

JOY

A STUDY OF PAUL'S PHILIPPIANS

BY ALLEN HILTON

**FOR THE "50 STATES OF JOY" CAMPAIGN
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Dear Joy Seeker:

Welcome to the unexpected. Those of us who map happiness on the territory of pleasant circumstances face a formidable challenge in Paul's Letter to the Philippians. The author sits pressed in the "abandon hope all ye who enter here" realm of a dark, dank Roman prison. And his addressees face suffering and struggle under the pressure of neighbors who oppose them for their faith.

Surprisingly, this exchange between sufferers produces, not only the highest frequency of joy language in the Bible (16 occasions in 107 verses), but the most complete recipe in scripture for how to attain and sustain joy regardless of our situation. Paul lives and offers a sort of well-being that does not evaporate in the face of pain and misfortune, making this letter the Bible's Ground Zero of joy. (For your convenience, a full NRSV text of Philippians is included at the back end of this study.)

"Joy – A Study of Paul's Philippians" is built to guide individuals or small groups through the friendly pages of this brief ancient letter. As you make your way through it, keep an eye out for that recipe. Ingredients will include purpose and prayer and mindfulness practiced in community. As you read, ancient strugglers will jump from your pages to welcome you in to a new way of being, grounded in Jesus Christ and sustained by the grace in which we all stand.

I hope you will enjoy this blessed encounter with ancient brothers and sisters, whose circumstances you will recognize, at least partly as your own, and whose joy you will envy until you make it your own.

Peace.
allen

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SESSION ONE – BEIN’ PHILIPPIAN
MEETING LEADER, PEOPLE, AND PLACE
PHILIPPIANS 1.1-11

OPEN -- JOY IN SPITE OF....

Martha Washington, whose husband was the first President of the United States, once wrote, “The greater part of our happiness or misery depends upon our dispositions, and not upon our circumstances.” If circumstances couldn’t dent her sense of well-being, Martha must have been speaking of joy.

PART ONE: APOSTLE AND CHURCH

Bible readers approaching one of the letters of the New Testament have the task of listening to one side of an ancient conversation and imagining the other. As we begin this letter, our main characters are God, Jesus, Paul, and the Philippian Christians.

Paul the Apostle

We know a lot more about Paul than we do about the group he wrote to in Philippi, because the Book of Acts feature his ministry prominently and because the New Testament contains thirteen letters with his name on them. (We even have a brief allusion to his ministry in the much-later letter called 2 Peter.)

Job Description

The Apostle Paul cold called ancient cities for Christ.

Step One – He walked into cities in present-day Syria, Turkey, Greece, and Italy, set up shop making tents, and then just started talking to people about Jesus.

Step Two – He gathered the interested in the home of one of their wealthier members (most of Paul’s crowds’ apartments (*insulae*) would not have sufficed), where he taught them the gospel and joined them in song and at table.

Step Three – He formed the group and began to help them put indigenous leaders in place.

Step Four – He said a fond goodbye, walked to the next city, and started the process again. “Lather, Rinse, Repeat.”

Step Five – He sent messengers, received their own messengers, and sometimes wrote letters to continue leading and forming them.

Why did he do this? Paul tells about God’s call on his life a few times in his letters, always emphasizing God’s commission to carry the gospel to the Gentiles. Here are two of the passages in which he tells the story.

1. Paul tells the Galatians of a time “when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles (Gal 1.15-16 NRSV)
2. Paul introduces himself to the Romans, a Christian group he had not founded, as “a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.” He then avows that through Jesus, “we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name’s sake.” (Rom 1.1, 5 NIV)

Bringing It Home – Your Calling

Paul begins his letter by identifying himself and his colleague, Timothy, as people called by God to do what they’re doing. Calling is no easy topic. But most of us have felt some sort of nudge toward joining God’s work or God’s will.

Have you felt called by God in your own life?

What gave you that sense?

How’s it going?

The Philippians

We know much less about the Philippian Christians than we do about Paul. Our sources are limited to this letter, a brief story of their beginning as a Christian group in chapter sixteen of the Book of Acts, and a brief mention of them in 1 Thessalonians 2.2. To fill in some blanks and add context, we look to other sources outside the Bible that help us understand the city and its culture.

The Philippians’ Geography

Philippi sits atop the Aegean Sea on the northeastern corner of present-day Greece, near where Turkey and Greece meet. Its modern town is called Kabala.



History

Philippi was important to the beginning of the Roman Empire. The transition from Republic to Empire happened here. The assassination of Julius Caesar (44 BCE) set off a civil war between the imperial forces of Mark Antony and Octavian and the defenders of the republic (and assassins), Brutus and Cassius. The empire-instigators won by chasing down Brutus and Cassius at the Battle of Philippi. After the battle, Octavian settled some of their veteran soldiers there to colonize the city. When Octavian became Roman Emperor (under the name “Caesar Augustus”) in 30 CE, he reorganized the colony, and placed more veterans from Italy in Philippi. So this was a military town.

Culture

Roman colonies were outposts of Roman culture in the midst of a native people with sometimes very different culture. These were proud Romans amidst Macedonians, Greeks, and Asians. This fact helps us understand three bits of scripture related to Philippi.

The first is Acts 16:20-21, where Paul and Silas are arrested in the city. “When they had brought [Paul and Silas] before the magistrates, they said, ‘These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating **customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.**’ The crowd joined in attacking them, and the

magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods.”

The second is further on in the Acts story. When Paul and Silas are jailed for disturbing the peace and inculcating non-Roman customs (see above), their captors treat them harshly. “When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, ‘Let those men go.’³⁶ And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, ‘The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace.’³⁷ But Paul replied, ‘They have beaten us in public, un-condemned, men who are **Roman citizens**, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves.’³⁸ The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens;³⁹ so they came and apologized to them (16.35-39).”

The third comes in the letter itself. Paul pictures Christian life as a colony in an alien world. “Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But **our citizenship is in heaven**, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 3.18-20)

Bringing It Home – Your Setting

Use a few words to describe your own geographical and cultural setting.

How does your culture and setting impact the way you picture God, practice Christianity, and read scripture?

Women Leaders in the Church

It is striking that in the Acts account of Paul’s visit to Philippi and in the letter, we encounter only four names that we know belong to Philippians – and three of the four are women.

1. Lydia the Host

A story about Paul’s time in Philippi appears in Acts 16.11-40. In it we are introduced to a key member of the church in that city: Lydia.

On the Sabbath Day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.' And she prevailed upon us (16.13-15 NRSV).

2. Euodia and Syntyche, the Leaders

In the fourth chapter of his letter, Paul asks the community to help these two women to get along. We don't know the nature of their conflict. We know that they must have been prominent members of the community and probably leaders, because "they have struggled beside [Paul] in the work of the gospel."

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life (4.2-3 NRSV).

This picture of Paul's leadership team in Philippi defies the modern Christian stereotype of Paul as a misogynist who suppressed women.

The Relationship

The Philippians' relationship with Paul plays out through the letter, but we get a good flavor for it in the first chapter.

1. Paul's Prayer for Them (1.3-5)
I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. (Phil 1.3-5 NRSV)
2. Paul's Recollections about Their Beginning
I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace* with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. (Phil 1.6-7 NRSV)*
3. Paul's Gratitude for Their Financial Gift
And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. ¹⁶ Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. ¹⁷ Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.^[g] ¹⁸ I have received full payment, and more. I am well

supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. (Phil 4.15-18 ESV)

Professor David Aune, who has done extensive work classifying ancient letters, puts Paul's short letter to the Philippians in the category "friendship letter." (*The New Testament and Its Literary Environment* 1987)

After reading Philippians 1.1-18, what words would you use to describe this relationship between Paul and the Christians in Philippi?

Do you agree with Prof. Aune's characterization?

PART TWO: THE PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES OF PAUL AND THE PHILIPPIANS

Paul alludes early in the letter to his imprisonment and the Philippians' "suffering," which he compares to his own.

Paul In Prison

We do not know where Paul is imprisoned when he writes this letter. We only know that he is imprisoned.

