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The Joy of It All

We live in a culture that seeks happiness at every turn. If it doesn't make me happy, I won't do it! The line in the Declaration of Independence that directs our steps is the guarantee of the right of *pursuit of happiness*.

In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul determines that what matters is not happiness but joy. This study in Philippians will seek to examine what Paul means by joy, where and how it can be found, and what that joy means for the Christian.

The Background for Studying Philippians

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A recent program on a public radio station, narrated some fascinating letters of Andrew Jackson. It is amazing what we can learn about someone by reading and listening to old letters. Many of us were not enamored with the study of history during our high school days. Since that time, interest in history has blossomed.

We can learn a great deal about Jackson from his letters—his love for his wife, what really mattered to him, the problems he had—even how he gained weight and had to have his clothes let out. There are all kinds of interesting tidbits that seem insignificant on the surface but give real hints as to the nature of the man.

Paul's letter to the Philippian church gives similar wonderful insights into the life of the apostle. We learn in this letter what really matters to Paul, how Paul lived, and how he endured trials. It is an amazing, encouraging book.

Paul's goal in this book is to teach the Philippian Christians that joy is to be located "in Christ" whether they are at Philippi or in prison in Rome. Long ago, John Albert Bengel provided a famous summary of the book of Philippians in his *Gnomon of the New Testament*, "I rejoice with you, ... rejoice ye with me." While the book of Philippians is about rejoicing, Bengel's summary provides an inaccurate way

to view the whole book. However, it does provide a recurring theme in the book as Paul instructs the Philippians to “rejoice” (cf. Phil 4:4: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!”).

The Roman emperors began to reserve private audiences for gladiator battles and the throwing of Christians to the lions. In the public games, people saw the way the Christians suffered with joy; unfortunately for the Roman officials, this worked as a conversion tool. People wanted to know more about such a faith.

Consider the persecution that arose after the stoning of Stephen and the scattering of Christians to Samaria. In Acts 8:8, Luke informs his readers that there was great joy in that city. Joy and suffering do not seem to go hand in hand. Suffering is not fun. Yet there was joy.

Joy is not what my daughters call “that used car salesman look,” that smile that seems so artificial. It is not that “nobody-should-be-that-happy” look; the kind that enables someone to say, with a smile on his face, that his pet dog died. Rather, it is an inner attitude that controls the way we act, think, talk, and live.

When this book was written, Paul was under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:16). We learn in Philippians that Paul expected ultimately to be released. It is wonderful because Paul is in Rome, and he is writing a letter back to the Christians in Philippi telling them to rejoice. It seems that it should have been the other way around. They should be writing to encourage him. What seems so strange is that a man, under house arrest with a possible death sentence over his head, was writing to people who were free and fairly prosperous to tell them to rejoice. Paul says that he finds real joy in Christ. It does not make any difference whether he is at Philippi or in prison; joy is to be found in Christ Jesus.

The Philippian Church

To fully appreciate Philippians, we need to begin by examining the origin of the church at Philippi.

Acts 16:8-10:

⁸ and ... they came down to Troas. ⁹ A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Paul and his companions traveled to the harbor city of Troas on the Aegean Sea. Troas was located 10 miles north of ancient Troy. It is there that Paul received the Macedonian call. During the night Paul has a vision. The man in the vision appeals to Paul, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Luke makes it clear that God was directing Paul's missionary efforts. This is a divine call. It is time for Paul to move on to Europe with the gospel.

Macedonia is what would today be considered northern Greece. The people there spoke Greek. The region was a place of transition from Asia to Europe.

It is possible that Luke himself was from Philippi. Even though there is no solid evidence, Luke does spend time there. At Troas, the reader meets the first "we" section (Acts 16:10-17), indicating that Luke has joined Paul. This "we" section ends at Philippi when Paul moves further south in Greece and Luke apparently stays behind. The second "we" section begins when Paul returns to Philippi on the third missionary

journey (20:5-15) and Luke rejoins the missionary team. Luke provides more details for Paul's ministry at Philippi than almost any other place where he serves (30 verses). More space is devoted to the mission at Philippi than any other city on his second tour even though Paul's stay there is a brief one.

Philippi is the only city described by Luke as a Roman colony. It is perhaps Luke's local pride that leads him to describe it as "a leading city of the district" (Acts 16:12). Luke himself plays a role in the founding and growth of the church in Philippi.

Philippi is a turning point in the history of the church.

Acts 16:11, 12:

¹¹ So putting out to sea from Troas, ... to Samothrace, ... to Neapolis; ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony; and we were staying in this city for some days.

Paul and his crew immediately book passage on a ship to Neapolis (modern day Kavalla). Their arrival in Philippi occurs in Acts 16:11, 12. Luke is on board now, so the reader is treated to a port-by-port description of the travel. They set out for Philippi, 10 miles northwest of Neapolis.

