

UNBROKEN JOY

THANKSGIVING

Philippians 1:1-8

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Paul is in prison. He is in Rome. He is chained to a guard, perhaps he is chained to two guards, one on each side. There in prison he has experienced not just a tremendous loss of freedom, but a loss of comfort. He is experiencing intrusion and no doubt tremendous insult. As he writes the book of Philippians, we are shocked to discover there is no trace of anger or bitterness, not even a hint of irritation. I have to confess I get irritable with one night of interrupted sleep, but the apostle Paul is in prison writing this letter and we are shocked at what we discover. We don't hear what we would expect. We don't hear a rebuke. We don't hear the apostle Paul coming and saying, "Listen, why haven't you done more to get me out? Why haven't you prayed more? Why haven't you done more of this or more of that?" We don't hear a rebuke. We don't hear self-pity. We don't hear him playing up the role of the victim, nor do we hear this incredible, elaborate scheme that is going to set him free from prison. Instead, shockingly what we hear is the theme of joy. And we have entitled this series "**Unbroken Joy**" because he speaks throughout this series about a joy that is lasting, abiding, pervasive, deep, sustained, unbroken, eternal.

Unbroken Joy: this is the theme of Philippians. The word "joy" appears in one form or another 20 times in four chapters. In a sense, the book of Philippians is a "how-to" manual on the subject of joy - how to experience, live in, walk in, and maintain true and lasting joy. Right here in this opening passage we hear it in verse 4. Paul is making his prayer to God for the Philippians *with joy*. This theme is seen again in chapter 4, verse 4: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." This letter pushes this theme like no other and does so in a manner where it rises above the

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circumstances of life, showing us that there is a joy that is available not based on what happens to us, but that resides within us.

It is not just imprisonment that Paul faces as a challenge. There is significant disunity in the church at Philippi. He is concerned for the church. One of their key leaders, Epaphroditus, has almost died twice. They are now beginning as a Roman colony to experience persecution as he is in prison and experiencing persecution. There is the attack of false teaching and false doctrine, which is threatening to undermine the gospel at work in their lives and in their church. In the midst of all this there explodes this theme of joy and Paul actually commands them to rejoice. When he commands them to rejoice and repeatedly does so, he quickly moves into instruction on how that should look and how it works, hence a manual for joy or unbroken joy.

We consider this at the outset: that to command joy challenges our presuppositions about the very topic, that we think of joy sometimes the way we think of love. We mistakenly think of love as something we fall into and fall out of, which really isn't a biblical position when it comes to love, nor is it when it comes to joy, as if completely outside of our control: we fall into joy and fall out of joy. But he is telling us that this is something we *will*. We *will* it; we *choose* it. We have something to do, as was expressed in the worship time. We have the example of David taking control of his soul, telling his soul, "Bless the Lord," telling himself what to think, what to feel, and what to say. We would have to maybe qualify that by saying that we tell ourselves what to think and the emotions, the feelings eventually will catch up to the direction the will chooses.

So this is our theme: **Unbroken Joy**. In Christ, there is joy which is without interruption. There is deep, abiding, Christ-exalting, Spirit-filled joy. There is answered prayer. There is relationship with God, deep, intimate, pure, fulfilling friendships and relationships with others. These are the strong elements and the themes that carry us throughout the book of Philippians.

As it happens, it is also a very practical letter, a very practical book in the New Testament. Often when Paul would write, he would separate his writing into two parts: a theological part and an application part; a doctrinal part, what we might call in the second part ethics, and there is a very distinct separation. Normally there would be great weight given to the theology: how to think, what to believe. Then very importantly, but building on that theology: how to live, how to walk, how to act.

Philippians has a different structure. Philippians weaves together these two elements: the element of theology and doctrine along with practice and application. The result is that the book is highly practical and relevant. It is also very personal. Paul is transparent as he writes the book of

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Philippians. He is very open about problems that people are having getting along and attacks that are coming against him personally and against the doctrine that he teaches. He is transparent, very transparent about his deep love for those he is writing to. Practical and personal, with the theme of joy.

As we get ready to really jump into the first part of this text, let me just talk for a moment about some general assumptions that Paul is working with. If you are interested in joy and experiencing joy, you need to know that the first thing that Paul assumes (he states it here) is that joy is found in Christ. He is writing to those who are in Christ and reminding them that joy is found in Christ. It is the result of grace. It comes as a gift. Jesus Christ offers his life for us to pay the penalty of our sin. In Christ, as a gift, there is the forgiveness of sin and there is joy. It is in Christ. That little phrase, that idea is found throughout all the writings of Paul and in the book of Philippians.

Another way of saying that same truth is that it is in the gospel, that the gospel is the message about Christ. It is a message of good news that is proclaimed that discloses who Christ is and what he has done. Through that message, through embracing this truth as the central truth in all the universe and in our lives, we are brought into relationship with God. We are transformed. Our relationships are transformed and we experience joy.

So the first thing is this: joy is found in Christ. It is found in the gospel. It is grace. It is God's gift.

The second assumption that is very clear for Paul here is that those who experience this joy in Christ are brought together in community that is called the church. So here we are. We are all together here today worshipping God, singing praises to his name, opening his word, hearing from the Lord, sharing life together. That is what's happening here in the book of Philippians, verses 1 and 2. "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus." Timothy is functioning as a secretary here. He is receiving Paul's dictation and writing down the letter of Philippians. "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers and deacons..." He addresses the leaders, the overseers, it would be another word for elders, the governing body of the church; the deacons, those who are serving, leading ministries; the leadership of the church to all the saints.

You may have grown up in a tradition, maybe in the Catholic tradition, where you have this understanding of saints being certain individuals who are elevated above other Christians. But the scriptural teaching very clearly is: all who are in Christ are called saints. They are made holy because of what Jesus Christ has done. Paul is addressing here the entire church at Philippi. We are just building some assumptions.

1. Joy is found in Christ.

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2. All those who are in Christ come together in community, share life in the church.
3. The third assumption is this: We are on a mission together.

We are on a mission together. There is joy in Christ. We are together and we are taking that joy to others. He calls them partners in the gospel. These three assumptions are underneath all that Paul writes in the book of Philippians. It is important to establish them because if you are here today and you are saying, "Listen, I really need joy and I want joy. I need to just tell you from the outset that it begins with Jesus Christ. It begins by coming in, to know Christ, and to receive the forgiveness that's in his name, to hear this good news and to understand that it is my sin that interrupts this joy and that life is found in Jesus Christ. As soon as that happens I am brought into a relationship with other wonderful people and we are on a mission together.

This last assumption that we mentioned is one of the most amazing things for me. It's good enough news to consider that God forgives me and gives me life and gives me peace and gives me joy, but the fact that he invites me to be a part of his mission, to be a blessing to other people is just outstanding.

That would have been a very good time to just say, "Amen" or "Brian, I'm awake, I'm alive." "Please don't stop."

Then what does Paul do? He begins with thanksgiving and prayer. Now, here's the danger. This is a pivotal moment in our study of scripture. This is the form that was kind of a Greek/Roman tradition and Paul adopts it. He does it in all his letters. It is influenced by his Jewish roots. He has made it his own, but it's kind of a standard way of communicating. There is a danger that you and I will really start Philippians in verse 12, that we will see all this as the normal introductions and we will try to move quickly past these 11 verses.

The reality is that these are critical. These are essential. I would suggest to you that we all too often assume and move past so as to ignore thanksgiving and prayer and that they form the very character of community and communication within the people of God. If they are not there, the foundations are not there. In fact, this is the place we *must* begin. When we understand that joy comes from God, that it begins with God, then we understand that we always begin with thanksgiving and prayer.

Those are bold statements, so I'm going to make them again and if they are true, they are *life-altering* for us. When we understand joy comes from God, it is found in Christ, then community and communication always begin with thanksgiving and prayer. This is the blocking and tackling of the

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Christian life, the ABC's, the meat and potatoes, the addition and subtraction, the debits, the credits, and yes - the rice and beans. To my Puerto Rican home group leader: This is the rice and beans of life! We live with gratitude overflowing! We are so crazy grateful for what God has done and what he has blessed us with. That ushers into this confidence in God and what God will do because of what God has done and what God has promised that it transforms relationship.

So we begin with thanksgiving, verses 3 through 8. Here's what I want you to grab ahold of in these five verses. Before we try to help people or change them, we must appreciate them. We must love them and express that love if we are ever going to influence them positively. **I'm just going to subdivide this first roman numeral: Thanksgiving into three parts: *Appreciation* (verses 3-5), *Assurance* (verse 6), *Affection* (verses 7-8). So you have *Appreciation* (verses 3-5), *Assurance* (verse 6), *Affection* (verse 8). We will be doing well to get through that portion this morning.**

Appreciation. Do you remember in the book of Acts when Paul goes to Philippi he has a vision, the man from Macedonia? The door is shut for him evangelizing in Asia and he goes to Europe instead. This is an amazing truth because the reality is, if that doesn't happen and you are European and you are sitting here in the west worshipping God, you might not be here right now in this moment. This was God's choice of you. So Paul comes into Philippi and his first convert in Europe is a woman named Lydia. This is the amazing mercy of God, that a woman who in that day would have had very few rights and privileges, who would have been taken for granted, assumed, is the first convert in all of Europe. There is no synagogue that we know of in Philippi, which would have been Paul's normal practice to go to the synagogue. So, he goes to a place of prayer, goes down to the river, and he meets there Lydia. The scripture tells us that God opened her heart to hear the truth. She becomes a Christ follower and all her family. She is a seller of purple. She may have had some money and may have played a key role in terms of the practical needs of that little early church.

So then the scene in Acts 16 moves from there to another woman, another woman of even greater insignificance. She is a slave girl and she has this ability to tell the future. She is owned and through demonic activity predicts people's future. She is following Paul and his team around and yelling out, "These men are servants of the Most High God. Paul finally loses his patience one day and just delivers her. Scripture says he gets annoyed and he sets her free. This sets off a scene. The owners are livid. Their means of gain is gone. You see, these are gospel pictures. Here is a woman who is enduring horrific torment, being exploited by her masters, and the Master of the universe sets her free. For that, Paul and his companions are dragged off to the marketplace. They are stripped of their clothes. They are beaten with rods and they are put in prison. This is Missions

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101. There they are in prison, and do you remember what they did? They sang hymns. They started praising God. There at midnight there is an earthquake. The doors are open. The shackles fall off. The Philippian jailor is ready to take his life because if the prisoners go free his fate is sealed. Right when he is ready to take his life, Paul stops him and says, "No, we're all here. Don't do that." Then there's this famous verse, this great question. The Philippian jailor says, "What must I do to be saved?" The Philippian jailor is saved, he and his household.

Paul writes to these people, "I am so thankful for you!" You see, when someone's conversion comes with beating with rods and being publicly stripped and imprisoned, when our lives are knit together and we are all partakers of grace, and we all are just so messed up and then we drink in the mercy and the forgiveness of God together, and then God uses us to help someone else, there is this gratitude that overflows. We are on mission together. This is Paul's story. The Philippian church helps him. They had just sent him money. They were providing for his needs while he was in prison. They are partnering together.

When I was in seminary and single 30 years ago, I met my wife to be and we went to a church together. This church was exploding in growth. We were in a home group and my brother was in this home group. We were experiencing church life together. Then my brother and I took a summer to go to Europe, to backpack through Europe. We tried to do Europe on \$10 a day, that's how long ago it was. We came back from Europe and our entire home group surprised us and showed up at the airport. Like I said, this was back in the dark ages and you could actually get to the gate, that's how long ago it was. Our whole group was there holding up signs. We were doing life together, celebrating the grace of God. My wife was not willing to be one of the crowd, so she literally walked all the way down the runway, the gateway, the gangway (What do you call that?...the jetway) and came onto the plane to welcome me home. Yeah - it was so sweet. We were partners together. It was a sweet, wonderful time.

