

FINDING JOY IN PRAYER **(Philippians 1:3-8)**

I have several books in my library that have been acquired through the years that were written by a man who is now 86-years-old. He is still pastoring and preaching and writing. His name is Charles Swindoll. Back in 1992, when he was 58, he published the book, *Laugh Again: Experience Outrageous Joy*. His book is based on the NT letter of Philippians. In the first chapter, he tells about receiving a letter from a woman who attended a conference at which he spoke. In her letter she wrote:

After your talk last night, I was enjoying some relaxed moments with friends I met here. I told them I got married at age 31. I didn't worry about not getting married; I left my future in God's hands. But I must tell you, every night I hung a pair of men's pants on my bed and knelt down to pray this prayer:

Father in heaven, hear my prayer,
And grant it if you can;
I've hung a pair of trousers here,
Please fill them with a man.

The next Sunday, Swindoll read the woman's letter to his congregation. Most everyone laughed. Swindoll happened to notice the reactions of a father and his teenaged son who were sitting together. The father laughed out loud while the son seemed preoccupied. The mother had stayed home to tend to a sick daughter. Swindoll reported that a couple of weeks later, he received a note from that mother:

Dear Chuck:

I am wondering if I should be worried about something. It has to do with our son. For the last two weeks I have noticed that before our son turns the light out and goes to sleep at night, he hangs a woman's bikini over the foot of his bed . . . Should I be worried about this?

We are joyful when God answers our prayer. According to Paul, however, we can also experience joy as we pray.

The NT deals often with the subject of joy. The words *joy* and *rejoice* show about 60 times each and are found in 21 of the 27 books of the NT.

I fear, however, that we are more familiar with reading about joy than we are about actually experiencing joy. Many people experience a remarkable lack of joy. For them, the Christian life is about duty, responsibility, and adherence to a set of rules, most of which are man-made, by the way. If you insist on being a rule-follower, let me offer up a couple of God-given commands:

- We are told in 1 Thessalonians 5:16, "Rejoice always."
- We are commanded in Philippians 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will

say, rejoice.”

If you are not experiencing joy as a believer, you are being disobedient, and your life is a contradiction to what God wants for you.

Most people view prayer as a chore. It is time-consuming. It is difficult. It requires an investment of energy, and if no one is standing over them making them pray, they will pray very little.

Just as Paul prayed with joy, you and I can, too. Let’s read Philippians 1:3-8 as we consider, “Finding Joy in Prayer.”

Joyful Prayer is Found in a Shared History.

Have you ever noticed that it is easier to pray for someone you know than someone you don’t know? Just being honest, I have a hard time praying for people I have never met and know nothing about.

This past week, Tiger Woods, the golfer, had a terrible car accident and suffered severe injuries to his legs. He underwent emergency surgery, and while his injuries were not life-threatening, he is facing months and months of rehabilitation. I have never met Tiger Woods, but I’ve seen him on TV. I have read about him. I am familiar with him; so, it is easier for me to pray for him rather than someone of whom I know nothing.

If my son or daughter or a family member were in an accident, I wouldn’t have to be encouraged to pray for that person. I would do so urgently and often.

Question: When is a good time to pray for someone?

Answer: Whenever you think about that person. Whenever a person comes to mind is a good time to pray for him or her.

Look at v. 3. Whenever Paul thought about his friends in Philippi and the church there, he thanked God for them. Ten to twelve years had passed between the time Paul was in Philippi and the writing of this letter. We know that Paul founded the church in Philippi on his second missionary journey. He may have stopped there on his third missionary journey, but is in no recorded. We know that he was in the area—Macedonia—where Philippi is located. Regardless, Paul knew people there by name. He led some to the Lord. He had met their family members. He was grateful for what God had done among them.

When people come to mind, think about what God has done in them, and for them, and through them. That will give you an occasion to thank God.

Through the years, I pastored four Southern Baptist churches before becoming your pastor. Each church was very different from the other, but I have fond memories of each. When I think of Paradise Baptist Church that was out in the country, three miles from blacktop, I think of Sammy and Bruce. Bruce was an officer in the Stillwater Police Department, and Sammy later served as a deputy with the Payne County Sheriff’s Department. Both men came forward on two consecutive Sunday mornings to give their lives to Christ. I baptized both men in the swimming pool at John and Carolyn Moorman’s house.

When I think of the five-years I was the pastor of Lake Center Baptist Church, I think

of Woody. He came to Christ when he was over 80. I got to baptize him the same Sunday I baptized a boy who was about 10. I also thank God that Earl came to know the Lord. He was in his late 40's or 50's. I think of Don, a retired man, who came to Christ.

