

“A Prayer from Prison”

Today we begin a new journey in a new book of the Bible, Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

I choose to preach through this book for two reasons.

First, I know that right now in our church there are many people who are going through a particularly difficult season of their lives. This is always the case in any church. There is always sickness, death, divorce, job loss, depression, addictions, etc. etc. But I think for us, right now, it seems to me, this is where a great number of our people find themselves. This is a good book for us to study because the apostle Paul himself was facing a very difficult situation, a life threatening situation, yet somehow he had joy in the midst of all his difficulties.

I hope that traveling through this book together over the summer months that all of us, but most especially those in our congregation who are facing difficult circumstances, perhaps even life threatening circumstances, will receive strength and encouragement from this letter. I hope we all can capture a bit of that same joy that captured Paul in his time of affliction and trial.

Second, I chose this book because of its theme of unity in Christ that is so strongly emphasized.

Right now, as we all know, the Presbyterian Church USA is a fractured and deeply divided denomination. I can’t solve that problem. Nor can I capitulate or ignore God’s truth on very important and essential matters, but I can, through this letter, regardless of whatever happens in the PCUSA over the next couple of years, emphasize to this body of believers who are caught in the midst of that storm, the importance of grounding ourselves in Jesus Christ through the Word of God. If we are grounded in His Word and if we are unified in our commitment to accept it, keep it, and yield to it, then we shall be unified. Whatever happens in the PCUSA, and whatever potential ramifications that might have for local churches that are within the PCUSA, this congregation must stand together and stay together as a congregation.

So here we are today in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. In verse 7 of the text Paul tells us in his introduction that he has great affection for the Philippians and is appreciative of the fact that whether he is preaching the gospel, or is in chains for Christ they stand with him. The Philippians were a loyal bunch of people who stuck with Paul through thick and thin. Right there in that verse we get a clue of Paul’s circumstances as he wrote that letter. His situation is imprisonment. Next week’s text will expound upon that in greater detail, but what I want to do right now is briefly recap for you what happened to Paul, so that you can have a greater appreciation for the joy that filled the apostle’s heart even while he was in jail for Christ.

To understand Paul’s circumstances a brief recap of his third missionary journey in the book of Acts is in order. While Paul was in the lands of what would today be called Turkey and Greece a famine arose in the land of Israel. Consequently, the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were

suffering greatly from food shortage and because of rejection from other fellow Jews who did not embrace Jesus.

Paul himself was Jewish and he wanted to take up an offering from all the Gentile Christians in Turkey and Greece in order to help the Christians out in Jerusalem (the mother church). He knew this was a great risk for him to take. Paul sensed that his life might be endangered. He was even warned by fellow Christians to not go back to Jerusalem.

Paul, being the hard headed man that he was went anyway, and he was falsely accused by fellow Jews of polluting the Jewish temple with Gentile people, and for overturning the Law of Moses. As a result he sat in jail for a couple of years awaiting trial, and then finally he appealed to his Roman citizenship in order to get a trial before the Roman Emperor. Consequently, Paul was sent to Rome and it was there that he awaited his fate, and it was there that he wrote this letter.

Imagine that. Paul was in prison and he was filled with the joy of the Lord. It begs to question of us all why aren't we filled with the joy of the Lord when we have it so good in America? Think of all the things that we let sap the joy and vitality of Jesus Christ right out of our lives.

As we look at this letter this morning I want us to study the joy that is in it and behind it. Why is Paul so joyous while he is in prison? First let's get behind what Paul actually says in this opening portion of the letter about joy and get down to the man himself.

Paul's Mind and the Mind of Christ

The reason Paul is joyous is because he has the mind of Christ. That is to say that Paul has saturated himself in Jesus Christ through the teaching of Scripture. We cannot know Jesus Christ apart from his Word. Yes, Paul had his onetime encounter with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus, but after that dramatic conversion experience, there was no more one-on-one, face-to-face time with Jesus. Paul got the mind of Christ through his mediating on the Word of God. Paul ate the scroll. You might say he was a glutton for the Bible.

In his letter to the Romans Paul said, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. It is only then that you will be able to discern the will of God." (Rom. 12:3)

Paul got this transformed mind from the Bible.

The mind of Christ is a renewed mind and a renewed mind is a mind that is saturated in the Word of God! Because Paul's mind was soaked in the teachings of Christ, his thoughts became more and more occupied by Jesus. That is to say, Christ consumed him and Christ dictated to Paul how he was to view everything he was experiencing in his life. Once Paul's mind was captivated by the mind of Christ, then what else could Paul have but have joy? There was no reason for his mind to be anything but joyous!

James Montgomery Boice in his commentary on Philippians reminds us of the difficulty that we humans have in trying to think of two things at the same time. He said,

The human mind can't think of two things at once. You cannot be thinking about pain in your back at the same time you are thinking about crepes suzette. Similarly you cannot be thinking about your problems in the same moment you are thinking about Jesus Christ. This Paul knew. He knew it theoretically and he knew it practically. Consequently he had filled his mind with Christ. (J.M. Boice, *An Expositional Commentary on Philippians*, Baker Books, p.13.)

