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The Epistle of Joy (Philippians 1:1–2)

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: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1:1–2)

We live in a generally sad world, a fallen world well acquainted with despair, depression, disappointment, dissatisfaction, and a longing for lasting happiness that often never comes to pass. Moments of pleasure and satisfaction are scattered through the general pain and sorrow of life. Many people have little hope that their situation in life will ever change much, if any, for the better. Hopelessness tends to increase with age. Long years of life often become long years of sorrow, unfulfillment, loss of loved ones and friends, and often physical limitations and pain. Such decreasing times of happiness tend to produce a morbid sadness and lessening satisfaction with life.

Most people define happiness as an attitude of satisfaction or delight based on positive circumstances largely beyond their control. Happiness, therefore, cannot be planned or programmed, much less guaranteed. It is experienced only if and when circumstances are favorable. It is therefore elusive and uncertain.

Spiritual joy, on the other hand, is not an attitude dependent on chance or circumstances. It is the deep and abiding confidence that, regardless of one's circumstances in life, all is well between the believer and the Lord. No matter what difficulty, pain, disappointment, failure, rejection, or other challenge one is facing, genuine joy remains because of that eternal well-being established by God's grace in salvation. Thus, Scripture makes it clear that the fullest, most lasting and satisfying joy is derived from a true relationship with God. It is not based on circumstances or chance, but is the gracious and permanent possession of every child of God. Therefore it is not surprising that joy is an important New Testament theme. The verb *rejoice* (*chairō*) appears ninety-six times in the New Testament (including those times when it is used as a greeting) and the noun *joy* (*chara*) another fifty-nine times. The two words appear thirteen times in Philippians.

A biblical theology of joy includes many features. First, joy is a gift from God. David declared, "You have put gladness in my heart, more than when their grain and new wine abound. In peace I will both lie down and sleep, for You alone, O Lord, make me to dwell in safety" (Ps. 4:7-8); "You will make known to me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever" (Ps. 16:11).

Second, God grants joy to those who believe the gospel. Announcing Christ's birth to the shepherds, the angel said, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11). Jesus told His disciples, "These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full" (John 15:11). Christ came to proclaim a gospel that would give true supernatural joy to those who receive Him as Savior and Lord.

Third, joy is produced by God the Holy Spirit. "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking," Paul said, "but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17). In his letter to the Galatian churches, the apostle wrote, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23).

Fourth, joy is experienced most fully as believers receive and obey God's Word. The prophet Jeremiah exulted, "Your words were found and I ate them, and Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I have been called by Your name, O Lord God of hosts" (Jer. 15:16). The apostle John wrote his first letter so that, among other things, his and his readers' "joy may be made complete" (1 John 1:4).

Fifth, believers' joy is deepened through trials. The full reality of joy is experienced when it is contrasted with sadness, sorrow, and diffi-

culties. “You also became imitators of us and of the Lord,” Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:6). In his second letter to the believers at Corinth, Paul spoke of being “sorrowful yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor. 6:10). James counseled believers to “consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials” (James 1:2), and Peter encouraged them with these words:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials. (1 Peter 1:3–6)

Sixth, believers’ joy is made complete when they set their hope on the glory of heaven. They are always to be “rejoicing in hope” (Rom. 12:12). Peter reminded them that, “though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory” (1 Peter 1:8). Later in that letter he exhorted, “To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation” (1 Peter 4:13). Jude concluded his brief letter with the beautiful benediction: “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen” (Jude 24–25).

The love bond between Paul and the Philippian believers may have been stronger than the one he had with any other church. It was in large measure because of the joy that their love brought to him that the theme of Paul’s letter to the Philippians is joy. The depth of their relationship with him encouraged the apostle during his imprisonment and added to his joy. He was concerned about their unity, their faithfulness, and many other important spiritual and practical matters. But his overriding concern was that their sorrow over his afflictions would be tempered by their joy over his faithfulness to the Lord and the great reward that awaited him in heaven. Paul wanted them not to be sad, but to share in the fullest measure his deep, abiding joy in Jesus Christ. It is a noteworthy testimony to the maturity of the Philippian believers that, although Paul warned and encouraged them, he made no mention of any theolog-

ical or moral problem in the church at Philippi. That also brought the apostle joy.