Philippi

In 356 B.C. Philip II renamed the ancient city of Krenides after himself. In 167 B.C. Philippi became a part of the Roman Empire. It would later be the site in 42 B.C. of the battle which Mark Antony and Octavian waged against Brutus and Cassius.

As a Roman colony, Philippi had the same rights and privileges as

a region in Italy proper. Many veterans of Roman wars settled in this Roman colony.

Even though Luke describes Philippi as “a leading city” of the region, Thessalonica was the capital. Philippi was an important agricultural center. It held a strategic location on sea and land routes. It was also the location of important educational facilities with a famous school of medicine. The nearby gold mines were a significant part of its economy.

Paul and his group had stayed several days before the event next recorded. They were perhaps waiting for a Sabbath to get leads of those who would be open to the gospel and to begin as Paul normally did with the Jews. Despite the fact that Philippi was an important agricultural, mining [gold], education [school of medicine], shipping, and governmental city, it did not have a large Jewish population.

Acts 16:13:

¹³ And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled.

According to Jewish law, a synagogue had to be made up of at least 10 Jewish men. Wherever there were 10 male heads of the household who could be in regular attendance, a synagogue could be formed. If there was no synagogue, a place of prayer could be established under an open sky near a river or sea. In rabbinic literature, it is not clear why the place must be near water. Perhaps it was just a way that out-of-town visitors could know where to look;

perhaps the location was chosen because water was important for performing acts of ablutions.

On that Sabbath, Paul and his companions walked outside the city in search of the place of prayer. The Gangites River was about a half mile west of city.

Acts 16:14, 15:

14 A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. 15 And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

Paul and his companions sat down with the women who had gathered for prayer and began to speak to them. A special lady in that assembly was from Thyatira (cf. Revelation 1:11; 2:18, 24), a city in western Asia Minor, formerly a part of the ancient kingdom of Lydia. Even though in New Testament times the province was no longer part of Lydia, it continued to be considered such.

We cannot be sure whether Lydia was the lady's proper name, a nickname, or simply meant a Lydian lady. It is generally assumed that it refers to her proper name. Lydia had taken up residence in Philippi. She had come from Thyatira, a city famous for the making of purple dyes and the dying of clothes. The dye was made from the secretion of shellfish (mollusks) from the eastern part of the Mediterranean. Because it took 8,000 mollusks to make one gram of the dye, it was very expensive. For emperors, senators, and equestrians, purple

clothing became a symbol of a person's status in the community.

Lydia was likely a wealthy merchant. She was the owner of a large house (later the church will meet there). She either never married or had been widowed. In Thyatira she had become a believer in Israel's God. She is described as a God-fearer (cf., Acts 10:2; 13:16, 26) even though it would seem that she was not a full proselyte. She faithfully worshiped Yahweh on every Sabbath.

After a profession of faith, she and her household are baptized in the Gangites River. Anyone making a trip to Philippi today, can walk to the river and know that he is standing within a few hundred yards of the very spot where Lydia was baptized. She expressed her gratitude by asking Paul and those accompanying him to stay with her. This provides an unusual picture, a Gentile woman asking four men (three Jews and one Gentile) to be her guests. The way she asked them to stay with her made it difficult for them to say "no." Luke simply says "she prevailed upon us" (Acts 16:15b). The New King James Version and the New International Version say, "she persuaded us."

Lydia's home would become the center of Christian outreach in Philippi (Acts 16:40).

Acts 16:16-18:

¹⁶ It happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation."

¹⁸ She continued doing this for many days. But Paul was

greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" And it came out at that very moment.

Unfortunately, trouble always comes wherever the church grows. Satan will try to obstruct that growth.

The missionaries are again off to the place of prayer (a phrase normally used of the synagogue, but here there is no synagogue). The missionaries head back to the river.

They are met by a slave girl whom Luke describes as having a "Pythian spirit," a phrase that had come to mean "demon-possessed." This demon possession enabled her to foretell the future. In so doing, she earned much money for her masters.

Acts 16:19-24:

¹⁹ But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, ²⁰ ... to the chief magistrates, they said, "These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, ²¹ and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans." ²² ... the chief magistrates tore their robes off them and proceeded to order them to be beaten with rods. ²³ ... they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; ²⁴ and he ... threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

The demon-possessed girl and her masters provide Paul and Silas

with some free publicity and helped gather a crowd. This continued for many days, but Paul seemed to fear that more attention was being given to the demon's words than the gospel. So, in the name of Jesus Christ, Paul commanded the evil spirit to come out.

Paul and Silas Are Thrown in Prison

The slave girl's masters did not appreciate the healing. It meant the loss of a source of income. The issue for them was property rights. They showed a complete disregard for the welfare of the girl.

