



Peninsula City Church

Finding Joy in Unexpected Places

Philippians: Introduction and Theme

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The Letter to the Philippians an Introduction and its Theme

An Introduction

Q. Do you try to find happiness or joy in daily life?

We hear people around us saying that, he or she is happy, then something happens to them or someone says something and their happiness seems to evaporate. You know what I mean someone announces that they are 'on cloud nine.' That is "a person who is on cloud nine is very happy because something wonderful has happened."¹ Then there are those who claim to be joyful, but well, they are anything but joyful. Maybe you have heard someone say that he or she could 'leap for joy.' For example Jesus said a really odd thing to those listening to Him,

²² "What blessings await you when people hate you and exclude you and mock you and curse you as evil because you follow the Son of Man. ²³ When that happens, be happy! Yes, leap for joy! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, their ancestors treated the ancient prophets that same way" (Lk 6:22-23 NLT).

So what is happiness and what is joy and is there a difference between the two of them? Well on this matter it has been said by Dr. Cheryl A. MacDonald a psychologist that,

"Happiness is subjective. What matters is someone's perception of happiness. Scientists say this emotion can be studied and measured because people can reliably and honestly self-report their increases and decreases in happiness levels. Joy is a state of mind, a combination of emotions, and in the spiritual context is localized in our heart. Joy contains elements of contentment, confidence and hope. I am going to be discussing the differences between Joy and Happiness, and ways in which we can receive both in life... Happiness is a blurred emotion... Joy is an internal lasting emotional condition... Joy is an attitude or belief, which soothes even in the most sorrowful of situations. Joy comes from within; it is an internal view. Joy in the Biblical context, is not an emotion. It is not based on something positive happening in life, but is an attitude of the heart or spirit... Studies on what makes people happy reveal that it does not have much to do with material goods or high achievement. Joy seems to be related to ones' outlook on life and the quality of relationships, along with having the ability to give and receive... Yes and No. Joy is something that lasts. Happiness is something that is temporary. Joy is an inner, conscious belief. Happiness is external. Something people may feel for a short time, for example, when they buy something that they desire. Joy brings with it a feeling of contentment when someone is in the middle of a life storm. Happiness is not present in a life storm. A person's genetic baseline level of happiness is fixed on the personality style in which they were born and can increase over time... Happiness is a blurred emotion."²

The theme of this current series to be covered is, "Finding Joy in Unexpected Places." Here a brief introduction and the theme of Philippians will be covered. Although we can all be happy at times, the Bible actually addresses joy. But what were the historical setting, outline and teaching of Philippians on this topic?

¹ "English Idioms & Idiomatic Expressions: Happiness – Sadness." <http://www.learn-english-today.com/idioms/idiom-categories/happiness-sadness/happiness-sadness1.html> (6th July 2016).

² MacDonald, Dr. Cheryl A. "Is there a Relationship between Happiness and Joy?" <http://healthpsychology.org/is-there-a-relationship-between-happiness-and-joy/> (6th July 2016).

1. A brief historical setting, and outline of Philippians

Q. How would you understand the historical outline of the letter to the Philippians?

The historical background to the letter is as follows. The letter to the Philippians is probably one of the most gracious of all Paul's writings. This was the first local church that Paul planted when he landed in Europe. The Philippian church was actually planted by Paul while on his second missionary trip in 49 or 50AD, (Acts 16:6-42). Then in 60 or 61AD while under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:16-31), he wrote to the Philippian church. It was during this time that Paul also wrote letters to the Ephesian and Colossian churches as well as to Philemon.

But, how did Paul come to be in the area of Philippi in the first place? Well, in Acts 16:6-8 we are told that,

⁶ "And they (Paul and his team) went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). ⁷ And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. ⁸ So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas."

Paul and his team were on the move trying workout the will of God for their next move. They were not just standing still, but they were active in their work. It was in this context that Paul received in a vision what has been called the 'Macedonian Call'.

"That night Paul had a vision: A man from Macedonia in northern Greece was standing there, pleading with him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us!'" (Act 16:9 NLT).

It is because he was actively seeking the will of God and therefore, was sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit that he was in a place to hear.

We are told in Acts 16:10 that, they went to Macedonia then "they decided to leave for Macedonia at once, having concluded that God was calling us to preach the Good News there." Paul grabbed the opportunity with both hands and ran with it. They did not just hear from God and revel in the fact, but put faith into action and "...boarded a boat at Troas and sailed straight across to the island of Samothrace, and the next day we landed at Neapolis. From there we travelled 16 kms and reached Philippi, a major city of that district of Macedonia and a Roman colony" (Acts 16:11).

This was a defining moment in church history a landmark in the history of Philippi. This made the city of Philippi a springboard or take-off-point to bounce Christianity off (Acts 16:12-40) into the rest of Europe. King Philip of Macedonia, who was the father of Alexander the Great, had established the city. It was now a Roman city; it had no synagogue, probably because of the military/commercial nature of the town. But in such a town, the first church in Europe was born with the conversion of this business-woman (Acts 16:11-15), a demonised fortune teller (Acts 16:16-24, and a jailer (Acts 16:25-34).

Paul wrote to those whom he had known at Philippi to encourage them in their faith. He reminded them that he knows what it is to suffer and be imprisoned for the faith. He was under house arrest in Caesar's custody in the will of Christ and not for himself.

¹ "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ... ¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ... ¹⁶ The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel... ^{4:21} Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. ²² All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. ²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit" (Phil 1:1-2;13,16; 4:21-23).

