

A Joyful Pastor

The untold secret of vocational ministry is how many pastors are chronically, and deeply discouraged. A few of them wear their discouragement on their sleeves, and on their faces, and try to lead by playing the sympathy card, but that never really works well. Most pastors attempt to appear encouraged in the pulpit, to show the face of joy and zeal, even when they're discouraged. Don't despise that, or call it insincerity. Leaders are supposed to represent the congregation, and that means sometimes ignoring your own feelings and appearing in public what a Christian is supposed to be. And when you think about it, if your pastor got up and showed his discouragement publicly, I don't think you'd walk away feeling glad that he was sincere and honest. You'd more likely be bothered and a little disturbed.

But sometimes the man remains chronically discouraged, and the smile in the pulpit has to become more and more forced and staged. And the longer he remains discouraged, the more that outer visage becomes a mask. One day, inevitably, the mask must crack, and when it does, people are often shocked to find how discouraged their pastor has been all along, and for how long.

Actually, the writer of Hebrews says that an encouraged pastor is what every church should want. ¹⁷ Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. (Heb. 13:17)

The writer says that if pastors rule and watch over souls with grief, that will not be profitable for those souls. Why not? Well, a heavy-hearted servant is less effective. He is less motivated. He is less diligent. And when he comes to give that account to the Lord, he will not be filled with complimentary things to say about those souls. And though the Lord can see through the error in the man, no doubt there will be a price to pay for those congregations that needlessly made life difficult for their leaders.

A pastor's joy is important for the life of the church, for the health of a church. And by extension, every Christian who serves should want to know the secret of finding encouragement for ministry, and being an encouragement in ministry.

Paul was one of those who managed to find joy and encouragement in the midst of many afflictions. We saw last week how he and Silas sang when in jail, and it seems so often that his letters sing with joy and encouragement over the people he writes to, even as he writes it in a Roman prison. In the first eight verses of Philippians, we learn much about a pastor's joy, how to create it for him, but how to find it for yourself.

Before we jump into the body, just a few observations about the opening two verses.

Philippians 1:1 Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Phil. 1:1-2)

Ancient letters had a certain form, and Paul respects that form. Our letters begin with “dear so-and-so”, and we sign our name at the bottom. Letters in Roman times began with the author and then immediately followed with the addressees. Then there were usually the greetings of “Chareiv”, similar to our “good day to you” “trust you are well”. Then there usually followed some words of kindness or blessing or praise, before the main body of the letter began. When that was over, there were usually some personal messages at the end, and a closing blessing. Paul more or less follows that pattern.

There are some distinctive things about his greeting in Philippians worth noting. First, he starts with Paul and Timothy, slaves of Jesus Christ. Instead of using his apostolic title, he calls himself by a humiliating title.

And then he addresses the leaders: the bishops (or overseers/elders/pastors) and deacons of the church. These were already the two functioning offices of the early church. Obviously an apostle was higher in rank than a pastor or a deacon, but Paul does not use his title when addressing other leaders. This is likely an early shot Paul is firing at the honour culture of this Roman city. This is about finding joy by dying and rising with Jesus, and that means dying to your titles and honorifics.

As he often does, he calls the believers there *saints*, which means holy ones, set-apart ones, in Christ Jesus. This is by far Paul's favourite title for Christians: those in Christ. When you are reminded of your position in Christ, it reminds you both of your resources and your responsibilities. Paul doesn't start the letter with "you lot in Philippi", or "to the crowd that gathers in Lydia's home". He says, "to the set apart ones, who are now joined to and included in Messiah Jesus". He greets them with not just regular *chareiv*, but with grace and peace from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul now begins his words of blessing or encouragement that will lead to a prayer. And here comes the main action of this section in verse 3. This is the main verb all the way down to verse 7, the key thought. What is it? Simply, **I thank my God upon every remembrance of you**. When Paul thinks of the Philippians, he prays prayers of joy, prayers of thanksgiving.

⁴ always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy,

In the next verses he is going to list out what brought a smile to his lips when he thought about the Philippians. What made Paul such a pleased pastor of the Philippians, such a blessed bishop, such an elated elder? Paul didn't have to scratch his head to find microscopic evidences of grace in them, or take out the magnifying glass to find fruit the size of poppy seeds. No, the Philippians provided abundant reasons for Paul's joy.

I. There is Joy For Partnership in the Gospel

⁵ for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, (Phil. 1:5)

Verse 5 is giving us a cause of Paul's thanksgiving. He is thankful because they have given him fellowship in the gospel from the first day till the present moment.

At first, this might sound as if Paul is just thankful that they are fellow Christians. But that is not Paul's meaning here. There's a little preposition here in the Greek. If Paul had used the one "eis" it would have meant, "I'm thankful that you have participated with me in accepting the gospel and getting saved". But he doesn't use that. He uses another preposition "ev" which means "I'm thankful that you have participated with me in spreading the gospel". You have been my partners, my co-labourers, my friends in gospel-work.