I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, ¹³so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; ¹⁴and most of the brothers and sisters,* having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word* with greater boldness and without fear (1.12-14).*

Life in Roman prisons is chronicled in Craig Wansink's fine book, *Chained in Christ: The Experience and Rhetoric of Paul's Imprisonments*. In that book, Prof. Wansink quotes ancient passages that describe prisons. Here's a sample:

The days we passed there and the nights we endured cannot be expressed in human terms. The torments we suffered in prison go beyond anything we could describe.
from *The Martyrdom of St. Montanus and Lucius*

The Philippian Christians' Suffering

We do not know exactly what Paul means when he refers to the Philippians'

“suffering” (Gk. thlipsis), but he writes partly to support them amid as they face that storm.

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel,²⁸ and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing.²⁹ For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well—³⁰ since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have (1.27-30).

Bringing It Home – Your Circumstances

What words would you use to describe your current circumstances?

How do you imagine those impact the way you read and hear Paul's letter?

PART THREE: THE JOY

Fifteen times in this very short letter (107 verses), Paul uses the term “joy” or “rejoice.” That is a whole lot in any context – almost one mention every seven verses!; but in the midst of the circumstances he and the Philippian Christians are enduring, Paul's mention of joy and exhortation to rejoice are remarkable.

Make your way through the letter tracking joy. Notice how Paul intersperses the word(s) and whether there is any indication of this joy's cause or origin. Read the verses below and summarize Paul's meaning next to each verse attribution. Ask yourself as you do, what are the odds that the letter of a man in prison to a group that is “suffering and struggling” would feature JOY so prominently?

1.4-5

1.18

1.18-19

1.25

2.2
2.17
2.17
2.18
2.18
2.28
2.29
3.1
4.1
4.4
4.4
4.10

It will be our project during these next weeks to discover Paul's secret. As a people whose emotions can be so easily tossed around by circumstances, there is gold in Paul's Letter to the Philippians.

Bringing It Home – Joy

How would you define joy as you begin this study?

Do you see a difference between joy and happiness? If so, how would you describe that difference?

Describe a time when you experienced great joy in your life? What were your circumstances?

Prep for Next Week: A Life Worth Living

What makes life worth living? That's a pretty central question for all of us. Paul takes it

on without really meaning to in chapter one. As preparation for next week...

1. Read Philippians 1.12-26 very carefully two or three times. Ask, not only of what Paul is saying, but why he is saying it. What does he mean to accomplish in the Philippian Christians' life and faith with these words?
2. How would you characterize Paul's attitude and philosophy of life from these verses?
3. If you have time, now read the whole letter in one sitting. It is less than 2300 words long, which is a little longer than a 20-minute sermon and a little shorter than a feature article in *The Economist* or the *New Yorker*. As you read, try to get a feel for the relationship between Paul and these Christians in Philippi.

A LIFE WORTH LIVING

EPICTETUS, HAMLET, PAUL, AND YOU

PHILIPPIANS 1.12-27

INTRODUCTION – HAMLET SPEAKS

*To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub...*
(“Hamlet” Act 3 Scene 1)

PART ONE: PAUL’S IMPRISONED LIFE

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians from prison because his work spreading the good news of Jesus ran against the grain of the society and legal structures in which he worked. Because Paul was imprisoned a handful of times, we aren’t sure where he is when he writes Philippians. Traditional accounts put him in Rome late in his career; others put him in Ephesus earlier. Whether he is in Ephesus or Rome, he is in prison. In the first section of the letter, he reports his present activities in a way that he hopes will help the Philippians face their own trials and tribulations.

The Conditions

What was a Roman prison like?

- An ancient author called Lucian of Samosata describes “the stench of the room and its stifling air (since many were confined in the same place, cramped for room, and scarcely able to draw breath), the clash of irons, the scanty sleep.”
- Lucian also tells how a prisoner called Antiphilus became unrecognizable after a lengthy stay, “so greatly had he been changed by his dire straits.” (Lucian, *Toxaris* 29)
- One ancient medical treatise even tells how ancient kings offered their prisoners as candidates for vivisection – though that vicious practice was rare.
- Prisoners often took their own lives, and higher ranking inmates were often put on suicide watch.

(These lurid descriptions are gory and fascinating. My favorite book on how ancient Roman prisons entered the early Christian conversation is Craig Wansink's *Chained in Christ: The Experience and Rhetoric of Paul's Imprisonments*.)

Paul and the Guards (1.12-14)

Imagine what you would focus on if you wrote a letter to a friend from an overcrowded, underfed, under-watered, loud, filthy, stinking prison room. Given those wretched conditions, Paul's description of his prison experience is surprising, to say the least

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, ¹³so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; ¹⁴and most of the brothers and sisters,* having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word* with greater boldness and without fear.*

- What is happening in the prison while Paul is there?
- What is Paul's attitude toward his imprisonment?
- What is ultimately most important to Paul?

Paul and the "Rival Preachers" (1.15-18a)

Rivalries abound among leaders across the ages, and in that arena egos can run a bit large. Church pastors have never been immune to such comparisons and competition. The Apostle Paul has an ego of his own, as we'll see elsewhere. Here, though, where we might expect it to rear itself – in the context of competing and even antagonistic others – Paul reigns it in. He writes:

Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. ¹⁶These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; ¹⁷the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. ¹⁸What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.

Bringing It Home – Ego Management

What is happening outside prison while Paul is in?

What is Paul's attitude toward these developments?

What is most important to Paul?

Ego management is a human project and Paul had a strong and competitive ego. What can we learn from Paul's attempt at managing his ego here?

Message or Motive

In Philippians 1.15-18a Paul does what Christians of the first and twenty-first centuries have to do all the time: discern how to recognize the truth when we hear it. What makes Paul willing to approve ill-motivated messengers here? What do they have going for them?

In Philippians 3.1-3, Paul's tone changes abruptly about other Christian teachers near him. "Beware the dogs, beware the evil doers..." What differentiates the teachers in chapter one from the ones in chapter three?

Compare Paul's way of assessing the value of teachers' words to Jesus' criterion – "By their fruits you will know them..." – in Matthew 7.15-19. How do you think Matthew's group made these decisions?

When you read your way through a library or newsstand or surf the web, how do you decide who's telling the truth? Is message more important? or motive?

***Paul
and***

Death (1.18b-26)

From his prison cell, Paul contemplates his own death – right there before God, the Philippians, and all of us. Consider his musings and the value system they reveal.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will result in my deliverance. ²⁰It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. ²²If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. ²³I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; ²⁴but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. ²⁵Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, ²⁶so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again. (New Revised Standard Version)

In this translation, Paul is a spectator of his own fate. He does not know “which I prefer” (Phil 1.22) Will he live or die? He’s not sure.

There’s a problem with that reading, though. The Greek word “haireo” – here translated “prefer” means “choose.” Pop it into any Greek dictionary program, or find where it occurs in the Bible, and “choose” will be the translation...except in Philipians 1.22 above. Here, our New Revised Standard Version Bibles have “prefer” instead. Why do you imagine these smart, qualified translators do that?

How does Paul’s contemplation of his own death change for you if “prefer” properly becomes “choose” instead? The New International Version, among others, gets it right:

“If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!” (1.22 – New International Version) Is Paul contemplating suicide? Is he considering a non-defense (like Socrates and Jesus, by the way) that would assure his execution? If either of these is true, Paul has some control over whether he lives or dies. In light of that, let’s ask our three questions again here:

What is happening while Paul is in prison?

What is Paul’s attitude toward these happenings?

What is most important to Paul?

PART TWO: PAUL’S PURPOSEFUL LIFE

What makes life meaningful and worthwhile?

People in every age ask, when life gets hard, what makes it worth living? The ancient Stoic philosophers, Shakespeare's Hamlet, and the Apostle Paul all contemplated the issue of suicide. Their different approaches to the issue reveal three different sets of values. As you read/hear each of these passages, ask three questions:

- What are the circumstances of each actor?
- Is suicide advised or chosen and why/why not?
- What is the very most important thing to each author?

In all times, people have faced and will face the question of life's worth. Sometimes circumstances or illness drive people to contemplate whether life is still worth living. Here are our three examples.

Stoics and the Smoky Room (Epictetus, Discourses 1.25)

[S]ome men are unduly crabbed and have too sharp tongues and say, I cannot dine at this fellow's house, where I have to put up with his telling every day how he fought in Mysia: 'I have told you, brother, how I climbed up to the crest of the hill; well now, I begin to be besieged again.' But another says, I would rather dine and hear him babble all he pleases.

And it is for you to compare these estimates; only do nothing as one burdened, or afflicted, or thinking that he is in a wretched plight; for no one forces you to this. Has some one made a smoke in the house? If he has made a moderate amount of smoke I shall stay; if too much, I go outside. For one ought to remember and hold fast to this, that the door stands open. But some one says, "Do not dwell in Nicopolis." I agree not to dwell there. "Nor in Athens." I agree not to dwell in Athens, either. "Nor in Rome." I agree not to dwell in Rome, either.

"Dwell in Gyara [a place of exile]." I agree to dwell there. But to dwell in Gyara seems to me to be like a great quantity of smoke in the house. I leave for a place where no one will prevent me from dwelling; for that dwelling-place stands open to every man.

Hamlet and the Bad Dream (Shakespeare's "Hamlet," Act 3, Scene 1)

*To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause: there's the respect*

*That makes calamity of so long life;
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action. - Soft you now!
The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remember'd.*

Paul and the Tortures of Prison (Philippians 1.20-26 NIV)

I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

****Note:** The Greek word translated “I shall choose” in verse 22 is *haireisomai*. While some translation (including the NRSV) render it with “prefer,” its usages in ancient literature don’t readily allow that translation. Paul ponders a choice. In the context of frequent suicides in Roman prisons, this passage becomes even more powerful and poignant.

Bringing It Home – Purpose

In each of the philosophies above, what makes life worth living?

Which compels you most? Why?

What purpose ground the value of your life?

The suicide rate rose 24% in the United States between 1999 and 2014 and stands at a 30-year high. (https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/22/health/us-suicide-rate-surges-to-a-30-year-high.html?_r=0)

Why do you think that is? And how might the Apostle Paul help?

PART THREE: PAUL'S HOPE FOR THE PHILIPPIANS AND US

After he has offered the Philippians his own example in some detail, Paul turns to them with a very direct and related exhortation: “Live YOUR life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...” He apparently wants them to imitate his values and behavior.

The Example of Paul

How do you feel when a preacher makes herself the hero of her own sermon illustration? or when anyone sets himself up as the proper way to live? Does it seem arrogant? Do you squirm a little?

If we want to understand Paul's work with the Philippians, it will help to set aside our squeamishness about leaders who set themselves up as an example to their mentees, because in the first century in Rome, the most revered philosophers used example and imitation as a primary tool for forming their students. Sometimes, they told people to imitate another worthy – most often Socrates, but also others. Other times, like a tutor who helps a student draw letters for the first time by having him trace the lines, these philosophers told their students to imitate them – to “be like me.”

In 1 Corinthians 11.1, Paul says, “Imitate me as I imitate Christ.” In Philippians 1, Paul implies that the Philippians ought, in their own lives, to look more like him. If you're looking for a theology that emboldens this kind of confidence, see the C.S. Lewis excerpt from *The Screwtape Letters* at the end of this handout.

The Outcome for the Philippians

Joy (1.25)

I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

Unity (1.27)

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel...

Courage (1.28a)

²⁸and are in no way intimidated by your opponents.

Confident Faith (1.28b-30)

For them this [i.e, their opposition to you and the gospel] is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. ²⁹For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well — ³⁰since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Bringing It Home – Our Outcomes

What have been the hardest times in your life?

What life purpose has made it possible for you to continue when circumstances have pressed in on you?

How does Paul's example inform that question in your life now?

PREPARATION FOR SESSION THREE -- PHILIPPIANS 1.27—2.12

In the next session, we discover that Paul's philosophy of life, which we so admired together in our study of chapter one, is not original to him. In chapter two, Paul gives full credit to Jesus, exhorting the Philippian Christians to, "Have this mind in you that was also in Christ Jesus..." This week we'll look at the example of Jesus as Paul cites it from a very early Christian hymn.

1. Read 2.1-4 to remember Paul's picture of true community in Philippi.
2. Then read 2.5-11 and ask yourself what "the mind of Christ" means for Paul? What would it mean to "have this mind in you that was also in Christ Jesus?"
3. How does this picture of Jesus prepare the Philippians (and us) to build better community?
4. It's always a great idea to read the whole letter at least once between our classes, just for fun...

C.S. Lewis on True Humility

In his book, *The Screwtape Letters*, the Christian author C.S. Lewis dramatizes the dynamics of temptation. The book presents a series of letters in which “Senior Tempter” named Screwtape counsels his protégé, called “Wormwood,” on how best to lure his “patient” away from the Enemy, God. The book is darkly comical and brilliantly insightful into the spiritual experience of being tempted. In this section, Screwtape tells Wormwood to use a false human definition of humility to his own sinister advantage.

You must therefore conceal from the patient the true end of Humility. Let him think of it not as self- forgetfulness but as a certain kind of opinion (namely, a low opinion) of his own talents and character. Some talents, I gather, he really has. Fix in his mind the idea that humility consists in trying to believe those talents to be less valuable than he believes them to be. No doubt they are in fact less valuable than he believes, but that is not the point. The great thing is to make him value an opinion for some quality other than truth, thus introducing an element of dishonesty and make-believe into the heart of what otherwise threatens to become a virtue. By this method thousands of humans have been brought to think that humility means pretty women trying to believe they are ugly and clever men trying to believe they are fools. And since what they are trying to believe may, in some cases, be manifest nonsense, they cannot succeed in believing it and we have the chance of keeping their minds endlessly revolving on themselves in an effort to achieve the impossible. To anticipate the Enemy’s strategy, we must consider His aims. The Enemy wants to bring the man to a state of mind in which he could design the best cathedral in the world, and know it to be the best, and rejoice in the, fact, without being any more (or less) or otherwise glad at having done it than he would be if it had been done by another. The Enemy wants him, in the end, to be so free from any bias in his own favor that he can rejoice in his own talents as frankly and gratefully as in his neighbor’s talents—or in a sunrise, an elephant, or a waterfall. He wants each man, in the long run, to be able to recognize all creatures (even himself) as glorious and excellent things. He wants to kill their animal self-love as soon as possible; but it is His long- term policy, I fear, to restore to them a new kind of self-love—a charity and gratitude for all selves, including their own; when they have really learned to love their neighbors as themselves, they will be allowed to love themselves as their neighbors. For we must never forget what is the most repellent and inexplicable trait in our Enemy; He really loves the hairless bipeds He has created and always gives back to them with His right hand what He has taken away with His left. (Screwtape Letter #14)

A MIND WORTH HAVING
PAUL'S FORMULA FOR THRIVING COMMUNITY
PHILIPPIANS 2.1-11

INTRODUCTION – TARZAN AND SUPERMAN

Songs reach our soul. That's why we listen long to radios and stereos and I-Pods, and that's why we hear and sing songs in worship. We start today with a funny song called "Tarzan and Superman" that oddly (and inadvertently, I imagine) captures the essence of Philippians 2.1-11.

"Superman's Song"
the Crash Test Dummies
Lyrics by Brad Roberts

Tarzan wasn't a ladies' man
He'd just come along and scoop 'em up under his arm
Like that, quick as a cat in the jungle
But Clark Kent, now there was a real gent
He would not be caught sittin' around in no
Jungle scape, dumb as an ape doing nothing

[Chorus:]

Superman never made any money
For saving the world from Solomon Grundy
And sometimes I despair the world will never see
Another man like him

Hey Bob, Supe had a straight job
Even though he could have smashed through any bank
In the United States, he had the strength, but he would not
Folks said his family were all dead
Their planet crumbled but Superman, he forced himself
To carry on, forget Krypton, and keep going

Tarzan was king of the jungle and Lord over all the apes
But he could hardly string together four words: "I Tarzan, You Jane."

Sometimes when Supe was stopping crimes
I'll bet that he was tempted to just quit and turn his back
On man, join Tarzan in the forest
But he stayed in the city, and kept on changing clothes
In dirty old phone booths till his work was through
And nothing to do but go on home

Why does the singer prefer Superman to Tarzan?

PART ONE: SINGING IN PHILIPPI

One part of understanding what it would have been to be an everyday Christian in one of Paul's little church groups is understanding that they would have sung...a lot! Amid the devastation of an earthquake and its aftermath, the Haitian people have found some solace and community refuge in singing together. Music was clearly a big part of Jewish worship throughout antiquity, and the Christians naturally followed suit.

As with music in all oral/illiterate cultures, they would have taught/been taught songs by singing them over and over (rather than by handing out lyrics and music). Here are some text that offer us access to this part of early Christian life together.

The Early Christians Sing

When Jesus and his disciples had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. ²⁷And Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered (Mark 14.26/Matthew 26.30).'

But when the healed fortune-teller's owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities. ²⁰When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, 'These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.' ²²The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them... (Acts 16.25)

What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up (1 Corinthians 14.26).

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5.19).

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.* ¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3.16).”*

The Government Notices

Early in the second century, Pliny was the governor of a Roman province called Bithynia. He wrote occasional letters to the Emperor Trajan, supplying information on affairs in the province and sometimes asking for advice. His most famous letter is about the Christians. He wrote it in 112 C.E. The whole letter is in the back section of this handout. The most informative part is quoted here:

“Dear Sir...the main of the Christians’ fault, or of their mistake was this: That they were wont, on a stated day, to meet together before it was light, and to sing a hymn to Christ, as to a god, alternately; and to oblige themselves by a sacrament [or oath], not to do anything that was ill: but that they would commit no theft, or pilfering, or adultery; that they would not break their promises, or deny what was deposited with them, when it was required back again; after which it was their custom to depart, and to meet again at a common but innocent meal...(Epistles 10.96)”

An Early Christian “Hymn to Christ” (*Carmen Christi*)

Scholars have spotted one of these early Christians hymns in Philippians 2. Notice the poetic structure of this passage.

*Christ Jesus...
who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

⁷but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

*Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2.6-11).*

PART TWO: WHAT'S HAPPENING IN PHILIPPI

As is our custom, we ask together, “Why did Paul choose to include the beautiful *carmen Christi* of chapter 2 in this brief letter to the Philippians?” Our first instinct by now is to ask after the circumstances and the literary context: what was going on in Philippi that made this song meaningful, and how does it fit into Paul’s strategy for teaching them?

Pressure from Outside

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God’s doing. ²⁹For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— ³⁰since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have (Philippians 1.27-30).

Signs of Division Inside

Exhortations to Unity

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel... (1.27)

...make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind (2.2).

Reference to “Murmuring and Complaining” (2.14)

Identification of a Specific Conflict between Leaders

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life (4.2-3).

A Closer Look at 2.1-2

First the review of God’s help to them.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy...

Next, Paul’s hope for them: Community

*...²make my joy complete:
be of the same mind,
having the same love,
being in full accord
and of one mind...*

PART THREE: PAUL’S FORMULA FOR COMMUNITY

The Philippians seem to be undergoing social pressure or persecution from outsiders, and that has prompted some strife and division within. Paul is clearly calling the Philippians to unity. But he knows that it’s not just a matter of saying “we want to be united.” (Take a look at all the major denominational bodies in the United States for an example of how that doesn’t work!)

Deference and Self Sacrifice

*³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,
but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.*

*⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests,
but to the interests of others.*

The Example of Paul

1. Putting the gospel over his own consolation in prison (1.12-14)
2. Putting the gospel over fairness to him (1.15-18a)

3. Putting the Philippians' needs over his own desire to be with Christ (18b-26)

The Example of Jesus

Have this mind in you that was also in Christ Jesus..."

*Who, though he existed in the very form of God,
did not regard equality with God as a thing to be exploited,
BUT EMPTIED HIMSELF
taking the form of a slave, being found in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
HE HUMBLING HIMSELF
and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.*

Result: God exalts Jesus (2.5-11).

Compare this to the words of Jesus: *Anyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but whoever humbles himself will be exalted* (Matthew 23.12).

The Examples of Paul's Co-Workers

Timothy puts the gospel above himself (2.19-24).

I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. ²¹All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. ²²But Timothy's worth you know, how like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.

Epaphroditus risks his life for the gospel (2.25-30).

Still, I think it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus—my brother and co-worker and fellow-soldier, your messenger and minister to my need; ²⁶for he has been longing for all of you, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. ²⁷He was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one sorrow after another. ²⁸I am the more eager to send him, therefore, in order that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. ²⁹Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honor such people, ³⁰because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me.*

Bringing It Home – Team-Building

Have you ever been a part of a team, cast, work group, military unit, committee, or other group that just worked? If so, describe that experience?

What was your shared purpose? And what did you accomplish together?

Did Paul's principles show up in the way you all treated one another?

Did you experience joy through that team? If not, how could the group or team you're a part of now benefit from Philippians 2.1-12?

PART FOUR – PAUL'S FORMULA IN OUR LIVES

How does Philippians 2 land in our daily living? If we stop short of that question, we haven't quite finished Bible Study for the day. Here is a four-step answer to the question, "How should I then live?"

Identify the Attitude

Paul calls each of the Philippians to stop thinking primarily and think, rather, about one another and the success of the good news about Jesus.

God is calling us to the same –

- putting others before ourselves and
- putting God's redemptive work in the world before our own interests.

That's pretty hard just to grit our teeth and do. So...

Find a Model

Paul offers Jesus as prime example and himself, Timothy and Epaphroditus as imitators

of Jesus.

All of them give up their own rights and pursuits for the sake of (1) Christ and the good news; and (2) the Philippians and one another.

They can be examples to us, too, of course. But it's also good to have a living example in front of us. Do you know someone humble, deferential, and self-sacrificial? Imitate him/her!

But we quickly get caught up in the means and forget the end. So...

Remember the Ultimate Purpose

Paul's teaching in chapter two on humility, regarding the other, and self-sacrifice are not meant simply to make his Philippians "better people."

He hopes that three things will happen:

- Christ will be honored in their body, as in Paul's (1.20).
- They will become a true community (2.1-4).
- By doing that (rather than murmuring and complaining) they will shine like stars in a dark world (2.15).

The Close – Team-Building and Joy

Consider how Paul's community-building work produced joy among the Philippians and how it could foster joy in your groups?

PREPARATION FOR NEXT TIME:

Class prep is always welcome and never required. If you have time and wish to read up, here's how.

1. Read Philippians 2.12-18 several times deliberately
2. Ask, Is our life of faith and our Christian community God's job or ours? What verses concern this?
3. For the first time in this letter, "the world" appears on Paul's radar screen in this passage. What does Paul say about the Philippians' non-Christian neighbors here? What is to be the impact of Christian community on the surrounding world?

Letters of Pliny the Younger and the Emperor Trajan

Translated by William Whiston

These letters concern an episode which marks the first time the Roman government recognized Christianity as a religion separate from Judaism, and sets a precedent for the massive persecution of Christians that takes place in the second and third centuries.

In the year 112, Pliny the Younger was faced with a dilemma. He was the governor in the Roman province of Bithynia (modern day Turkey) when a number of Christians were brought into his court. It is unclear what the initial charges are, but he ultimately decided, despite the fact that the Christians seemed generally harmless to him, that he should execute them if they refused to recant their faith. Because he is unsure as to whether he can kill them legally for no other crime than their faith, he writes to his friend the Emperor for advice. The Emperor replies that he did the right thing in executing them, but advises him not to seek out Christians for prosecution.

Letter One – Governor Pliny to Emperor Trajan

Sir,

It is my constant method to apply myself to you for the resolution of all my doubts; for who can better govern my dilatory way of proceeding or instruct my ignorance? I have never been present at the examination of the Christians [by others], on which account I am unacquainted with what uses to be inquired into, and what, and how far they used to be punished; nor are my doubts small, whether there be not a distinction to be made between the ages [of the accused]? and whether tender youth ought to have the same punishment with strong men? Whether there be not room for pardon upon repentance?" or whether it may not be an advantage to one that had been a Christian, that he has forsaken Christianity? Whether the bare name, without any crimes besides, or the crimes adhering to that name, be to be punished? In the meantime, I have taken this course about those who have been brought before me as Christians. I asked them whether they were Christians or not? If they confessed that they were Christians, I asked them again, and a third time, intermixing threatenings with the questions. If they persevered in their confession, I ordered them to be executed; for I did not doubt but, let their confession be of any sort whatsoever, this positiveness and inflexible obstinacy deserved to be punished. There have been some of this mad sect whom I took notice of in particular as Roman citizens, that they might be sent to that city. After some time, as is usual in such examinations, the crime spread itself and many more cases came before me. A libel was sent to me, though without an author, containing many names [of persons accused]. These denied that they were Christians now, or ever had been. They called upon the gods, and supplicated to your image, which I caused to be brought to me for that purpose, with frankincense and wine; they also cursed Christ; none of which things, it is said, can any of those that are ready Christians be compelled to do; so I thought fit to let them go. Others of them that were named in the libel, said they were Christians, but presently denied it again; that indeed they had been Christians, but had ceased to be so, some three years, some many more; and one there was that said he had not been so these twenty years. All these worshipped your image, and the images of our gods; these also cursed Christ. However, they assured me that the main of their fault, or of their mistake was this:-That they were wont, on a stated day, to meet