So the reason Paul is joyous is because Christ now occupies his thoughts, not the prison bars.

The word here for us today is to quit multi-tasking our minds so much. If I may borrow an analogy from our highly sophisticated technological culture. Quit trying to do the internet, read your emails, listen to your iPods, text your friends, do your blackberry, operate your GPS, and drink your coffee all at the same time. Anybody have that problem? No wonder we have no joy.

Get your mind *on* Christ and *off* your problems and then you will get joy, or better yet joy will get you.

Now that we have looked at the mind of the man who is behind the text, let us now turn our attention briefly to the joy that is explicitly mentioned in the text. In this prayer for the Philippians Paul mentions three things that brings delight to his heart.

1- Joy in Partnership- v.4

The Philippians shared partnership with him in the gospel. In v.2 of the text Paul says that he “prays with *joy* because of their *partnership* in the gospel from the first day until now.”

This band of believers has not abandoned him in his time of trial and tribulation.

We learn from II Timothy, another letter that Paul wrote while in prison to his young protégé Timothy, that there were many people who abandoned him when he needed them the most. A man named *Demas* turned his back on Paul. *Alexander* did great harm to him. Then he says that at his first trial that *everyone deserted him*. But the Philippians did not do this to Paul. Paul tells us that they were his partners through thick and then.

It brings great joy to our hearts when God sends people into our lives who will be committed to us no matter how difficult things might get.

2- Joy in God's Faithfulness- v.6

Paul's deep assurance that God will finish his work of salvation in the life of this church that he helped to start. In v.6 Paul says, “Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

Paul is joyous because he knows God is faithful.

In v. 6 Paul gives a core doctrine of the faith of Christianity. God will finish his work of salvation that he started. In essence Paul is saying that he is overwhelmed with joy because he knows that no matter what the situation God will see both him and the Philippians through all the way to the end.

It has to be that way. If it is not that way then we all will ultimately lose our salvation, because all of us slip, all of us grow weary, and all of us fail Jesus Christ. But the good news of the gospel is that our salvation is not dependent upon our faithfulness. Our salvation is dependent upon the faithfulness of God, in Christ.

In Christ, God has accomplished our salvation, fully and completely. Jesus has paid the wage for our sin, which is death; thus satisfying all the consuming justice of a holy God. And Christ has kept God's holy law perfectly, for us on our behalf, so that we might be declared righteousness. That is to say that the Father takes the cloak of righteousness from the life of the Son and he drapes it over our sinful lives and declares us to be holy in his sight! So it is Jesus Christ alone who saves us and it is he who will faithfully keep us all the way to the end. Not one ounce of his shed blood for the elect will be wasted.

I love how the Westminster Confession of Faith, that old crusty confession of faith that we mainline Presbyterians rarely study anymore, beautifully summarizes the faithfulness of God to keep us in our salvation.

True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into some special sin which wounds the conscience and grieves the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation, by God's withdrawing the light of his countenance, and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light: yet are they (true believers) never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart, and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may, in due time, be revived; and by the which, in the meantime, they are supported from utter despair. (WCF ch. 18)

What about you this morning? Do you have joy in your heart because you know that God will finish his work of redemption in your life, no matter how bad things may be or how messed up your life is right now?

If you don't then you have either not fully understood the gospel, or you have forgotten the very essence gospel. Christ has saved you by his perfect life and his perfect death, through the gift of faith, and he will not let you go.

Jesus said in the gospel of John that he would “lose none whom the Father had given him, but that he would raise them up on the last day.” (Jn. 6:39)

3- Joy in Love and Affection- v.7-8

The deep affection that Paul feels in his heart for this people. In v.7 and 8 of the text Paul says that he has the Philippians in his heart and that God can testify as to how he “longs for all of them with the *affection* of Jesus Christ.

There is real love here that has grown between him and this church. This is not a cold hearted business relationship that the apostle finds himself in, but rather it is a love relationship. It is a love based on *agape*, God’s love, and *phile*, a brotherly love that is shared between all the people in the church who have a common faith in Jesus Christ.

God has created us for relationship and it is in relationships, not isolation, that we experience joy in our lives. This is what the church is for. It is a body comprised of people who are in relationship to God and with one another. Those who are the happiest and most joyous about their church are those who have taken time to form deep relationships with other people. Paul has experienced this firsthand with the Philippians. He has invested his life into them and they into to him; therefore they have affection, and since they have affection, they have joy.

Conclusion

So as we can see from our text today, our joy is not rooted in our circumstances always being perfect because if it were then none of us would ever be able to experience joy, because life is not like that.

Life is often like Paul’s imprisonment, it can be difficult and filled with problems. Yet we can and *will* have joy if we will get the mind of Christ, if we will develop deep relationships of love and affection in the church, that won’t give up on one another and will stick together through thick and thin. And if we will truly seek to understand the depths of what Jesus has done for us. On the cross Christ has accomplished our salvation and there is nothing or no one that can ever snatch us out of the hands of the Savior.

“He who who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” (v.6)

There is much for us to rejoice about, regardless of our circumstances.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen