on the mail truck that burned. So he wanted me to bring him as many copies as I could so they could keep up their witness. You

will have great joy if you follow their example in obeying God's sovereign call to proclaim the gospel.

2. There is joy in the difficult circumstances that we encounter in proclaiming the gospel.

Somehow we have developed the false idea that if we obey God we will be exempt from trials. I often hear people going through suffering lament, "I was trying to please God and then this happened!" The clear question is, "Why didn't God protect me?" But such an idea is never taught in the Bible. Read the Book of Acts and see how God's obedient messengers suffered as they proclaimed the gospel.

Paul had *joy in disappointing circumstances*. In his vision, he saw a Macedonian man. When he got to Philippi, all he started with was a small group of women who had gathered to pray. How can you start a church with just a few women? Where were the men? But Paul faithfully spoke to them, God opened their hearts, and the church began.

In Philippians 1:15-18, Paul mentions the disappointment of those who proclaimed Christ from selfish ambition, rather than from love, trying to cause Paul distress in his imprisonment. But he still had joy in that situation, knowing that the gospel was being proclaimed.

Paul also had *joy even in persecution*. In Acts 16, with their backs oozing blood and their feet in the stocks, Paul and Silas sang hymns of praise to God (16:25)! In Philippians 1:12-14, Paul rejoiced even in his imprisonment, since he was seeing the gospel spread among the praetorian guard. The reason he could rejoice in such difficulties was that he believed in a sovereign God who is at all times in control, working all things together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28). As the earthquake in Philippi showed, God was indeed in control, even though the situation immediately preceding the earthquake would have seemed that He was not.

3. There is joy in the conversion of lost sinners in response to the gospel.

When the Philippian jailer and all in his household believed, they all "rejoiced greatly" (Acts 16:34), just as Paul rejoiced in his

remembrance of how God had powerfully saved the Philippians (Phil. 1:3-8). Whenever people are genuinely saved, there is demonstrable evidence in their changed lives. Lydia and her household members who believed were baptized and then showed hospitality to Paul and his companions (Acts 16:14, 15). If the slave girl was converted, you can be sure that she abandoned her occult practices and joined with the other Christians in following the Lord. The jailer was delivered from suicide, washed the wounds of Paul and Silas, was baptized, and joyfully showed them hospitality (16:31-34). The gospel is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16). It brings great joy to see sinners who were living for self transformed into saints who now live to exalt Jesus Christ.

4. There is joy in the power of the gospel to unite in Christ people of diverse backgrounds.

Think of the beginning nucleus of the Philippian church: An Asian businesswoman; a slave-girl who had been into the occult (assuming she got saved); and, a career Roman military man (the Philippian jailer). Surely, God has a sense of humor! Where could you find a less homogeneous group to start a church? Church growth experts today say that you need to target a homogeneous group, such as upwardly mobile, college-educated career people. That's human wisdom, based on marketing techniques. God's way is to save and bring together the most unlikely people. When friction develops (as surely it will), He then teaches them to learn the humility of Christ, who laid aside His privileges and went to the cross for our sakes (Phil.2:1-11). What a joy it is to see people from every background working through their conflicts and "standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel" (Phil. 1:27).

Conclusion

These are some of the lessons we'll be learning as we work through this great portion of Scripture. But, what about you? Do you know the joy that comes from being reconciled to God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? You can know it this very hour! If you know Christ as your Savior, do you know the joy that comes from obeying His Great Commission? Can you, with Paul, say that your aim is that "Christ shall even now, as always, be ex-

alted in my body, whether by life or by death" (Phil. 1:20)? If you've gotten caught up with living for self, you can re-focus your life around the call of Christ to make disciples of all peoples. You'll find yourself on the path of joy!

Discussion Questions

1. Does biblical joy mean suppressing feelings of grief or sadness? How can we know God's joy in the midst of suffering?
2. Why doesn't God protect from all hardships those who serve Him?
3. Is the Great Commission binding on *all* Christians, or just on those called to "full-time" ministry?
4. Is it wrong for the church to divide into culturally compatible groups? Why/why not?

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