In the first two verses the apostle described himself and Timothy as servants of Jesus Christ, the Philippian believers as saints in Jesus Christ, and offered his salutation to them in the name of their Lord.

THE SERVANTS

Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus (1:1a)

Paul is the beloved apostle who wrote thirteen New Testament epistles and is arguably the most noble and privileged servant of Jesus Christ the world has ever known. Yet, he referred to himself and **Timothy** simply as **bond-servants of Christ Jesus**. He made no mention of his apostolic authority or his being chosen to record part of God's written Word. He viewed himself and every believer primarily as a slave of the Lord.

Perhaps the most concise and clear look at Paul anywhere in the New Testament comes from the apostle himself later in this letter. Speaking of his life in Judaism, he wrote,

I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. [But] if anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Phil. 3:4-11)

Paul's human credentials were remarkable. He was the epitome of Jewish manhood, an exemplary, traditional, zealous, and legalistic "Hebrew of Hebrews." In the eyes of his peers, he was blameless and righteous. But after his conversion he saw those things for what they were in God's eyes: mere rubbish. What he had considered to be positives before God he came to realize were actually destructive negatives. His former imagined

righteousness was really unrighteousness, which he gladly forsook to gain the true righteousness that comes only “through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith” (3:9).

Timothy shared that righteousness, as a fellow bond-servant of **Christ Jesus**. He was Paul’s son in the faith (1 Tim. 1:2), not only a protégé, but also a cherished companion, to whom the apostle would bequeath an extraordinary spiritual legacy and ministry. His two inspired letters to Timothy were written several years later, the first after the apostle had been released from his first imprisonment in Rome and the second during his second imprisonment there.

Bond-servants translates the plural of the oft-used Greek word *doulos*, which describes a person owned by someone else and thus subservient to and dependent on that person. Paul used it of himself at the beginning of three of his epistles (Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1), and in each case it precedes the mention of his apostleship. James (James 1:1), Peter (2 Peter 1:1), and Jude (Jude 1) use it in the same way.

When used in the New Testament of a believer’s relationship to Jesus Christ, *doulos* describes willing, determined, and devoted service. It reflects the attitude of an Old Testament slave who refused the opportunity for freedom and voluntarily resubmitted himself to his master for life. The Mosaic Law provided that “if the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out as a free man,’ then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him permanently” (Ex. 21:5–6). Speaking of all faithful believers, Paul declared, “Now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter” (Rom. 7:6). To the Corinthians he explained, “For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord’s freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ’s slave” (1 Cor. 7:22).

In that spirit **Paul** and **Timothy** did not think of being **bond-servants of Christ Jesus** in anything but positive terms. Nor did they think of themselves as **bond-servants** of the church, of Rome, or of any other person or institution, but exclusively of **Christ Jesus**. Paul reminded the elders from the Ephesian church of that single-minded devotion when he met them near Miletus: “I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24). That devotion is required of every believer, but especially of those called to the ministry. Even if a pastor’s or teacher’s primary devotion is to the church, it will inevitably bring some measure of compromise, disappointment, and spiritual failure. But devotion to **Christ**

Jesus can never be disappointing or in vain. If his ministry is concerned with other believers' standards and opinions, a pastor will invariably stray from the gospel to some form of compromise. But devotion and obedience to the Lord and to His Word will just as invariably keep him on a godly and faithful course.

Paul's physical bonds were not really marks of his bondage to Rome but to his Lord. His imprisonment *by* Rome symbolized his bondage *to* Jesus Christ. "My imprisonment in the cause of Christ," he explained, "has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and . . . most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear" (1:13–14). It was Jesus Christ who would assign all his duties and meet all his needs. He had the same spirit of devotion to Christ that David's servants had to him as king: "Then the king's servants said to the king, 'Behold, your servants are ready to do whatever my lord the king chooses'" (2 Sam. 15:15). Jesus declared unambiguously that "no one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matt. 6:24). And because the Lord is such a loving Master, His servants can testify with Paul, "And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (2 Cor. 12:9).

THE SAINTS

to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: (1:1b)

Paul addresses his letter to **all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi**. Like *qodesh*, its Hebrew equivalent, *hagios* (**saints**) refers to someone who is set apart; specifically believers, who are set apart by God for Himself. Both words are often translated "holy."