Paul and Silas are dragged into the agora, the marketplace, to face the authorities. The charges against them were: (1) They are advocating *religio illicita* (an illegal religion); and (2) They are disturbing the *Pax Romana* (the peace of Rome). The slave owners appealed to anti-Semitism, racial pride, and bigotry.

Why were Paul and Silas the only ones arrested? Perhaps it was because they were Jews. Timothy was half Jewish, and Luke was a Gentile.

As a Roman colony, Philippi was ruled by chief magistrates (Acts 16:20, 22, 35, 36, 38). Under these magistrates were two *lictores* or policemen (vv. 35, 38).

The crowd turned on Paul and Silas. They were stripped and severely flogged.

Acts 16:25-30:

²⁵ But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; ²⁶ and suddenly ... a great earthquake ... the foundations of the prison house were shaken ... all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were

unfastened. ²⁷ When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!" ²⁹ And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, ³⁰ and after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

The jailer placed them in the innermost cell with their feet in stocks. Paul and Silas were Roman citizens and should have been exempt from such treatment. After this sort of treatment we might expect to find them bemoaning their plight in pain and shock from the flogging. Instead, they are praying and singing hymns of praise. Notice again the theme of joy that is found in Philippians.

There is an earthquake, the doors are opened and the prisoners' chains are loosened. Some argue that this is just a legend like many other prison-release legends. However, the men are not released; no one escapes. The story is given to vindicate the two preachers and to prepare for the conversion of the jailer. There are no real parallels between this story and prison legends.

The jailer drew his sword to kill himself. He thought the worst. He assumed everyone had escaped, and he was doomed. Roman law said that if a jailer allowed a prisoner to escape, he would receive the punishment due the prisoner. On top of that, the humiliation before his peers would destroy him.

Paul shouts, "Do not harm yourself ... we are all here!" (Acts 16:28). Since it was midnight, the jailer calls for torches. He falls at Paul and Silas' feet and asks, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (v. 30). It is

unclear whether the jailer was talking about his spiritual situation, but he did open the door for a spiritual message. Paul and Silas shared with the jailer and his household the Good News—the same Christ-centered message that had been preached at Pentecost.

Acts 16:31-34:

³¹ They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” ³² And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. ³³ And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. ³⁴ And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.

The jailer believed, washed Paul and Silas’ wounds, and he and his whole household were baptized. The whole household was filled with joy because they had come to believe in God. It is interesting again to see joy already in Philippi in the earliest days of the church, long before Paul would pen his letter to the Philippians.

Acts 16:35-40:

³⁵ Now when day came, the chief magistrates sent their policemen, saying, “Release those men.” ³⁶ And the jailer reported these words to Paul ... ³⁷ But Paul said to them, “They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Romans, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they sending us away secretly?

No indeed! But let them come themselves and bring us out.”³⁸ The policemen reported these words to the chief magistrates. They were afraid when they heard that they were Romans,³⁹ and they came and appealed to them ... they kept begging them to leave the city.⁴⁰ They went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia, and when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.

The chief magistrates hoped to sweep the whole incident under the rug. They had, after all, abused Roman citizens. Paul would not allow that. He wanted them to publicly release them thereby making a statement. Note they return to the house of Lydia before leaving.

Philippi was strategic for the whole Christian mission. It was located on the Egnatian way; it witnessed daily traffic of commerce, culture, and religion; and it was a link between the East and the West. When writing to the Thessalonians, Paul reflected on the fact that he had suffered and had been mistreated at Philippi (1 Thessalonians 2:2).

Paul's Current Situation

At the time Paul is writing his letter to the Philippians, he is under house arrest in Rome. He had appealed to Caesar because of the claims of the Jews. That appeal would ultimately take him to Rome. The book of Acts ends with Paul under house arrest. Luke has reached his goal; the gospel has been preached in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth.

During this imprisonment, Paul will pen four letters: Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, and Philippians. These epistles are generally referred to as “the prison epistles.”

Some time earlier, the Philippian church had sent a gift to Paul to express their love and concern. Paul does not follow the etiquette Ann Landers would dictate by sending an immediate thank-you note. Some time later, he learns about the situation of the Philippian church and then pens this letter.

1. Imagine what the church at Philippi may have been like from what we know of the earliest converts there.
2. Do you find it unusual that a man under house arrest would write to free people telling them to rejoice?
3. Respond to the following sentence: Philippi was a turning point in the history of the early church.
4. Discuss the role of Lydia in Acts and in the church at Philippi.
5. How does the fact that Paul and Silas were singing hymns of praise to God in prison after being beaten set the stage for Paul's call for the Philippians to rejoice?
6. How is the jailer's conversion similar to and different from other accounts of conversions in Acts?