When I think of the FBC of Hinton, I thank God that we reversed a ten-year downward trend in attendance. Before I left that church, we raised the money needed to build a youth center. We bought property across the street from the church and moved off two old houses to make room for the youth building. The new pastor got to oversee the building of that center without having to worry about paying for it. Some years later, the church bought property across another street, and they built a big, new sanctuary. Today, the church is much stronger than when I left. I think of men with whom I worked: Dave, Michael, Steve, and young men who are now adults and serving the Lord—Corey, Rob, and Cody.

When I think of FBC, Stillwater, I thank God for our ministry to international students. I think of two Chinese students, a man and a woman. Neither of the two had ever been in a church until they came to the U.S. One of the two had never heard the name of Jesus while living in China. While in Stillwater, they trusted Christ as Savior and Lord, and I had the privilege of baptizing both.

Who has God put into your life, maybe you haven't seen that person in years, but when you think of them, you thank the Lord?

Paul not only thank God for what He had done for these people, He also thanked God for what these people had done for him. Look at v. 5. The word that is translated *partnership* in this verse shows up 19 times in the NT. It is used by Paul 13 of those times. It is often translated as fellowship. It means, "to have something in common." The thing that Paul and the believers in Philippi had in common is that they worked together in the cause of the gospel.

In many churches today, the people of the church hire a pastor to preach for them, and teach for them, and visit for them, and they pay the bills. I suppose that is a partnership of sorts, but that is not the kind of partnership the Bible truly promotes. Turn backward to Ephesians 4:11-12. The NT teaches that my job is to teach and equip you to do the work of ministry, not to do it all by myself.

I don't know all the people that you know. I don't travel in all the circles in which you travel. I don't rub elbows with all the people with whom you rub elbows. That means I can't reach the people you can reach. God means, instead, for you to reach them and minister to them. As we each take responsibility for reaching out to those God has placed in our lives, we are partnering together for the spread of the gospel.

Let's look at a second place where joyful prayer is found.

Joyful Prayer is Found in a Supreme Confidence

Look at v. 6. Don't you like that word *sure*? Paul didn't write *maybe*, or *possibly*, or *hopefully*. Paul wrote with certainty. What did Paul know to be the case? Paul knew that God finishes what He starts.

That is not the case with us. Do you have any books that you started to read, but then

lost interest in and gave up on? Do you have any projects you started, but then somewhere along the way, you lost your motivation, and you haven't gotten back to them?

We don't always finish what we start, but God does. What is the good work that God began in you? I want you to look at Romans 8:29-30. If you didn't bring a Bible, each pew has a couple of Bibles. Find one, or scooch over to your neighbor and look at his or her Bible. This is one time that social distancing has to be ignored. You need to see this in black and white. God's good work and goal for you is that you be conformed to the image of His Son. God wants you to be like Jesus. He wants you to think like Jesus, and act like Jesus, and speak like Jesus. God wants you to resemble His Son.

Many people say that my son looks like me. When people see me, I want them to say, "You sure look like Jesus." That may not be the case right now, but God is still working, and He isn't going to give up until the job is complete.

A sculptor was once asked, "How can you take a block of marble and make it look like an angel?"

He answered, "It's easy. I just chisel away everything those doesn't look like an angel."

God is chiseling away everything in your life that doesn't resemble Jesus. That isn't always fun because often that chisel hurts and bites. We get kind of fond of our sin and our habits, but God comes along and places His chisel in just that one place we been trying to protect and hold on to, and with one strike of His hammer or several, He removes it. It may not be fun, but it is necessary.

Listen to what C.S. Lewis wrote:

I suggest to you that it is because God loves us that He gives us the gift of suffering. Pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world. You see, we are like blocks of stone out of which the Sculptor carves the forms of men. [I would change that to read, "the form of Jesus"]. The blows of His chisel, which hurt us so much are what makes us perfect.

When will the Jesus inside of you be completely freed from the block of marble holding it captive, so to speak? Look at the end of v. 6. God "will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." What is His day? It is His return. When Jesus comes back, the work God has been doing will be completed. The day of Jesus' return is the Day of Resurrection. When we are given a resurrection body, we will be like Jesus. Sin will be completely removed. It will no longer hold any power over us. It will have no place in heaven.

It has often been noted that salvation is a three-fold process. There is a past tense, present tense, and future tense aspect regarding salvation. These go by the names: justification, sanctification, and glorification. When you trusted Jesus as Savior and Lord, you were justified. As you grow in your relationship with Jesus, you are being sanctified. When Jesus comes back you will be glorified. At the moment you were justified, you were freed from the penalty of sin. As you are being sanctified, you are being freed from the power of sin. When you are glorified, you will be freed from the presence of sin.

Has God started the work of salvation in your life? If so, you can rest assured that He will complete it. That should give you confidence and joy as you pray for yourselves and others in whom God has started this good work.