Unfortunately, **saints** are often thought of as being a special, higher order of Christians who accomplished extraordinary good deeds and lived an exemplary life. In the Roman Catholic system, saints are revered people who are officially canonized after death because they have met certain demanding requirements. But Scripture makes it clear that all the redeemed, whether under the Old or New Covenant, are **saints**, set apart from sin to God.

When God commanded Ananias to lay his hands on the newly converted Saul (Paul) so that he would regain his sight, he answered,

“Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem” (Acts 9:13). A few verses later Luke writes that “as Peter was traveling through all those regions, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda” (Acts 9:32). In both instances it is clear that **saints** refers to *all* believers in those cities (cf. Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:2). That Paul even referred to the worldly, immature believers at Corinth as saints indicates beyond dispute that the term has no relationship to spiritual maturity or character. To them he wrote, “To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours” (1 Cor. 1:2). Like all other believers, the Christians at Corinth were not saints because of their spiritual maturity (cf. 1 Cor. 3:1–3), but because they were “saints by calling,” a reference to their call to salvation (cf. Rom. 8:29–30).

All believers are **saints**, not because they are themselves righteous, but because they are **in** their Lord, **Christ Jesus**, whose righteousness is imputed to them (Rom. 4:22–24). A Buddhist does not speak of himself as *in* Buddha, nor does a Muslim speak of himself as *in* Mohammed. A Christian Scientist is not *in* Mary Baker Eddy or a Mormon *in* Joseph Smith or Brigham Young. They may faithfully follow the teaching and example of those religious leaders, but they are not *in* them. Only Christians can claim to be *in* their Lord, because they have been made spiritually one with Him (cf. Rom. 6:1–11). “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us,” Paul wrote, “even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:4–6). To the Galatians he declared, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). In Paul’s letters, the phrase “in Christ Jesus” occurs fifty times, “in Christ” twenty-nine times, and “in the Lord” forty-five times. Being **in Christ Jesus** and therefore acceptable to God is the believer’s supreme source of joy.

Overseers and deacons are called to lead the church. As is clear from Acts 20:17, 28 and Titus 1:5, 7, *overseer* is another term for *elder*, the most common New Testament name for the office (cf. Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 23; James 5:14). Elders are also referred to as pastors (or shepherds; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1–2), pastor-teachers (Eph. 4:11), and bishops (cf. Acts 20:28, marg.; 1 Tim. 3:2, marg.). Their high qualifications are set forth in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9. **Overseers**, or elders, are first mentioned in relation to famine relief money sent by the church at Antioch to the elders in Judea by the hands of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11:30). They mediate the rule of Christ in local churches by

preaching, teaching, setting godly examples, and giving Holy Spirit–guided leadership.

Although their role is primarily one of practical service rather than preaching and teaching, **deacons** are required to meet the same high moral and spiritual standards (1 Tim. 3:8–13) as elders. The distinction between the two offices is that elders are to be skilled teachers (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9).

THE SALUTATION

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1:2)

Paul used this common greeting in several of his letters to churches (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:2; Col. 1:2–3; 2 Thess. 1:2) as well as in one letter to an individual (Philem. 3). It is an expression of the apostle’s deep love for fellow believers, even the immature ones in Corinth who caused him such grief. But he must have felt an especially deep sense of joy and gratitude for the saints in Philippi who, in stark contrast to those in Corinth, had brought him immeasurable satisfaction and comfort.

The saving, eternal **grace** that is granted to penitent, believing sinners is the supreme divine gift, and everlasting **peace** is its greatest blessing. The source of both is **God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**. This salutation expresses Paul’s abiding love and concern for the faithful believers in Philippi and serves as an introduction to the many specific causes for rejoicing that he mentions throughout this tenderest of all his epistles.

The common New Testament salutary connection of **God our Father** with the **Lord Jesus Christ** repeatedly emphasizes the oneness of nature between the two (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3, 9; 2 Cor. 1:2–3; Gal. 1:1, 3; Eph. 1:1–2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:1, 3; 1 Tim. 1:1–2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philem. 3; Heb. 1:1–3; James 1:1; 1 Peter 1:3; 2 Peter 1:1–2; 1 John 1:3; 2 John 3; Jude 1). **God the Father** shares His essential divine being with **the Lord Jesus Christ**. The emphasis on this equality establishes the deity of our Lord Jesus, which is the central truth of Christianity.