A brief outline of the letter on the topic of joy is as follows:

- Joy found in connecting with others in the gospel: Phil 1:1-11
- Joy found in the maturing work of life's trials: 1:12-30
- Joy in unity through humility: 2:1-18
- Joy in collaboration: 2:19-30
- Joy as Jesus Christ crafts you, His masterpiece: 3:1-4:1
- Joy in the unity and wholeness of heart and mind: 4:2-9
- Joy working through the heavens currency: 4:10-23.

2. Joy in Philippians in Phil 1:1-11 (in the context of the letter)

Q. How do you read the letter of Philippians and what themes do you see in the letter?

As pointed out above, the central teaching of the letter is joy in the Lord. Namely, 'Finding Joy in Unexpected Places.' In this section of the letter the sub-topic that will be reviewed is 'Joy found in connecting with others in the gospel'. Paul wrote the letter to the Philippian believers covering matters of joy and support as he personally is in the middle of some difficult state of affairs, as they were.

^{1:1} "Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons... ^{4:4} Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again-- rejoice! ^{4:15} And you yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone" (Phil 1:1; 4:4,15 NASB).

This is a major theme in the book is that of joy, Paul deals with this in the midst of what life has thrown at him. He encourages the Philippian believers to be full of joy in the Lord; regardless of what life throws their way. For example,

- The word joy is found five times within the letter: Phil 1:4,25; 2:2,29; 4:1.
- The verb to rejoice occurs some eleven times, (Phil 1:18; 2:17,18; 4:4 where it was used twice); and (Phil 2:28; 3:1; 4:10 it is used once).

All this was in the face of Paul's being under house arrest for his faith in Jesus Christ. Yet, he still displayed a joyful faith in his and their God.

Remember, Paul sitting under house arrest at the time he wrote this letter was an example to the Philippians on how a Christ-follower needs to live. He was encouraging the Philippians to rejoice and stand firm in their challenges. They were to stand in unity while sharing the Gospel, even in the midst of their sufferings (as Christ did, and was glorified Phil 3:1-41). They were to joyfully press towards the goal of knowing and making known Jesus Christ their Lord, even in the midst of suffering and trials.

Consequently, Paul pointed out that, he was always thanking God as he remembered the Philippians. It is such a thankful response because,

⁴ "Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, ⁵ for you have been my partners (fellowship, *koinonia*) in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now" (Phil 1:4-5 NLT).

This gratitude filled prayer is fuelled by a highly-spirited and vigorous joy, in light of the partnership of spreading the Good News of Christ. Paul was not just having an empty emotional or happy

experience. But it was a joy that had a tangible action attached to it, which was the common participation in spreading the Gospel. So, it was not joy for joy sake, but the joy that was grounded and found in connecting with others in the gospel for Christ's sake.

Paul was pointing out that, they were in this Kingdom work together. It was the together aspect that he was emphasising here, regardless of the trials that come with doing this Kingdom work. It was to be accompanied by a certain heavenly Kingdom characteristic, namely joy. As C.S. Lewis has said, "Joy is the serious business of heaven."³ This is the attitude that Christ-followers need to ooze, especially when doing the work of our Heavenly Father. Remember that, this God given joy of the Christ-follower is something that lasts, even in the midst of trying times. Happiness on the other hand, is something that is, fleeting, especially in the midst of trials. Joy on the other hand, is constant; it is an inner, mindful and spiritual belief that is from God. Happiness is an externally motivated emotion that is subjective, whereas, joy gives rise to hope.⁴

Paul in his letter to the Galatians said that, this kind of joy is from the Holy Spirit, (Gal 5:22). To be exact, it is the nature or character of God, He is joy. It is not something that is worked up, or earned, it is something that a person receives the moment they are born from above. It is the character or nature of Spirit of God who is now living inside the new born child of God. It is not a natural feature, but a supernatural one. So, from the moment a person is born again from above and receive the new life, they receive all of who the Holy Spirit is into their life. This includes the joy of the Lord.

Some concluding thoughts

So, coming back to the opening question,

Q. As a Christ-follower, do you try to find happiness or joy in daily life?

If you are a child of God, you already have the joy of the Lord. If you are not a child of God, you can be and receive the joy of the Lord. Paul highlighted the truth that, joy can be found in connecting with others in the gospel. As a Christ-follower, we can and need to live a joy filled Christlike life. We are not to be those who are dejected and sad, due to the trial that comes our way. Remember that, the joy of the Lord is our strength. As a Christ-follower, we already have that joy, right now.

This joy within the biblical context, is not an emotion, rather comprises features of contentment, assurance and hope. It is a God given feature of His character, and attitude of the heart or spirit. We received it the moment that we were born from above. Now, it needs to mature, but that will take time and the tests of time that will come our way.

So, when push comes to shove, in light of what has been discussed here, where to from here? Here are a few questions that may help to try to get some direction.

- What do we know now regarding being joyful as a joint witness regardless of the trials that will come our way that we did not know before?
- What new biblical idea about being joyful as a joint witness regardless of the trials that will come our way are you going to share with our family, friends, & those in your social circle?
- What action are we going to take RIGHT NOW regarding being joyful as a joint witness regardless of the trials that will come our way?

³ Lewis, C.S. *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*. (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1991), 93

⁴ MacDonald, Dr. Cheryl A. "Is there a Relationship between Happiness and Joy?" <http://healthpsychology.org/is-there-a-relationship-between-happiness-and-joy/> (7th July 2016).

That is, what are you prepared to do 'STARTING RIGHT NOW,' or change to put this new knowledge into practice in real-life situations?

It is time to develop real-life solutions & processes from what you have heard today & apply them to your real-world problems, issues & relationships, etc.

⁴ "Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, ⁵ for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now" (Phil 1:4-5 NLT).