As the church was being built Paul is not for a moment taking this for granted. Friends, we teach our kids to say "thank you." We have probably literally beaten this into them. And they say "thank you" all the time. I don't know how often they are thankful, but they say it. I've always been amazed, particularly when two of my sons sit down for a meal, they are always effusive in their thanks and their appreciation. When appreciation is really in our being, it transforms relationships. We are so tempted to take people for granted. We so quickly move past one trial, one imprisonment, one beating onto the next thing, onto the next triumph, onto the next conquest. We are about to shipwreck financially and God delivers us and immediately we move on and we are asking for something new, something next, something more. Paul is full of gratitude. He sees his partners as the work of God's grace. *Appreciation.*

Then verse 6, because they are the work of God, God is at work in them, Paul is full of assurance. He is full of confidence and he says as much. He says, "...I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

Now think about this. You are the Apostle Paul. You've got disunity in the church at Philippi. You've got false doctrine trying to seep in. In the midst of it, you are really concerned because they are experiencing persecution and some trial and you are thinking, "Where do I begin?" He begins by expressing his love, his affection, his assurance for them and reassures them of his absolute confidence. How many of us in this moment, how many of us would not begin with guilt, with rebuff, with "I'm so disappointed in you," "what have you done?" "you are going to turn out to nothing," "you are going to undo all that I've done?" How many of us would try to motivate through fear, guilt, condemnation? Not Paul. He does this not as some psychological trick. He does it because he has true confidence that comes only when you know joy is the work of God. These friends are the work of God. It is God's grace that has brought us this far. It is God's grace that will carry us home. "I am confident that God will complete what he began in you." There is evidence of God's work, evidence of the gospel taking hold. Therefore I'm encouraged. Therefore I am confident. Therefore I have *assurance*.

Appreciation, assurance, and finally affection, verses 7 and 8. He basically says to them, "I love you deeply. It is right for me to feel this way about you because I hold you in my heart. You are all partakers of grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense of the gospel. We are together in this. I love you. I am expressing that love to you. To parents, I would say to you it is so important, so critical for you to express affection verbally and physically in appropriate and healthy ways. It connects us on the heart level and Paul bares it here before them, expressing to them with an oath his deep love and affection for them.

Now consider this for just a moment. He is Godward in his orientation. He speaks to God first, then he speaks to them. He expresses appreciation to God. He sees them as the work of God, and then his first communication to them is about what he has spoken to God about them. There is a sense in which the presence of God envelops this entire communication. If you have ever read Augustine's Confessions, it is a classic. Augustine writes his testimony, but the entire testimony is written to God. As you read it, there is a sense of standing before the Lord as he talks to God about how God transformed his life.

For many, many years I have journaled and it has been very helpful to me personally. When I began journaling, it helped me to express my thoughts directly to God, so that 95% of what I write in that journal is expressed to the Lord himself. Talk to God first. This fills us with gratitude, with affection,

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with assurance about what he is doing in the lives of others. As you begin talking to God, begin with praise and thanksgiving. Because herein we begin to experience the presence of God. As we become more God-focused ourselves, rehearsing, celebrating what he has done, who he is, giving thanks for others, those that we want to pray for, acknowledging to God we see his work in their lives.

Friends, this will transform your marriage. If you start with God, “God, I want to thank you for my wife, I want to thank you for the incredible way that she loves you and serves our family. I see you actually bringing growth in this area of her life. I want to express to you, Lord, that I absolutely know you will not fail to continue what you started.” Start there instead of where Adam starts, “God, it’s the woman you gave me,” instead of a constant tone of accusation and condemnation – yes. When we bare our souls to God we will say, “God, would you open her eyes to see that I’m right.” Understandable prayer and good to bare your soul before the Lord, but start with praise and thanksgiving and begin to experience the presence of God, so that from your heart you can sincerely, deeply, not superficially express appreciation, assurance and affection to those that you love.

If you are married and you have trouble in this area, you have trouble praying with others, you have trouble praying with your wife or you have trouble praying with your children or with your husband if you are the wife, or you have trouble praying with friends and people that you are close to, if you are single and you are longing for deeper friendships where the Lord is at the center, Paul models for you something beautiful. Begin praying for those individuals on your own with a focus of praise to God and thanksgiving for them, move into the prayer part – the asking – but then when you are together it is a very simple step just to give thanks. The easiest kind of prayer for us to engage in with others is the prayer of thanksgiving, just to voice to God what we are grateful for. Start at a meal then let that flow over into other areas.

We are going to stop here at verse 8. If you want to hear the substance of the prayer, you have to come back next week, where we will talk about the intelligent, deep, discerning prayer that Paul offers in light of the themes that form the book of Philippians.

Now I’m going to ask the worship team to come up here and as they do, I’m going to ask you to prepare your heart to respond to God’s word.