together before it was light, and to sing a hymn to Christ, as to a god, alternately; and to oblige themselves by a sacrament [or oath], not to do anything that was ill: but that they would commit no theft, or pilfering, or adultery; that they would not break their promises, or deny what was deposited with them, when it was required back again; after which it was their custom to depart, and to meet again at a common but innocent meal, which they had left off upon that edict which I published at your command, and wherein I had forbidden any such conventicles. These examinations made me think it necessary to inquire by torments what the truth was; which I did of two servant maids, who were called Deaconesses: but still I discovered no more than that they were addicted to a bad and to an extravagant superstition. Hereupon I have put off any further examinations, and have recourse to you, for the affair seems to be well worth consultation, especially on account of the number of those that are in danger; for there are many of every age, of every rank, and of both sexes, who are now and hereafter likely to be called to account, and to be in danger; for this superstition is spread like a contagion, not only into cities and towns, but into country villages also, which yet there is reason to hope may be stopped and corrected. To be sure, the temples, which were almost forsaken, begin already to be frequented; and the holy solemnities, which were long intermitted, begin to be revived. The sacrifices begin to sell well everywhere, of which very few purchasers had of late appeared; whereby it is easy to suppose how great a multitude of men may be amended, if place for repentance be admitted.

Letter Two – Emperor Trajan to Governor Pliny

My Pliny,

You have taken the method which you ought in examining the causes of those that had been accused as Christians, for indeed no certain and general form of judging can be ordained in this case. These people are not to be sought for; but if they be accused and convicted, they are to be punished; but with this caution, that he who denies himself to be a Christian, and makes it plain that he is not so by supplicating to our gods, although he had been so formerly, may be allowed pardon, upon his repentance. As for libels sent without an author, they ought to have no place in any accusation whatsoever, for that would be a thing of very ill example, and not agreeable to my reign.

A PARTNERSHIP WORTH EXPLORING

PAUL'S DIVINE-HUMAN DIVISION OF LABOR

PHILIPPIANS 2.12-18

OPEN – HOW DOES GOD GET THINGS DONE?

The Bible features some direct, unmediated acts of God – creation, flood, Red Sea parting, etc. Mostly, though, what God accomplishes involves partners – Abram and Sarai moving house to take up a new vocation, Moses hounding Pharaoh, Elijah prophesying, Mary giving birth, Peter preaching Pentecost, Paul evangelizing, Lydia hosting, etc. In this session, we ask how those partnerships happen and how we might partner with God.

PART ONE – A CLOSE READING

Our full text for the day takes us less than a minute to read. This is the deepest dive we will get to take in this series: seven verses in sixty minutes – or nearly 9 minutes per verse. Luxurious!

Reading the Whole Section

First, we read the passage through once to get the thematic arc of these paragraphs. Watch for phrases or concepts that especially spark your interest, appeal to your heart, or stop you up short.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

¹⁴ Do all things without murmuring and arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. ¹⁶ It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. ¹⁷ But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you— ¹⁸ and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.

What is Paul trying to do with these two paragraphs? If he reaches that end, how will the Philippians' thoughts or lives be changed?

Reading Line by Line

Next step: a close reading of the text, phrase by phrase, with some attention to what's gone before in this letter and some contextual insights from Paul's other letters.

“Therefore...”

This word prompts good readers to ask, “What came immediately before this?” Here, it was “At the name of Jesus, every knee will bow...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the father.”

What carryover do you imagine Paul hopes for with his “therefore” here?

How does the picture of every knee in the cosmos bowing to Christ relate to “fear and trembling” in v. 12?

“Just as you have always obeyed me...”

Paul had great success with this Philippian group when he met them and formed their life together. They believed his message, consented to his leadership, and gave his odd new way of living the benefit of the doubt. They even put their lives to it.

Paul now expects that his words will be just as effective by letter as they were in person. Is obedience a proper category for grownups? Paul seems to think so. How does it land with you? What makes someone worth obeying?

A House United Insight

We hear people talk about “obeying Jesus” or “obeying God” much more often in conservative churches than in mainline and progressive ones, who prefer to talk about “following Jesus.” What about conservative and liberal ways of doing the world do you imagine cause that difference? How do “obey” and “follow” differ? To which do you most relate? Can you guess why you prefer it? How might you learn something useful from the term that is not your usual home language?

Work out your own salvation...

Paul’s signature belief in the wide church’s memory is that “A person is not justified by works of the Law (of Moses), but through faith in Jesus Christ.” (Galatians 2.16) Luther and the Protestant movement found mother’s milk in the doctrine of justification by faith. As he led fledgling Christian churches like the Philippians, Paul battled determined opponents who wanted their converts to take on Moses’ Law and the obligation to be circumcised. (E.g., Philippians 3.2) Does his exhortation to “work out your own salvation” contradict that principle? If not, what does it mean?

What do you think Paul means by “salvation”? What does that word mean to you now? Does it change your impression to know that “your” is plural here, and not singular? How do you imagine a Christian community would “work out” their/our collective “salvation”?

...with fear and trembling...

“One does not live out the gospel casually or lightly, especially in light of verses 6-11, but as those who know what it means to stand in awe of the living God.” (<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/Phil/Application-Final-Appeal-478>)

“For it is God who is at work in you...”

So it wasn’t our “salvation” to work out after all...or at least not solely ours. Have you ever experienced God “at work in you”? What were you doing and what did it feel like?

Do “work out your own salvation” and “God...is at work in you” contradict one another? How so or not?

Another term for holding two opposites in tension is “paradox.” One dictionary defines “paradox” in this way: “a seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition that when investigated or explained may prove to be well founded or true.”

Bringing It Home – Partnership

Have you ever experienced the paradox in the statement, “I did it...and God did it”?

If so, describe that experience. What were you doing? What did it feel like?

...enabling you both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

Precisely how is God “at work in you,” as it turns out? The Greek of this sentence could be translated more literally:

“For God is the working-in/among-you (plural) One (*en-erge-o*), both toward your willing and toward your working (*en-erge-o*) on for the sake of the God-pleasing things (*eudokia* – Same as the “good will” of some preachers in 1.15).”

So...did God actually “do it” in verse 13? How might God “enable” you to want and do what God likes?

In Galatians 5, Paul traces out the origin of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, calling these “the fruit of the Spirit.” Does that verse belong alongside Philipians 2.13? Why or why not?

In 1 Corinthians 12.4-11, Paul lists a wise word, a word of knowledge, faith, the ability to heal people, miracle-working, prophecy, the ability to speak in tongues, and the ability to interpret others who speak in tongues and calls them all “gifts of the Spirit.” Does this list belong alongside Philipians 2.13? Why or why not?

Presumably, both godly attitudes and talents employed for the common good please God. What else pleases God? How would we know?

Do all things without murmuring or arguing...

Don’t “stop murmuring!” and “stop arguing!” seem like awfully mundane examples of “working out your own salvation with fear and trembling”? Didn’t you expect something a little more grand than, “stop your whinin”?

For Paul, our commonplace, everyday decisions and attitudes in life are vital to God’s purposes in the world. Remember that we caught a hint of intra-group conflict in Paul’s emphasis on “standing side by side” and “being of the same mind” (Philipians 1.27) and in the difficulty Euodia and Syntyche have had getting along. (4.2) Do these help us see what is at stake in their murmuring and arguing?

“...so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish...”

If the specific action of “no grumblin’ or fightin’” seems small potatoes, the result looks awfully good. “Blameless” and “innocent” and “children of God without blemish” seem like the kind of words we’d like to have describe us...but they may not seem accurate. Let’s say we actually succeed at quitting the murmuring and arguing. What about all those other spots on us? What do you think Paul means by motivating them to be “pure and blameless” (again – see Philippians 1)?

The word for blemish appears often in the context of animal sacrifice, among the Jews and the pagans. Whether Paul is contemplating Greco-Roman sacrifice of meat to the gods (which the Philippians would best understand) or Jewish sacrifice (which Paul and a couple of Jews in his group would best understand) is unclear. But Greco-Roman priests did not place as high a premium on using unblemished sacrifices as Israel did. Paul will come back to sacrificial imagery again in 2.17.

“...in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.”

