Paul’s Joy in Prayer - Philippians 1:3-6

I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ;

A popular test for depression rates people on a scale of one to ten. The higher the score, the more severe the depression. If the apostle Paul had taken such a test, he doubtless would have scored a zero, because his joy was complete and irrepressible. Like the writer of Psalms 42 and 43, he knew how to overcome depression, anxiety, and worry (cf. Pss. 42:5, 11; 43:5).

Yet Paul's circumstances at the time he wrote this letter were dire. He was imprisoned in Rome, possibly facing execution. He was under house arrest (Acts 28:23, 30), chained to a Roman soldier (Acts 28:16) to prevent any possibility of escape. Paul languished there; unable to do the work he loved, while others, taking advantage of his situation, preached the gospel out of contention and strife (1:15-17). Others took advantage to import new and worthless philosophies into the church, mingling them with the Gospel. Nevertheless, his heart overflowed with joy (1:18). If anything, those horrendous circumstances made Paul's joy all the greater, because he trusted the sovereign purpose of his Lord and turned even more to Him for strength and comfort.

True joy is an unwavering constant in a Spirit-filled life (cf. Rom. 14:17), not a transient emotional feeling that comes and goes depending on circumstances. Because Paul was constantly near to God, he was constantly joyful. He experienced the inexpressible peace (4:7) and contentment (4:11) provided by the Holy Spirit deep within his heart and soul because he had a conscience that was clear of offense against God (Acts 23:1; 24:16; 2 Cor. 1:12; 2 Tim. 1:3).

The Philippian church was not perfect. But in contrast to most of the other churches with which Paul was associated, they had no major moral or spiritual problems. He urged them, "Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel" (1:27).

A few verses later he exhorted the Philippians, "Make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (2:2-4).

Later he commanded them to "do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world" (2:14-15).

In chapter 4 he urged Euodia and Syntyche, who obviously had an unresolved point of contention, "to live in harmony in the Lord" (v. 2), and he encouraged the entire church to "be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (v. 6). But those admonitions are more a form of encouragement than a rebuke.

As Paul thought about this beloved congregation to whom he was writing, his joy overflowed. He was not thinking so much about his own circumstances as about their faithfulness (1:3-5),
- not so much about his own afflictions as about their love (2:1-2),
- not so much about his own physical suffering as about their spiritual steadfastness (2:12-16).
- He was thinking about their selfless generosity in sending him financial support (4:14-16).
- He was thinking about their "progress and joy in the faith" (1:25),
- about his "beloved brethren whom [he longed] to see, [his] joy and crown" (4:1). He could therefore say with utter sincerity, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you" (1:3).
In 1:3-8 the apostle gives five specific elements of his Spirit-given joy as it related to other believers. He focuses on the joys of recollection (v. 3), of intercession (v. 4), of participation (v. 5), of anticipation (v. 6), and of affection (vv. 7-8).

The Joy of Recollection - *I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, (1:3)*

Thank is from *eucharisteō*, from which the English word "Eucharist," a name often used of the Lord's Supper, derives. In that ordinance believers give thanks to God in remembrance of Christ's substitutionary sacrifice on the cross. In this instance Paul gives thanks for his spiritual brothers and sisters in Philippi who, over the years, had brought him such abundant blessing and joy.

The phrase *my God* reflects Paul's deep intimacy and communion with the Lord, to whom he belonged and whom he served (Acts 27:23). His thankfulness for the Philippians was to God, emphasizing both that the Lord is the ultimate source of all joy and that it was the Philippians' relationship to Him through Christ that caused Paul to thank... God.

Paul expressed similar thanksgivings for the believers in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:4), in Colossae (Col. 1:3), and in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 1:2; cf. 2:13), and for his beloved coworkers Timothy (2 Tim. 1:3) and Philemon (Philem. 4).

Paul's remembrance of the Philippians began with his second missionary journey, when the apostle first came to Philippi. He was specifically directed by the Holy Spirit to go to Macedonia (the province in which Philippi was located) rather than Bithynia, as he and Silas had intended (Acts 16:7-10).

On the Sabbath they went outside the city to the riverside, where they expected to find Jewish worshipers. (Evidently there were not enough Jewish men in Philippi to form a synagogue.) The only ones present were a group of women at prayer.

One of the women, Lydia, was "a worshiper of God," that is, a Gentile proselyte to Judaism. The Lord opened her heart to Christ. When she heard the gospel, she was baptized with her newly believing household, and she prevailed on Paul and those with him to be her guests (Acts 16:13-15).

Lydia and her household were the first Christian converts in Europe and became the nucleus of that continent's first church. The generosity and hospitality they exhibited characterized that congregation for years to come.

Surely in Paul's remembrance was the young demon-possessed slave girl in Philippi who brought her owners considerable wealth from her fortune telling. She dogged the apostle and his companions for many days and "kept crying out, saying, 'These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation.'" Becoming "greatly annoyed, [Paul] turned and said to the spirit, 'I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!' And it came out at that very moment" (Acts 16:16-18). Although Luke does not report it specifically, it seems probable that, like Lydia, she was born again and became a sister in Christ whom Paul now fondly remembered.

Paul also would have remembered the time he spent in jail in Philippi because of the slave girl's owners, who lost a great source of income and incited the townspeople against him and Silas (Acts 16:19-23). Not only did the Lord give Paul and Silas peace and joy despite their chains and literally put songs in their hearts (Acts 16:25), but He also used their imprisonment to bring the jailer and his household to salvation (Acts 16:26-34).

On the way out of the city after being released from prison, Paul and Silas went to Lydia's house for a last time and were encouraged by the many believers there who came to see them off (Acts 16:40).

Paul must have often remembered that, after he left Macedonia, the Philippian church was the only one that helped him financially (Phil. 4:15-16). Those devoted believers continued their generosity by contributing toward the collection Paul made for the needy believers in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8:1-5).

Having a genuine desire to remember and focus on the goodness, kindness, and successes of others does not involve denying their weaknesses and shortcomings but rather looking past them. The Holy Spirit prompts believers to appreciate others' love, generosity, and compassion and to forget the rest (cf. 4:8; 1 Cor. 13:4-7).
On the other hand, a person who constantly focuses on the negatives, faults, shortcomings, and slights of others is a person not controlled by the Holy Spirit, and is perhaps an unbeliever. Bitterness, resentment, a critical spirit, holding grudges, and the like are works of the flesh, not of the Spirit.

Much of Paul's joy was based on the pleasant, loving recollections of believers who, like those in Philippi, were consistently faithful to the Lord, to their fellow believers, and to him.

The Joy of Intercession - always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, (1:4)

Another indispensable element of joy for believers is interceding before God on behalf of others. Those who are obedient to the Holy Spirit will delight in the privilege of intercessory prayer. Faithful and sincere intercession is much more than an obligation; it is a joy.

Faithful intercessors are more preoccupied with the needs and welfare of others than their own and ask God to pour out His divine blessing on them.

An infallible test of godly joy is the degree to which a believer prays more earnestly for the benefit and blessing of others than for his own.

The noun deësis (prayer), used twice in this verse, has the basic meaning of “a request, entreaty, or supplication” and, in the New Testament, is always addressed to God (cf. Luke 1:13; 5:33; Rom. 10:1; 2 Cor. 1:11; Heb. 5:7; James 5:16; 1 Peter 3:12).

As the apostle explains later in this chapter (vv. 12-21), he was at this time experiencing some of the most difficult and painful times of his ministry. Not only was he in prison, but, even more painful to him, he also was being maligned by fellow teachers and preachers who intended "to cause [him] distress in [his] imprisonment" (v. 17). Although he obviously was not unaware of or unconcerned about that unjust and hateful behavior, he was determined not to allow it to diminish his joy. Instead, Paul was grateful "that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice" (v. 18).

Intercessory prayer sometimes involves disappointment and pain. Later in this letter he counseled the Philippians, "Join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things" (3:17-19).

Those false believers not only were uncharitable in the extreme but also were shamelessly worldly. They were "enemies of the cross of Christ." Their false teaching and immoral living seriously threatened the church, and that tragic state of affairs brought pain to the apostle.

Paul reminded the church at Corinth that "out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you" (2 Cor. 2:4; cf. 11:29).

But Paul's prayers for the Philippians were offered with great appreciation, thankfulness, and joy. Neither the unbelieving false teachers, such as those just mentioned, nor squabbling believers, such as Euodia and Syntyche (4:2), could rob Paul of his joyful remembrance of this cherished congregation. After beseeching Clement and an unnamed elder at Philippi to help reconcile those two women, he exults, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!" (4:3-4).

Like Paul, believers who possess God-given joy do not focus on themselves, even in the midst of pain or difficult circumstances. They are rather concerned about their fellow believers' pain, difficult circumstances, hardships, failures, and sorrows, and they earnestly intercede for them. They joyfully pray for God to bless their fellow believers in every way, above all for their spiritual welfare. Later in this letter Paul expresses this personal trait in an admonition: "Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (2:4).

It seems that throughout most of the history of the church only a minority of Christians have known the true, full joy that God gives to His obedient children. Lack of joy reveals itself in three ways: in negative thoughts and talk about others, in a lack of concern for their welfare, and in the failure to
intercede on their behalf. Joyless believers are self-centered, selfish, proud, and often vengeful, and their self-centeredness inevitably manifests itself in prayerlessness.

The Joy of Participation - for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now. (1:5)

A third element of God-given joy is participation. Koinōnia is commonly rendered "fellowship," or "communion," and has the root meaning of sharing something in common. It is used in several places of sharing possessions or money.

Using the verb form, Paul declares that faithful believers should practice "contributing to the needs of the saints" (Rom. 12:13); and later in the letter he uses the noun form in speaking of "a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem" (Rom. 15:26; cf. 2 Cor. 8:4, where koinōnia is rendered "participation"; 9:13). In 1 Timothy 6:18 the adjectival form is rendered "ready to share," and in Hebrews 13:16 the noun is translated "sharing."

In the broadest sense, Paul rejoiced that the Philippians were saved and thus partners with him in the spread of the gospel. That participation included their generous financial support of him. Later in this letter he reminded them: "You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs" (4:15-16).

