

The Serious Business of Heaven
Philippians 1:1-11
10-20-2024

Job 38:4-7 says God spoke to Job out of the whirlwind and told him that when he laid the foundations of the earth and created everything that exists, the morning stars sang together and the angels shouted for joy. In writing of this shortly before his death in 2018, Eugene Peterson said, “if we throw our minds back into the past as far as we can imagine, what we find is joy: the stars of God and the sons of God singing and shouting joyfully.

Then go in the other direction—as far in the future as we can imagine, into heaven itself and we find a similarly joyful pleasure. In Revelation 4, all creation is gathered around God’s throne, and songs of joy are lifted up by great multitudes in exuberant chorus. In the midst of the assembled joy, 24 elders, representing the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles of the church...take off their crowns and throw them into the air, pitching them before Gods throne. He wrote that the picture is one of hilarity, almost frivolity. Think of West Pointers throwing their white hats into the air in the jubilation of graduation or of football players filling the air with their helmets in the triumph of victory.

The story of our faith, our very existence, begins and ends with joy. And in between the beginning and the conclusion there is joy: Psalm 46:4 says there is a river whose streams make glad or joyful, the city of God. Jesus said it plainly, these things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

Joy at the beginning. Joy at the end. And joy filling everywhere in between!”

CS Lewis called joy the serious business of heaven

So why have we let the world redefine our faith as one of solemnity and seriousness, of long faces and sour expressions?

If you pay attention to surveys by such notable groups as Barna and Gallup, too many followers of Jesus have forsaken what Psalm 46:11 calls the fullness of joy found in God’s presence in exchange for the stigma of judgmentalism and harshness, intolerance and hate speech, along with all the cultural wars language which has become so common in the past 40 years.

Even popular views of heaven and hell reflect this, with hell portrayed as a place to party with your friends and no one to tell you what to do. While heaven is pictured as dull and boring with nothing better to do than sit around all day playing a harp.

What happened to joy?

when you read the gospels, heaven is primarily referred to in terms of celebration and wedding feasts while hell is a place of torment.

It wasn’t Jesus but his adversaries who were always walking around with a scowl on their faces, looking for someone to condemn and criticize.

Jesus seemed only too happy to oblige and be the target of their criticism, attending celebrations and dinners in his honor. His first miracle was to change water into wine at a wedding where people had already had more than enough to drink.

At the end of his life, he was told to have the people calm down and be quiet because they were making too much noise with their singing and dancing and celebrating as he rode into Jerusalem.

Joy so characterized his life, that he was accused of being a drunk and a glutton and friend of sinners

And, listed among the fruit of the spirit, it is to characterize ours as well

1 Peter 1:8 says we, who believe in Jesus, are meant to be filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.

Acts 13:52 says His disciples are to be filled with joy and the Holy Spirit

And Nehemiah 8:10 says the joy of the Lord is to be our strength!

The Christian life is meant to be one lived in Joy!

Or as Peterson said, **Joy is God's creation and gift. No authentic biblical faith is conceivable that is not permeated with it.**

Canadian pastor and author Mark Buchanan wrote that God is full of Joy. Jesus is full of Joy. And his desire is to have His joy in you and for that joy to be complete. Paul commands you to rejoice and to be joyful always. Those who don't know how to rejoice and resent everyone else doing it are the Pharisees and their gang. And the one person dead set against your joy is the devil

there are more than 60 references in scripture to celebration and all but one or two of them are positive. Most of them are divine commands to go party...you get the sense that God is looking for just about any excuse to fire up the barbeque and invite the neighborhood over.

I think that is why I like the book of Philippians so much.

Just like creation to revelation, from the start to finish and everything in between, the book of Philippians maintains a continuous note of joy within it, permeating all it says.

Early on in verse 3 he says his prayers are always filled with joy then emphasizes this further in verse 18 saying I rejoice and I will continue to rejoice

Near its end, in 4:4, he writes rejoice in the Lord always I will say it again, rejoice.

And in between the two, as one writer put it, his joy keeps bubbling up and spilling over, referring to joy 15 times in just 104 verses.

Using an analogy from mining, one commentator wrote, In the ore of all the practical details in the book, we find a bright glittering vein of irrepressible joy. The apostle Paul was in the midst of very trying circumstances, but these circumstances did not, and could not, diminish his abounding joy...He is, radiant amid the storm and stress of life.

The book begins,

"Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now,

being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for 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. 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 until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.” (Philippians 1:1–11)

By way of background, the city of Philippi was named after Alexander the Great's father, Philip of Macedon. Strategically located to control the pass on the main road connecting east and west called the Ignatian Way, it became an important commercial center and gateway to Europe.

In 40 B.C. it was the site of history's greatest battles, between the forces of Mark Antony and Octavian against those of Brutus and Cassius after they had murdered Julius Caesar. Antony's victory decided the future of the Roman Empire, transforming it from a republic to an authoritarian state.