Is this language jarring to you? Does it sound like hellfire and damnation? Or like the non-incumbent in a political campaign, telling why we need to elect her or him?

Do you see your generation as “crooked and perverse?” How so? How not?

For Paul (as for Jesus, in the Gospel and Letters of John, especially) there was a stark line between the faithful and their generation/the world. Compared to their neighbors, Paul says, the Philippians shine out like stars in the world.

To what extent do you see a boundary and a recognizable difference between people in the church and people in the world?

Should we recognize that border? Or brush it away? Why?

It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.

Do you think this is a good motivator: “Let’s see, if we stay clean, Paul gets to boast someday and not feel like he wasted his time?”

Did you ever only practice piano because you didn’t want to disappoint your teacher, or make her/him look bad at the recital? This goes for coaches, too.

Paul is calling them to regard him as “more important than your selves” (2.3) But is he doing the same? (Check out his prison time in chapter one for a refresher.)

Adding it all up, two very good things will happen if they heed Paul’s call to stop grumbling and arguing:

1. They will shine in their neighborhood.
2. Paul will be proud at judgment day.

Bringing It Home – Unity in a Divided Generation

Paul calls the Philippians to love one another rather than hurting one another. How does that exhortation land in the divided Christian church of 2017, where left and right stay separate from one another and openly disdain and deride one another?

In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus links Christian love and unity to impact on the world, (John 13.34-35 and 17.20-23) just as Paul seems to be doing here. What impact do you imagine a church that loved one another instead of dividing would have on our generation?

17 But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith...

Paul here pulls out the imagery of sacrifice again – this time with himself as the libation poured out over the animal (their faith). He may be referring to his prospective death, as he did in chapter one.

...I am glad and rejoice with all of you— 18 and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.

Here's that joy word again. Paul will rejoice, even if he is headed to death for the cause. He wants them to rejoice with him as he rejoices with them – in spite of the hardships that his work as an apostle and their lives as Christians bring them. This is one of the tough times within Paul's "Rejoice in the Lord always!" of 4.4, but Paul imagines they've got a better chance of rejoicing if they do it together.

PART TWO – Imagining Partnership with God

When we start to think of ourselves as co-workers with God, the usual lines of cause and effect get harder to draw.

God's Pattern of Partnership

God could accomplish God's will remotely. Throughout Jewish and Christian history, though, God's pattern is to partner with faithful folk to accomplish God's will.

- Noah built a boat.
- Abraham and Sarah moved house and started a BIG family.
- Moses rescued that family from Egyptian slavery.
- Elijah, Isaiah prophesied to Israel.
- Mary and Joseph joined God's Christmas plan.
- Paul took the good news across the north side of the Mediterranean and beyond
- Countless other quiet Christians simply partner with God in everyday life.
-

God is always looking for partners. As my friend, Ward Brehm, said at the 2007 National Prayer Breakfast in Washington D.C., we are God's Plan A...and there is no Plan B.

Double Agency as Partnership

Back to Philippians 2.12-13:

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

The English philosophical theologian, Austin Farrer, spoke of Christian participation in God's work as "double agency." When humans consent to the will of God, according to Farrer, our wills overlap with the divine will and our bodies become vehicles of divine Spirit.

What if we picture "work out your own salvation" and "God is at work in you" as God's picture of partnership? Does that match your experience?

CLOSE –

PREPARATION FOR SESSION FIVE

Philippians 3 is next. There, Paul tells his own story of receiving from God an astonishing, unexpected gift through Jesus. To prepare...

1. Read Philippians 3 carefully.
2. Imagine Paul's personality. What do we learn in this chapter?
3. What is the astonishing gift he receives?
4. How does Paul situate the Philippian Christians relative to the world around them?

A GIFT WORTH RECEIVING
PAUL'S BIO AND THE SECRET TO HIS JOY
PHILIPPIANS 3

OPEN – “HONEY, SAUL QUIT HIS JOB...”

Imagine the proud parents of Saul of Tarsus. They have watched their boy excel at every level of education under the greatest Jewish teachers of his time. He has joined the party of the Pharisees and risen through their ranks at a young age. He has grown so zealous as to become an active protector of Judaism against upstart splinter movements like The Way. Then one day a messenger delivers a letter from the pride of their family. It has two parts: first, Saul has quit his job; second, they should call him “Paul” from now on. What?!

REVIEW: A LIFE LIVED FOR OTHERS

During our first four weeks together, we've found that Paul lived and taught a life of self-emptying love that he epitomizes in his exhortation to “consider others as better/more important than yourselves (Philippians 2.3).” To provide the Philippians a visual aid for that habit, Paul presents himself and his co-workers as poster boys, and then produces Jesus as the center and source of it all.

1. Paul's Habit of Self-Emptying and Other-Concern (Philippians 1.12-26)
 - In prison, employing the guards as a mission team (1.12-14).
 - In prison, glad even that ill-motivated preachers are spreading the Gospel (1.15-18a).
 - In prison, asking whether to keep living or take his life, Paul chooses life because “to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you (1.24).”
2. Jesus' Example of Self-Emptying and Other-Concern (Philippians 2.6-11)
 - In God's equal company, deciding to empty himself for us (2.6)
 - One earth as human, deciding to go to the cross for us (2.7-8)
3. Inhabited partnership with God (Philippians 2.12-13)

THIS WEEK'S TASK

Paul didn't spend his pre-Christian life overeating bon bons and watching stolen cable. He was at the head of his class in the system of Pharisaic Judaism. But then something changed in him that made him able to re-evaluate all that achievement and redirect his focused, intense energy.

Today's Questions:

- What prompts Paul to give up his considerable accomplishments and start a whole new life and career?
- And with that, what liberates Paul to give himself out so freely to the Philippians and others?
- How does this insight into Paul's transformed life play in our own lives.

PART ONE: PAUL THE ACHIEVER

Paul never did anything halfway. Throughout his life, it seems, if he saw a competition, he wanted to win it. If he saw a ladder, he climbed to the top rung and wanted to go higher. He cultivated the discipline to excel and then he did.

The A+ Student

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless (Philippians 3.4-6).

You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism...¹⁴I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors (Galatians 1.13-14).

The Passionate Persecutor

*When [the High Priests of Jerusalem] heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. ⁵⁵But filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' ⁵⁷But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' ⁶⁰Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.**

And Saul approved of their killing him.

That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. ²Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. ³But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison... (Acts 7.54—8.3)

I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. (Gal 1.13)

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more...⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church... (Philippians 3.6)

1. What person you know reminds you of Paul the Achiever?

PART TWO – PAUL THE RECEIVER

The Experience of Grace

On a road from Jerusalem to Damascus, Paul suddenly realized that he had been climbing the wrong ladder. Jesus appeared to him and changed him and gave him a completely different climb.

The Big Story in Acts

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'⁵ He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.'⁷ The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.⁹ For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.'¹¹ The Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying,¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.'¹³ But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem;¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.'¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel;¹⁶ I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.'¹⁷ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul* and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.'¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized,¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength (Acts 9.1-19).*

1. How did Paul's life with Christ begin according to Acts 9?

2. Does this conversion story inspire you? Intimidate you? Other?

3. How did your own life with Christ begin?

4. Does the difference between Paul's story as Acts tells it and yours bother you?

Paul's Accounts

If Paul's conversion in Acts 9 is dramatic and spectacular, the way he tells it in his own letters seems very understated.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord (Philippians 3.7-8).

Last of all, as to someone untimely born, Christ appeared also to me (1 Corinthians 15.8).

But...God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased ¹⁶to reveal his Son to me... (Galatians 1.15-16)

Saul's Unnamed "Experience of Jesus"

According to the Book of Acts, Saul/Paul stood by while the Jewish council and mob stoned Stephen outside the city (Acts 7.58). Here's how the end of that story goes:

⁵⁴ When [the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem] heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen.^[i] ⁵⁵ But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" ⁵⁷ But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸ Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died. (Acts 7.54-60)

While he watched, Stephen...

- Commended his spirit to Christ.
- Forgave the people who were killing him.
- When Jesus was crucified in Luke (the prequel to Acts), Jesus...
- Commended his spirit to God.
- Forgave the people who were killing him.

In the story world of the Book of Acts, then, Jesus “appeared” to Saul before he even knew it.