By far the most important thing all believers share is their spiritual oneness, their participation in the gospel of Jesus Christ. "God is faithful," Paul explained, "through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1:9).

Fellowship includes cooperation in the preaching of the good news of salvation to those who have never heard it, so that the spiritual fellowship might be enlarged and bring still greater glory to God (cf. 2 Cor. 4:15). In this context the phrase “in the gospel” refers to the whole enterprise of gospel ministry, especially that of evangelism.

So Paul here commends the Philippians for their faithful and enduring partnership with him in this supreme endeavor.


The justifying grace of the Son, the electing love of the Father, and the sanctifying fellowship of the Holy Spirit are inextricably coalesced in the partnership of the saints, a vast spiritual brotherhood that includes every person who has saving faith in Jesus Christ. Such fellowship was a great source of joy for Paul, as it is for all Christians who find strength, encouragement, support, comfort, and help through their fellowship with other believers.

A Christian who willingly forsakes fellowship with other believers will inevitably be without genuine, Spirit-given joy. It is impossible to live faithfully or happily apart from fellow believers in Christ. But the believer who regularly is in the company of fellow saints, fulfilling the responsibilities that such fellowship requires and provides, will just as inevitably be filled with divine joy. To be in the company of those who are joint heirs with Christ, people who love, care for, understand, pray for and with each other, who minister and fight the good fight together, is to be assured of abundant and abiding joy.

That is the joy Paul expressed here in regard to the Philippian believers. They had faithfully served with him in their church, proclaimed the gospel with him, worshiped and prayed with him, and defended the faith with him. They had abundantly shared their material resources with him over and over again. They had tirelessly and selflessly been in partnership with him from the first day until now, over a period of several years.

The Joy of Anticipation - being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. (1:6)
A fourth element of joy is anticipation. Nothing can encourage a Christian so much as the knowledge that, despite life's uncertainties and difficulties, and no matter how many spiritual defeats there may be along the way, one day he will be made perfect.

Confident translates peithō, which here means "to be persuaded of and have confidence in." Paul's confidence was much more than human hope; it was the absolute confidence that comes from knowing and believing God's promise that He [God] who began a good work in him will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. Salvation is wholly God's work, and for that reason its completion is as certain as if it were already accomplished.

Began is from enarchomai, a compound verb meaning "to begin in." It is used only twice in the New Testament, both times in reference to salvation. Paul rebuked certain believers in the Galatian churches who believed that they could finish in their own power what God had divinely begun in their lives solely by the power of His Holy Spirit. "Are you so foolish?" he asked rhetorically. "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Gal. 3:3).

In the present text the apostle, in effect, responds to that same question, assuring the Philippians that their salvation is solely a gracious work of God. God requires faith for salvation, but faith is not a meritorious work. Salvation is by the power of God in response to faith; and, as already noted, faith itself is God's work, divinely initiated and divinely accomplished (Eph. 2:8-9).

As noted earlier, salvation is solely by God's grace. God "chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him" (Eph. 1:4). God chose all believers before time, long before they could possibly choose Him; and apart from His choice of them, they could not choose Him (John 6:44). It has always been true, in every age and circumstance, that only "as many as had been appointed to eternal life [have] believed" (Acts 13:48). Paul clearly expressed that truth in Romans 5:8-10: God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

Later in that epistle Paul gave a parallel to Philippians 1:6, noting that "those whom [God] foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified" (Rom. 8:29-30). All the chosen will be glorified. God will finish what He has begun.

It is the Lord who begins the work of salvation, and it is the Lord, through His Holy Spirit, who will perfect it. To the Galatians Paul wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Gal. 2:20). Epiteleō (to perfect) is a compound, formed by the preposition epi and the verb teleō ("to complete") to give the intensified meaning of "fully completed."

Paul was absolutely certain that God will fully complete His work of salvation in the Philippians. There is no possibility of failure or of partial fulfillment.

An eschatological expression, the day of Christ Jesus, clearly refers to the time when believers will be glorified, when their salvation will be completed and made perfect (1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:10).

It is the same as "the day of Christ" that Paul mentions several times later in Philippians, the day for which Christians should be prepared by living sincerely and blamelessly (1:10) and by "holding fast the word of life" (2:16).

When God saves, He saves completely and eternally. In promissory covenant terms, to be justified is to be sanctified and glorified. There is no such thing as experiencing one of those aspects of salvation without the other two. Each is an integral and necessary part of the whole continuum of salvation.

For God to begin salvation in a person's life is an irrevocable guarantee of His completing it. As William Hendriksen has observed, "God... is not like men. Men conduct experiments, but God carries out a plan. God never does anything by halves."
It is easy for believers to become discouraged when they focus on their problems and imperfections (and those of other believers). Those sins should not be ignored or minimized; but neither should they be allowed to overshadow the marvelous reality of the future perfection of the church and of every individual believer, as God's Word guarantees so frequently and clearly. Remembering that glorious truth removes the debilitating pressure of doubt and fosters triumphant joy, gratitude, and anticipation. In so doing, it also frees God's people to live more abundantly and fruitfully.