The Philippians were a church that supported Paul's ministry. They gave financially to Paul personally. When they heard about the poor saints in Jerusalem, they gave. They prayed. They became interested in missionary efforts to other churches. They sent people who were helpful and precious to them, like Timothy, and Epaphroditus.

In other words, the Philippians were not merely recipients of Paul's ministry, but partners. They were not just spectators, but participants. They did not just take and take and drain and drain, but they returned something, gave back, developed, grew, and did ministry with Paul.

Paul wanted to do gospel work. In fact, Philippians uses the word *gospel* more proportionately than any other epistle. He was overjoyed when a church became zealous for the gospel themselves, and spread it, and taught it, and shared it, and gave towards it. A pastor's joy in the maturing of his people can be likened to a parent's.

When God gives a couple a baby, what they find is that this little package of noise is concerned with only one thing: his or her own needs. He is utterly self-centred. Only as the child grows does he become dimly aware that other people also have needs; other people also need to be served and helped. As the child grows, wise parents train the child away from total self-centredness and towards serving the other family members. Parents will be glad when children do their chores because they're reminded to do them. They will be even happier when the child no longer needs to be reminded and serves others without having to be told. But a parent's greatest joy is when that young person starts taking initiative to serve, finding ways to serve, becoming an active helper and servant in the home: finding ways to help, offering to cook, fixing things, cleaning things, making suggestions to improve things. Now the parents truly have a partner, a friend in the home.

So in ministry. We understand when people are newly saved, that they are just learning the ropes. But as the years go on, we remind people of their spiritual chores: be in church, encourage others, give, pray, serve, be a member. Like with small children, when people do it, it's gratifying, and then they stop doing it, and you remind them, and they do it again. Greater joy comes when people become mature enough to not need the reminders, they're faithful, and active, and obedient, and you don't have to keep running after them. But the greatest joy is when these mature ones become real partners: they take initiative. They invite people to their homes. They offer to do a Bible study with a new believer or an unsaved person. They see the need for a new ministry in the church and offer suggestions or volunteer to make it happen. They start going after the backsliders themselves; they initiate contact with the missionaries; they reach out to the youth, they introduce themselves to visitors and invite them over. This is when you go from being a self-focused infant believer to a ministry-minded servant. You are partner with your pastors and deacons.

To bring joy, be that person who is in partnership in the gospel with your church. You've graduated from the baby chair and bib of just attending church regularly. You've developed beyond the table-manners-cleaning-your-plate stage of actually being a member, keeping your membership covenant, loving one another. You've reached the stage of preparing meals for others: starting ministries, visiting, discipling, evangelising, equipping others. If you want joy, spend more time thinking about the partners than the screaming infants.

But that very thought of people in different stages of development is actually the basis for Paul's second source of joy.

II. There is Joy for Promises of Future Perfection

⁶ being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete *it* until the day of Jesus Christ; (Phil. 1:6)

Paul's second reason for joy in the Philippians came from a confidence, an assurance he had. The word in verse 6, *being confident*, is in the perfect tense with effects in the present. It means "I have been persuaded and therefore am convinced". What is Paul utterly convinced of? That He, that's God, who started a good, or beautiful work in the Philippians, will complete it, or finish it all the way to the day of Jesus Christ.

There's a starting point: the work begun in you, and an end point: the day of Jesus Christ. The

starting point is the day of your regeneration, your conversion, the day you trusted in the Lord Jesus and are justified. The end point is the day of Jesus Christ, which is Paul's way of saying, the day of glorification, when sin and suffering and death are put behind us, and Christ is declared Lord of all.

Paul says, I am absolutely convinced that the work of salvation God began in you, He will finish on that day of Jesus. That word *complete* means to perfect, to bring it to its designed end, to bring it to its purpose.

Here is a rock solid pillar of the doctrine of eternal security. From God's perspective, a true believer is a process that He will never abandon. A true believer is a project that God starts and does not give up on. A true believer is a work of grace that the omnipotent God will see through. In verse 5, Paul saw the good fruits of perseverance and faithfulness, and that leads Him in verse 6 to focus on God's side of the equation. What God begins, He completes. There will be no half-formed saints in eternity. There will be no off-cuts in eternity, no Beta-version Christians who didn't make the grade, no factory flaws, or defective models. If God truly begins a true work in you as a Christian, you have the assurance that God finishes what He starts.

Paul is rejoicing, because as he looks at the Philippians, he knows that wherever they are in their walk, God is still at work in them. They are in process. They are growing. And that means the best is yet to come.

Now why is that a source of joy? Well, nothing is more joy-destroying than to think that what you are doing is all in vain. Nothing is more discouraging than to think that what you are doing will fail. Conversely, great joy comes from knowing that what you are doing will succeed, it will get better, and it will reach the end goal.

Many a homeschool parent despairs during the day, with thoughts of "Are we getting anywhere?" But if you were offered a photograph of your successful child 15 or 20 years into the future, an injection of joy and hope would come into your soul. The work that's I've begun in my child will come to fruition in a future missionary, or pilot, or electrician, or engineer, or pastor, or homemaker, or doctor, or business owner.