After the battle, Antony discharged a number of his veterans and they settled with their families in Philippi. A short time later it became a great source of pride when it was declared an official Roman colony. This designation gave them special privileges, treating it as if it were in Rome itself. Citizens were given full Roman citizenship including full exemption from taxes. It was considered a piece of Rome in the middle of Greek culture which sheds light on some of the terms and phrases Paul used in the letter such as when he told them to conduct themselves as citizens of heaven in both 1:27 and 3:20.

Paul became acquainted with the people of Philippi on his second missionary journey when Acts 16:6 says the Spirit prevented him from travelling into Asia Minor and instead led him into Macedonia and soon the city of Philippi.

Even though he was only there a short time, possibly three months, yet he managed to be the cause of a riot, was unjustly beaten, publicly humiliated, illegally imprisoned, and then the city leaders tried to cover it all up by virtually running him out of town.

Given what he went through while he was there, many would expect him to express words of anger and bitterness

Yet years later as he was sitting in a Roman jail, waiting to find out what is going to happen to him, he remembers his time there and rather than anger, he writes this epistle of joy saying things like I thank my God every time I remember you, I always pray with joy, I have you in my heart, and I long for you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

There were bigger and more important cities than Philippi. Cities that were more open and receptive to the gospel.

While it was the first church begun in Europe, there were churches with more resources and talented people.

Larger churches that had seen far more converts.

But it was the church at Philippi that held a special place in Paul's heart and brought him so much joy and held a very special place in his heart.

Begun almost by accident with little more than a slave girl, a jailer and his family, and a wealthy business woman named Lydia.

Yet from this letter we learn that true joy is independent of our external circumstances.

Independent because Jesus is the true source of his joy
Seen by the fact that of the 104 verses which make up the book, Jesus is mentioned in over half of them, a total of 61 times.

It is not some possession or feeling or experience but listed as a fruit of the Spirit and therefore evidence of God in our life

And because God is its source, the only way to ever increase our joy is to deepen our relationship with the Lord.

As seen by his opening statement in verse 9 where he says his prayer is not for safety or prosperity but their growth in love, knowledge and insight into the ways and person of the Lord so they will better know how to live for God.

Which is why it makes sense that along with joy, Christian growth and maturity are major themes in the book of Philippians.

Our world is so obsessed with happiness, we seek it in so many ways: in experiences, in possessions, in substance abuse and escapism.

Yet all this comes with is frustration and despair because all these are empty promises and dead ends

Joy is rooted in a person not in possessions.

Because it has its origins in God, it cannot be created or earned, hoarded or accumulated.
It cannot be bought, only received because it is ultimately a gift and only found in him

As CS Lewis said, God cannot give us joy apart from himself, because it's not there, there is no such thing!

Paul didn't seek it, he received it as he sought out the Lord

As such, joy is integral to grace and a byproduct of knowing Christ as our Lord, our savior.

In fact, the Greek word for grace is charis.

The word for joy is chara

They share the same root because the source of joy is the grace of God

Completely unearned and freely given.

That is why Paul could express such joy for the Philippians even though he had gone through such difficulty while there

It's like James said, he was able to count it pure joy when he faced trials of many kinds because he knew that the testing of his faith developed perseverance. And perseverance must finish its work so that he would be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Joy isn't something we seek, but something we receive as we get closer to Jesus
It's not something we go searching for, but something we are given as we draw closer to God

In other words, it is, the result of grace!

Joy comes when we start to realize this and place our trust in him, rest in him confident that no matter what is happening right in front of us, what we can see, he knows better.

If the source of joy is Christ and a relationship with him, the context for joy is gratitude

Brennen Manning said I believe that the real difference in the American church is not between conservatives and liberals, fundamentalists and charismatics, or between republicans and democrats. The real difference is between the aware and the unaware

When somebody is aware of God's love, the same love that the Father has for Jesus, that person is spontaneously grateful. Cries of thankfulness become the dominant characteristic of the interior life, and the byproduct of gratitude is joy. We're not joyful and then become grateful—we're grateful and that makes us joyful.

The book of Philippians is a thank you letter from Paul
In chapter 4 he speaks openly about their help and support for him and his work and now he writes to say thank you
With that gratitude came greater joy

In fact,
Where the Greek word for joy is chara and for grace is charis,
The Greek word for gratitude is eucharisteo

They all share the same root because they are dependent on each other
Grace elicits gratitude and joy is what you experience as a result

Another way to say this is that joy is what you feel when you are grateful for what you have been given.
So if you want to increase your joy, make a point to practice gratitude and acknowledge all you have been given

When you are truly grateful for others, it will deepen and enrich your relationship and feelings you have for them
Which is why Paul could write so openly of the joy he felt as he remembered the Philippians and prayed for them
I thank my God every time I remember you, he wrote
As a result, he said, in all my prayers for all of you I always pray with joy.

Philippians is one of the only letters Paul wrote where he appealed to their friendship rather than his authority as an apostle so that they would listen.

If you want more joy in your life, make it a point to practice and express gratitude.

In accepting Jesus as savior and Lord we join in the celebration of joy begun at creation and will continue to celebrate right along with his creation into heaven itself.

Joy at the beginning, joy till the end. And all along the way, like in the parable of the faithful servants, Jesus invites us come and share in our master's joy.