We come to the third location of joyful prayer.

Joyful Prayer is Found in a Strong Affection

Let's read vv. 7-8. Notice the word *feel* in v. 7. That word is found 26 times in the NT, and Paul used it in 23 of those times. Ten of those times are in Philippians. It is a word that encompasses feelings, thoughts, and emotions.

It is not entirely clear how to translate v. 7. There are no personal pronouns in the text that tell us exactly whose heart is being referred to. Most translations render the verse to say that Paul had the Philippians in his heart. Some translations, however, say that the Philippians had Paul in their heart. Either way, it is clear that Paul had deep feelings for the believers in Philippi, and they felt the same way about Paul. That is evidenced by the fact that they had repeatedly supplied Paul with financial assistance.

Verse 7 goes on to say that just as they were partners in the gospel, they were also co-recipients of God's grace. The one thing that should unify us is the realization that we who trust in Jesus have all been shown grace by God. We may speak different languages, have different backgrounds, and even worship in different ways, but we are unified by the fact that we all needed and we all received God's grace.

You and I need as much grace to get to heaven as the bum on skid row and the drug addict who is homeless.

James Montgomery Boice tells a moving story about something that happened at a world evangelism conference in Germany many years ago—1966 to be exact. There were many nationalities present at the conference.

One night two Auca Indians from Ecuador were giving their testimony. These two men along with others had brutally killed five missionaries. They spoke in their own language, but as their testimony was translated, those in the auditorium were thrilled by what they heard. They told of how their whole lives they were held captive by superstition. They feared the gods of the jungle. They were part of a violent tribe who always warred against other tribes. They had killed those missionaries because of their ignorance. Later, they heard the gospel, how they could be saved from their sin by Jesus. They believed the message. Now, they wanted to share this good news with the tribes who lived downriver from them.

Suddenly, as they were speaking a man from Africa came running down the aisle. This African pastor bore many cuts and marks on his face. His face had been tattooed and colored by primitive dyes. When he reached the men, he threw his arms around them as tears ran down his face. What had taken place in the lives of the Auca Indians had taken place in his. These men were from different cultures, spoke different languages, lived four thousand miles away from one another on different continents, but they had each received the matchless grace of God.

In this world, there are many ethnicities, but there is only one race—the human race.

In this one race, there is only one division that truly matters. We are divided between those who have received God's grace and those who have not yet done so. For the sake of those who haven't yet believed, let's hold in our hearts those who have.

Look at what Paul wrote in v. 8. He *yearns* for the believers in Philippi. He had an intense desire to be with them because he loved them with the love of Jesus.

It is not enough to simply tolerate our Christian brothers and sisters. It is not enough to put up with the. If we love them, we will pray for them, and it will be a joy to do so.

You can live without joy, but it is not really living. It is just surviving. God doesn't want you to simply survive; He wants you to thrive. To thrive you must pursue joy in Him.

Borrowing again from Swindoll . . . He tells about an author name Tim Hansel who wrote a book entitled, *You Gotta Keep Dancing*. In that book, Tim tells about a near-fatal climbing accident that left him with chronic, severe pain. One day he realized that this pain would never leave him. At that point, he made a decision. He decided he would choose joy no matter now what. He couldn't change his condition, but he could change his attitude.

There was an 82-year-old, retired pastor who came across Hansel's book. This man had been a pastor for over 50 years. Now, he was struggling with skin cancer. He had endured 15 skin operations.

After reading Hansel's book, he put it down and said to himself, "He's crazy. I can't choose joy." Later, however, he read John 15:11 where Jesus says, "I want to give you My joy so that your joy may be complete."

He thought about that a moment. Jesus says that joy is a gift. He didn't know what to think about that, but with effort, he got down on his knees and prayed, "Well then, Lord, give it to me."

Suddenly, in his words, a hunk of joy came from heaven and landed on him. He wrote, "I was overwhelmed. It was like the joy talked about in Peter, a 'joy unspeakable and full of glory.' I didn't know what to do, so I said, 'Turn it on, Lord, turn it on.'" He then began dancing around the house."

He decided he had to leave his house; so, he drove to a local, fast-food restaurant and ordered a hamburger. The lady at the register saw how happy he was. She asked, "How are you doing?"

He answered, "Oh, I'm wonderful!"

"Is it your birthday?" she wondered aloud.

"No, honey. It's better than that?"

"Your anniversary?"

"Better than that."

"Well, what is it?" she asked.

"It's the joy of Jesus. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

The lady shrugged and replied, "No. I have to work on Sundays."

When Jesus gives you His joy, others may not understand it, but they will know something is different, that you are different.

Brother and sisters, let's choose joy. It is hidden in plain sight. It is found in prayer.