This is a pastor's joy as well. It points in two directions. There is the joy that faithful believers will not fall away, and will not break your heart. There is the joy that even immature believers will grow and become better than they are. The encouragements will remain encouragements, and the discouragements will become less discouraging. When there are fruits of the gospel, fruits of salvation, we can say, whatever stage this believer is in, God will finish the work He has started. I am playing a part. I am not the whole part, or the only part. I must play my role faithfully, and trust that God will bring this Christian to completion one day.

This will help you too. It helps when you look at those believers who are not yet fellow-workers in the gospel. Right now, they may just be apparent drains on time, prayer, and attention. But if they are in Christ, they are a very small, wet, and malformed lump of clay, needing to be shaped.

What about those with no fruit at all? Those are the ones we discipline. When there is no sign of Christ in them, we need not confuse our testimony by including a goat among the sheep, nor keep watering a dead plant hoping it will grow. We protect our joy by calling Christians only those who show those fruits. The others, we pray for their conversion.

III. There is Joy for Partaking of Grace

⁷ just as it is right for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as both in my chains and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers with me of grace. (Phil. 1:7)

Here is Paul's third reason for joy in the Philippians. The last phrase of verse 7: you are partakers with me of grace. This is not saving grace, but enabling grace.

God's special enablement and a sense of His presence is given to believers who engage in ministry and do God's will. You experience grace when you need grace, and you need grace when you face what Paul describes in verse 7: my chains, the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

Paul was in prison, not for his own crimes, but for the gospel. Both in and out of prison, he had both a negative and a positive approach. Negatively, he fended off attacks on the gospel. Positively, he taught and confirmed and established the gospel. In all this, the Philippians were partakers. When Paul was in prison, they sent money and help to him. When Paul's character as a gospel preacher was being slandered, they sent their own, Epaphroditus, to encourage and strengthen. They weren't ashamed of Paul, or of Paul's being a prisoner. Because of this, Paul says that we are partakers of grace together.

That knits the Philippians especially close to Paul. Verse 7: I have you in my heart. You are dear to me. I hold you close. You are precious.

Verse 8: ⁸ For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ. (Phil. 1:8) God knows the depths of my heart., Paul says, I yearn to see you, I miss you. Paul feels such a kinship with these people that he longs to be re-united with them. The words "affection of Jesus Christ" uses the Greek *splanchna*, which refers to the deep and noble desires. Not passing passions, not sudden appetites, but deeply held spiritual desires. This is the deep love of Jesus, who treasures His people. Paul has this for the Philippians.

There's a special bond of kinship and joy for those who share grace together. When you share in the grace of that which comes to those who suffer and sacrifice together, you have a bond that few others share. Believers who have suffered and experienced grace have a special bond and understanding with other believers who suffer and need grace.

Men who come back from war, from the battlefield, often feel alienated from regular civilians. Often enough, it's those who have seen active service who have the most connection with them. They've seen the pain, known the horrors, known the rigours. The people who most often help soldiers suffering from PTSD are soldiers themselves.

This is why pastors will often seek out fellowship with each other, because those in full-time ministry experience certain pains and joys that are really only known from the inside. When you have fellowship with a good, likeminded brother-pastor, he does not plunge you into despair with complaints, nor shrink you into depression with boasts about his ministry, but he speaks with you about the grace you've shared. The grace to preach when you are discouraged, the grace to counsel others when your own home is hurting, grace to weather people abandoning your ministry, the grace of stable and dependent fellow-leaders, the grace of seeing people saved and baptised, the grace of seeing growth, the grace of weathering church splits and divisive brethren, the grace of fighting your own sin while you preach to others, the grace of seeing some thrive and accelerate, and seeing others languish and stay in the same place.

But to be a fellow-partaker of grace is to know that God's strength is made perfect in weakness, and

that spending and being spent for ministry is better than standing back and never having entered the fray.

This is a special joy that you share with every other hard-working Christian. As you labour for souls, to disciple others, to grow the church, to develop the ministries, to strengthen it all, you are a fellow-partaker. You will suffer together, and experience reward together. You will endure together and enjoy together. And through it all, you will speak to each other of the grace of God which abounds more than sin, and more than weakness, and more than unbelief.

Here's a nagging thought at the back of our minds. Weren't there discouraging believers in Philippi? Weren't there perpetual infants, difficult people, chronic spectators? Wasn't Philippi like our church, or was it blessed with 100% thoroughbred Christians? I'm sure there were. So what can we take away from Paul's approach?

First, Paul focuses on the good fruit, not on its absence. That's a choice, to look for grace, not its absence.

Second, Paul is subtly calling on those drainers to live up to this standard. He treats them all as if they are this way, so that some of them may change.

A pastor's joy, and by implication, a Christian's joy in ministry, lies in focusing on those who partner in the gospel, by remembering that God will perfect all of His people in His time, and by enjoying the grace we share, when we get stuck in and serve and suffer together.