

PLANTING THE SEEDS OF A JOYFUL LIFE (Philippians 4:20-23)

I want to tell you the story of Methuselah and Hannah but not the characters from the Bible. This Methuselah and Hannah are living today, but they are not people; they are trees—Judean, date palm trees to be specific.

Their story begins with a woman named Sarah Salon, an Israeli doctor. While she was visiting in India, she got sick. The modern medicine she was given didn't help. Eventually, she took some herbal medicine, and she got better. That made an impression on this medical doctor. When she returned to Israel, she began to research medicinal plants. She learned that many of the plants once used medicinally have become extinct.

One of those was the Judean date palm tree. For thousands of years, it was lauded for its healing properties, and it once lined the banks of the Jordan River and there were groves of them close to the Dead Sea. They went extinct in the 15th century.

Dr. Salon learned that in the 1960's, during excavations at Masada, where Herod's Palace was located, date palm seeds were found. They were put in a jar, and they sat in a jar on a shelf for 40 years.

Reluctantly, Dr. Salon was given several seeds. She took them to Elaine Salowey of the Aravah Institute in southern Israel. She planted those seeds, and one of them grew into a palm tree. It was named Methuselah after the oldest man in the Bible, an apt name for a tree that came from seed that was 2,000 years old.

There was a problem though. Methuselah is a male tree. Male trees can't bear dates. Only female palms can do that. Later excavations in the Dead Sea area uncovered a trove of date palm seeds. Mrs. Salowey obtained a number of those. The first seed to grow from that batch of ancient seeds was named Hannah, after the Hannah of the Bible who gave birth to Samuel even though she was said to be barren. When Hannah, the female, Judean, date palm tree flowered, it was pollinated from Methuselah's pollen, and in 2020, Hannah gave researchers 111 large, succulent, sweet, dates.

The Aravah Institute has plans to grow a Judean, date palm grove with each tree coming from ancient seeds. A seed has life within it even if it is 2,000 years old.

The Bible compares itself to seed, and even though this seed is ancient, it still gives life. When this good seed finds good soil, miraculous things happen.

Today, we close out our study of Philippians. We will look at the last four verses—4:20-23. These verses are more than a dry conclusion to an ancient letter. They are seed, and when they are planted, the Holy Spirit will cause them to grow into a sweet, succulent fruit called joy. The letter called Galatians enumerates for us nine fruit of the Spirit. The second one listed is joy. For the Spirit of God to grow fruit in the soil of your life, He has to use seed, and this Book is the seed He uses.

When all we do is read God's word, it is like seed on the path. The Enemy can swoop down, gobble that seed up, and there will be no fruit. When we do God's word, that seed gets planted deep and will bring much fruitfulness. We are going to look at three ways we can do or plant God's word which will result in joy.

When I read this text last week, three words jumped out at me—glory, greetings,

grace. We will look at each.

Express Heart-Felt Glory to God Often

One of the things I love about Paul's letters is that you are reading along, and then, Paul breaks out in spontaneous and joyous praise. Before I show you that in our passage, let me point out some other occasions where Paul does this. In the letter preceding this one, like a geyser, Paul suddenly erupts with praise. Look at Ephesians 3:20-21.

Notice also Romans 11:33-36.

We see this happening at both the beginning and end of 1 Timothy. Look at 1:17 and 6:15-16.

Here, toward the end of Philippians, Paul gives us a grand promise in v. 19. It is quickly followed in v. 20 with a short prayer of praise.

We have a word for that. It is doxology. Many of you are familiar with the chorus we sing titled simply, "Doxology." The words to that chorus are, and say them with me if you know them:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise Him, all creatures here below;
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

The word *doxology* means, "words of praise."

It is interesting that v. 19 and v. 20 both contain similar words, but they mean very different things. There is a huge difference between the glory of God and giving God glory. The glory of God has to do with the perfection of His character. He is perfect in holiness, perfect power, perfect in love and grace and mercy and justice and all of His other attributes. When we give God glory, however, we add nothing to His perfection. When we give God glory, we do not add anything to God as though He were lacking in something. To give God glory means to praise Him. When we glorify God, we praise Him.

Like Paul, we should praise God often. I wonder, do you spontaneously praise the Lord? You are driving along the road. You see a beautiful sight, maybe it is a gorgeous sunset or a sparkling lake. Immediately, you say, "Well praise the Lord! Look at what He has made!"

Maybe you are having a conversation with a friend when he tells you a piece of good news, a sick family member who has recovered or the birth of a new grandchild. Upon hearing that news, you say, "Glory to God! Isn't He good?"

We need to be spontaneous and generous with our praise.

This past week, I came across a sermon from Joel Gregory. He, by the way, is one of my favorite preachers. When I was in seminary, I went to hear him on Sunday morning. At the time, he was the pastor of Travis Avenue Baptist Church. A few years later he left Fort Worth and became the pastor of the FBC of Dallas. I have never heard God speak audibly, but I suspect He sounds a little bit like Joel Gregory.

One of his recent sermons is entitled, “Living Between the Tick and the Tock.” I want to share his opening words and his closing words.

Before Tik Tok was a social media phenom, Tick Tock was the way old clocks sounded. Mechanical, wind up clocks sounded a TICK and then after a moment between sounded a TOCK.

Ezra, tucked away in the Old Testament between 2 Chronicles and Nehemiah, by analogy reminds us what our lives are like when we live between the tick and the tock . . . Ezra tells the story of God’s people in the tick of Exile and waiting for the tock of Restoration . . .