1. What impact do you imagine watching the stoning of Stephen had on Paul?

2. What have been the most impactful God moments in your life? What changed because of them?

Life Lived in Grace

Zeal is not admirable if it is misplaced. In fact, it can be dangerous. We all know of cults and other religious distortions that win passionate allegiance but destroy souls. Given that experience, it is important for us to look at Paul’s conversion closely to make sure that the person was not obliterated by the experience and made into a religious robot.

What Paul shares about himself in Philippians and in his other letters reveals both change and continuity – a new Paul with some persistent elements from his life-long personality.

A New Paul

When Paul’s life was turned upside down, so were his values. Suddenly, the things that formerly meant everything (e.g., achievement in keeping the Law of Moses, whatever possessions he had, distinction as a Pharisee), no longer counted for anything. His transformation is abrupt and remarkable!

For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ* and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own (3.8-12).

Bringing It Home – Paul’s Conversion and Our Life Changes

1. Has a disruptive event ever made you evaluate your own priorities and re-rank things? What was the experience? What priorities rose and fell?
 2. What is the hardest thing in your life for God to dislodge from its perch?
 3. Is knowing Christ something we can get better at? How? What’s God’s part in all that? What’s our part?
-

But Still Paul

Climbing a Different Ladder

Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus (3.13-14).

Passionate for the New Truth

*Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!
³For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God* and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh (3.2-3).*

The Difference: Receiving the Gift

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith (3.8-9).”

Bringing It Home – Grace and Giving

Paul's life changed utterly when he realized that he no longer had to win God's affection – that God needed nothing from him. Suddenly he became full enough to empty himself. Amazing Grace!

1. Do Paul's harsh words about other Christian teachers – calling them dogs, evil workers, mutilators of flesh – seem helpful to you? When have you experienced someone as such a danger that you felt harsh words were necessary?
2. When do you feel free to give yourself out? What prompts that freedom for you?

PART THREE: GRACE MEETS THE NEIGHBORS

For Paul, the ecstasies of redemption are not mere private joys. His mind goes immediately to the people who have not yet experienced them. In the last paragraph of chapter three, Paul turns the Philippians' attention to their neighbors, who have not yet tasted transformative grace.

Paul's Picture of a Graceless Life

Thus far in this letter, Paul has kept his focus almost exclusively on insiders: himself and his helpers, Jesus, and the Philippian Christians. Here are the exceptions:

- The prison guards who seem to have converted from paganism to Christianity. (1.13)
- The Philippians' unnamed opponents (1.28)
- The crooked and perverse generation that surrounds them (2.15)
- The would-be Christian "mutilators of the flesh" (3.2)

Now Paul juxtaposes the Philippians, whose "citizenship is in heaven" to the people for whom earth is all there is.

Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. ¹⁹ Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. (Philippians 3.18-19)

1. How do you imagine Paul's characterization of the Philippians' non-Christian

neighbors makes the Christians feel? Defensive? Or evangelistic? Superior? Other?

2. Remember that not long ago, the people Paul is writing to would have been in that group. In your experience, how do people who have lost weight feel toward the obese?

The Grace-Filled Life among the Graceless

Paul's job is to form these new Christians in Philippi, and part of that formation is teaching them how to live in the real world. When push comes to shove, where does their loyalty belong? Some people have used the phrase "in the world but not of it" to characterize Paul's approach.

Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹ He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

1. What does Paul mean by "our citizenship is in heaven"? How do citizens in heaven live out our citizenship on earth?
2. Here Paul talks for the fifth time in Philippians about the life to come. ("the day of Christ" in 1.10-11; "to live is Christ and to die is gain" in 1.21-24; "on the day of Christ" in 2.16; "the resurrection from the dead" in 3.11.) Assurance of an afterlife with God/Christ was a part of his daily life. How often do you think about the coming glory? What impact do those thoughts have on your everyday life?

CLOSE – LEARNING FROM PAUL

Paul can be intimidating to the likes of us. He's intense and he focuses that intensity on the Gospel and faithful living – at least in the letters. We never get to see him in unguarded moments. In his letters he never speaks of leisure – never even hints at it. Did he ever take in a game or a concert or just relax for a minute?

If we can get past that, though, there's a whole lot with which we can connect. Here are a few morals from this story:

Seek and ye shall find!

When I imagine Saul the Pharisee, I imagine someone who thought he was climbing the right ladder, but found when he got to the top that it didn't lead to the truth he sought. After that experience, he put his ladder on another wall.

God honors and employs our individuality.

Paul's personality stays the same. His job changes. Saul's drive is still there in Paul. It is just aimed in a different direction.

One size does not fit all.

Experiences of God vary as widely as the people who have them. Paul understates his own experience – “I want to know Christ” in Philippians, “Christ appeared to me” in 1 Corinthians 15, “God revealed God's son to me” in Galatians. This understatement guards against conversion envy, which we might feel in the face of the pyrotechnic conversion the Book of Acts describes.

Seek Christ where he may be found.

In a way, Paul “saw Christ” in the death of Stephen. In the last week, where have you seen Christ in the life of someone around you?

The Secret to Joy

In chapters 1–2 Paul gives himself out for others and for the gospel. In chapter 3, Paul tells us what made that possible: Christ offered a righteousness that wasn't earned, but rather was by faith. Paul accepted that gift in faith. No longer did he have to strive to gain God's approval. Now God gave it to him before any work. Christ had given himself out for Paul. That gift paradoxically freed him to give himself out for others. Then came joy.

Bringing It Home – What's Your Takeaway?

1. What thing do you most hope to take from today's time with Paul, God, and Philippians 3?
2. Sometimes actions embed our insights in our lives. How do you plan to help your epiphany last?

PREPARATION FOR NEXT TIME:

1. Read Philippians 4.
2. When Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always!" in verse 4, he seems to think that joy is a choice we make. Do you agree?
3. What is the value of prayer for Paul (verses 6-7)
4. In verses 8-9, Paul tells the Philippians to direct their minds toward good things. An Exercise: Stop what you are doing, get rid of noise and distractions, and try to do that for five minutes. How'd it go?
5. Why do you imagine the Philippians gave money/supplies to Paul (verses 15-16)?

PAUL'S JOY HACKS

OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLES

PHILIPPIANS 4.1-23

OPEN – IT STARTED WITH A SQUABBLE

In its twenty-three verses, the fourth chapter of Philippians contains four Hall of Fame-caliber passages. That makes it prime real estate for the Navigators scripture memory system.

“Rejoice in the Lord always! And again I will say it: rejoice!” (4.4)

”Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (4.6-7)

“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (4.8-9)

“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (4.13)

These passages are beautiful! But their fame and attractiveness can ironically undermine their purpose in Paul’s letter, as we quote them for our daily use. Properly, the last movement of Paul’s letter begins with a crisis: Euodia and Syntyche, two female leaders in the Philippian Christian group, can’t get along. Paul here calls on the community to help these women, who “struggled alongside Paul in the work of the Gospel.” While we don’t know the nature of the conflict, Paul makes his famous command to rejoice in the Lord always with his next pen stroke after he describes it. That context matters for our work on joy. He commands joy amid the uncertainty and concern that division presents. But how can they sustain joy amid such a threat?

PART ONE: THE SETTING FOR PHILIPPIAN JOY

Joy does not depend on ease or comfort. Sociologists and social psychologists tell us that the happiest people in the world are not those experiencing the easiest or rosier circumstances. Here’s what the Philippians are going through, when Paul tells them to “rejoice in the Lord always!”

Pressure or Persecution from Outside

In this letter, we have seen that Paul is not the only one in duress. He is in prison, but his group of Christians in Philippi are facing their own version of hardship, which Paul describes as...

- “Intimidation” by “Opponents” (1.28)
- “Suffering” (1.29)
- “Struggle” (1.30)

Increasing Conflict within the Group

Paul strongly called the Philippians to unity in chapters 1 and 2:

“Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that...I will know that you are...”

- *standing firm in one spirit,*
- *striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.”*

Now we hear a specific live conflict in Philippi.

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. (Philippians 4.2)*

What impact do you imagine the conflict between Euodia and Syntyche is having on the Philippian Christian group?

What do you think Paul wants the Philippians to do to help these two women?

Have you ever experienced the conflict of two people who are important to you? How did it impact you? How did you respond?

PART TWO: TRANSFORMATION – PAUL’S WAYS IN HIS TIME

Into the midst of the Philippians’ circumstances, Paul inserts joy. He exhibits in himself and calls them to a sort of wellbeing that can’t be thwarted by hardship. In Paul’s time, people who encouraged others to change habits or develop new ones had specific methods that help us to understand Paul’s relationship with his Philippians.

Changing Habits in the Ancient World

When ancient philosophers set out to help their students to improve morally, they followed a prescribed pattern. This way of speaking they called *paraenesis*. One scholar has described its purpose like this: “Ancient *paraenesis* was not just exhortation, but something more specific, a speech act that was logically directed towards conduct, behavior, acts to be done, or avoided.” (Troels Engberg-Pederson, “The Concept of *Paraenesis*”)

The general pattern for *paraenesis* had four components:

1. Reminders of the Teacher’s Love and Care
2. The Presentation of Examples the Students Could Follow (e.g., Socrates)
3. Encouragement and Affirmation of the Student’s Progress
4. The Command Itself

Using these techniques, moral philosophers artfully moved their students from Point A to Point B in their growth

Paul’s Call to Tough Joy

Reminder of the Teacher’s Love and Care

Paul’s Constant Prayer for the Philippians

I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now...⁸For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

Paul’s Decision to Stay on and Labor for Their Good

*I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it.**

Presentation of Examples

Paul’s Example of Rejoicing in All Circumstances

In this short letter (104 verses) Paul uses the words “joy” and “rejoice” sixteen times (16) – a little more than once every seven verses – mostly to describe his own approach to life. He does this in spite of his current harsh experience of painful and discouraging circumstances.

Attitude in Prison

- *others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. ¹⁸What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice (1.18)*
- *But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you (2.17).*

Attitude When in Need

¹¹Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹²I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. (4.11-12)

Encouragement and Affirmation

Throughout the letter, Paul lavishes affirmation and praise on the Philippians' for their progress in Faith. These are especially pronounced at the beginning and end.

- Paul begins the letter by thanking God exuberantly for them and commending them at the same time (1.3-11)
- Paul ends the letter by thanking them again and praising their participation in his ministry from early days to the present (Paul 4.10-20)

Have you had teachers and coaches who used encouragement to help you change a habit or learn a new one?

The Command/Exhortation Itself

Paul's unlikely and thrice-repeated command

- *I am glad and rejoice with all of you— and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me. (2.17-18)*
- *Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. (3.1)*
- *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice! (4.4)*

PART THREE – THREE PRACTICES THAT ASSIST JOY

Paul must have known the degree of difficulty involved in cultivating a habit of joy in all circumstances. To help himself jump that high bar, he had learned three “tricks of the trade”: prayer, a focused direction of the mind, and practiced contentment. Finding the way that these three practices serve joy keeps this fourth chapter from being an unconnected all star team of commands – as if Paul were haphazardly throwing in the kitchen sink before closing. Instead, we should see this string of exhortations as a connected strategy to assist the central goal: joy.

Threat to Joy: Worry; Remedy: A Habit of Prayer

Anyone who seeks joy must do something about worry. Imagining that something bad happening wreaks havoc with the well-being joy would bring. Jesus addressed this in his Sermon on the Mount:

“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear...Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, but their heavenly father feeds them.” (Matthew 6.25-26)

Paul sends his Philippians to confident prayer and its outcome, joy’s cousin, peace.

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4.6-7)

Bringing It Home – Prayer as a Joy Hack

Have you tried praying about things you’re worried about? If yes, give an example.

Has praying brought peace?

If you have not tried praying over worrisome things, what has kept you from it?

Does Paul’s plan seem promising to you in your own struggle to maintain joy amid worries?

Threat to Joy: Fixating on Problems

Remedy: A Habit of Mindfulness

Bad news is the overwhelming majority of our media coverage. And in 2017 Americans read and watch news A LOT! Yet in our time, research continues to demonstrate that focusing on positive things produces healthier lives. A cottage industry has grown up around the discipline of focusing the mind – often called “mindfulness.” Some forms of this practice takes emphasize emptying or decluttering the mind. Paul here chooses another path, directing the Philippians’ (and our) minds toward good and noble objects.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4.8-9)

Bringing It Home – Mindfulness as a Joy Hack

First, as you face struggles that threaten your joy, does this practice of focussing sound helpful to you? Why yes? Or why no?

Second, does it sound doable? Take a moment right now to direct your mind toward something that is pure. Start the timer on your phone and linger on that pure thing as long as you can.

How was your experience?

How long did you last? Have you practiced this discipline? How would practice make it more helpful?

Threat: Financial Fear

Remedy: Contentment

Andrew Weil has written, “I think instead [of happiness] we should be working for contentment... an inner sense of fulfillment that's relatively independent of external circumstances.” In that sense, contentment and joy are close cousins.

Jesus’ words above confronted material worries: what to eat, what to drink, what to wear. He was talking to Galilean peasants, but material worries span the socio-economic continuum. After he has seemed to turn to a new topic, Paul gives us his third joy-producing practice: contentment. In the context of thanking the Philippians for their material gift, Paul writes:

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress. (Philippians 4.10-14)

Bringing It Home – Contentment as a Joy Hack

Financial concerns continue to rank among the top three stressors on survey after survey of the American people. Paul has learned to be content in all financial circumstances. That side-by-side would naturally commend Paul to us as we face our own financial pressures. His secret is being content.

Are you content? If you're not fully home on this, how would you imagine practicing contentment? How can we build these muscles?

Think for a moment to the last time you were anxious about financial or material matters? Now imagine the very worst possible outcome of that case. Is that something you could live with? Why or why not?

Paul attributes his contentment to God. How might God help us to be content?

CLOSE – THE SECRET ASSISTANT

Philippians 4.13 brings us to our closing thought. Moral philosophers of Paul's time believed that progress was up to the will power of the faithful person. Paul saw it otherwise. He believed that God had been working in the Philippians' lives from the beginning and would continue through to the end.

- *I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ (1.6).*
- *...for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (2.13)*
- *I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (4.13)*

How about us? Being commanded to rejoice, being told to pray, focus, and be content – these may seem like things you've tried and failed at before. But Paul tells us there is a

holy wind at our back. We ride that holy wind when we connect to the God who “began a good work” in us, who is “at work in us, enabling...”, who “strengthens us” to do things we never thought we could do – things like joy unsinkable.

Grace, peace and joy to you as you take Philippians into your life and out into your world!

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS (New Revised Standard Version)

1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus.

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.

3 I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart,* for all of you share in God's grace* with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

12 I want you to know, beloved,* that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, ¹³so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard* and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; ¹⁴and most of the brothers and sisters,* having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word* with greater boldness and without fear.

15 Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. ¹⁶These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; ¹⁷the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. ¹⁸What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will result in my deliverance. ²⁰It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. ²²If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. ²³I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; ²⁴but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. ²⁵Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, ²⁶so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

27 Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. ²⁹For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— ³⁰since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

2 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was* in Christ Jesus,

⁶who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

⁷but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸he humbled himself
and became obedient
to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name

that is above every name,

¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹and every tongue should confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God, the Father.

12 Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

14 Do all things without murmuring and arguing, ¹⁵so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. ¹⁶It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. ¹⁷But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you— ¹⁸and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.

19 I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news of you. ²⁰I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. ²¹All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. ²²But Timothy's* worth you know, how like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. ²³I hope therefore to send him as soon as I see how things go with me; ²⁴and I trust in the Lord that I will also come soon.

25 Still, I think it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus—my brother and co-worker and fellow-soldier, your messenger* and minister to my need; ²⁶for he has been longing for* all of you, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. ²⁷He was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one sorrow after another. ²⁸I am the more eager to send him, therefore, in order that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. ²⁹Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honor such people, ³⁰because he came close to death for the work of Christ,* risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me.

3 Finally, my brothers and sisters,* rejoice* in the Lord.

To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard.

2 Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!* ³For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God* and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh— ⁴even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of

Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ,* the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ* and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal;* but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved,* I do not consider that I have made it my own;* but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly* call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. ¹⁶Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.

¹⁷ Brothers and sisters,* join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. ¹⁹Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship* is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹He will transform the body of our humiliation* so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory,* by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

4 ¹Therefore, my brothers and sisters,* whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

² I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion,* help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, beloved,* whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if

there is anything worthy of praise, think about* these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

¹⁰ I rejoice* in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it.* ¹¹Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹²I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me. ¹⁴In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.

¹⁵ You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. ¹⁶For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. ¹⁷Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. ¹⁸I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. ¹⁹And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

²¹ Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The friends* who are with me greet you. ²²All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor's household.

²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*