We need to start now what we will do forever . . . In a larger sense we are living between the tick of time and the tock of eternity, when the clock as we know it will sound no more. There, the priority forever will be the worship of God. We just as well get into practice.

Let’s plant the seed of joy by worshipping the Lord as often as possible. It occurs to me that fans derive joy by rooting and cheering for their team. A true fan doesn’t sit passively and watch quietly when his team scores a touchdown, intercepts a pass, or kicks a winning field goal. He yells. He claps. He jumps up and down. He gives his friend a high-five. The fan’s exultation increases his joy of supporting his team.

I understand that there is a place for reverence, for quiet contemplation of God’s greatness, but we need to understand that worship doesn’t happen only in a worship service within the walls of a church building. We can worship God in a grocery store, on a camping trip, in a hospital bed. We are to look for and seize every occasion we find to worship God. We can worship God with our bodies, with our voices, with our hands, with our minds, with our abilities, with our checkbook, and with everything God gives us.

There are two words we need consider, and we need to notice the difference between the two. Those words are *exult* and *exalt*. The word *exult* means “to be elated, to be jubilant, to celebrate joyfully.” The word *exalt* means “to praise, to extol, to magnify, to honor.” When our exaltation of God is paired with our exultation in God, our joy is multiplied. Let’s do both and do both often.

There is a second way we are to plant the seed of joy.

Exchange Warm Greetings with the Family

Look at vv. 21-22. Paul uses the word *greet* three times. Paul, remember, is in Rome, and he is writing a letter to the Church in Philippi. Look back at how he began this letter in 1:1. When the letter was delivered, probably by Epaphroditus, it was given to the leadership of the church. The leadership would have read the letter before reading it to the larger body of the church. It is the leadership that Paul is addressing in these two verses. Paul is saying to those elders, “Guys, when the church gathers, say ‘hi’ to them for me. And the Christian folks who are with me are sending along their best wishes, too.”

The closing of this letter is very different from the last chapter of Romans in which

Paul mentions 33 people by name. Of that number, 9 are in Corinth and 24 are in Rome, and Paul uses the word *greet* no less than 22 times in that chapter. Here, however, in the closing chapter of Philippians, Paul doesn't mention a single person by name. Why is that? I think the answer is simple. When Paul wrote his letter to the Church at Rome, Paul had not yet been to Rome. Paul had been to Philippi. Paul knew people in Philippi. He would have known Lydia and her family. He would have known the jailer and his family. He likely would have known some of the elders and others. If Paul had mentioned some by name, those he had not chosen to name would have wondered, "Why didn't he mention me? Does Paul have something against me?" They would have been hurt. That would not have been the case in Rome. He hadn't been there yet. Those he mentioned were people he had met elsewhere who were now living in Rome.

Paul is viewed as being rather scholarly, and that he was. A scholar is not usually thought of as being a people person. They are often more into books than people. Although he was a scholar, Paul must have been a people person.

Pick any major, metropolitan city in the United States as long as you have never been there. Now, how many people can you call by name who lives there? Two or three at tops?

Paul could name 24 people in Rome before he ever got there. Paul networked. He knew people. He remembered people. He cared about people.

Years ago, I used to have a sign that sat on top of my computer monitor in my office. This was back when computer monitors really took up space. They were more deep than wide. This sign had just two words on it. It read simply, "People Matter." Don't forget that. People matter.

If we have our priorities straight, we will use things and love people, but sadly, far too many of us love things and use people. People are not tools to be used; they are souls to be loved.

Jesus did not start a business, hire employees, and pay them to do what He wanted them to do. He called people into a personal relationship with Him. He invested His life in them. He changed them from the inside out. Out of love for Him, they went wherever He sent them and did whatever He asked.

The NT has many metaphors for the Church. The Church is referred to as a body, a building, a bride, a flock, a field, but I think the most often used metaphor for the Church is that we are a family. God is our Father. You and I are brothers and sisters.

While the Bible offers its own images of what the Church is and should be, we in our Christian culture have our own ideas as to what the church should be. Colin Smith called them distorted images. He gave the following:

- The church as a *gas station*. For some people today, the church is a place where you fill up your spiritual gas tank when you're running low. Get a good sermon, and it will keep you going for the week.
- The church as a *movie theater*. For many people, the church is a place that offers entertainment. Go for an hour of escape, hopefully in comfortable seats.

Leave your problems at the door and come out smiling and feeling better than when you went in.

- The church as a *drug store*. For other people, church is the place where you can fill the prescription that will deal with your pain. For many the church is therapeutic.
- The church as a *big box retailer*. Other people see the church as the place that offers the best products in a clean and safe environment for you and your family. The church offers great service at a low price—all in one stop.

The NT describes the Church in none of those ways. We are a family. Sometimes there is discord and conflict in the family. Sometimes families face crises and heartache. At its best, the family supports, encourages, protects, and builds up one another.

If you were to take the time to think back and list some of the best times of your life, I would venture to say that many of those on your list would be related in some way to family. It might be a family vacation, a family outing, a family dinner, a family get together, a family tradition. It is in the family where the joys of life are most often experienced.

The Church is an extension of your family. Let's enter into deep and meaningful relationships with one another.

Verse 22 contains a subset of the believers in Rome—*those of Caesar's household*. It is unlikely that Paul is referring to members of the imperial family. Rather, Paul has in mind those who are employed in the work of the imperial court. It could have been soldiers who guarded Paul. Once they heard the gospel and believed, they shared the gospel with those they knew and rubbed shoulders with on a daily basis. Like a virus, the good news of Jesus was growing in the very court of the Roman Emperor who was supposed to be worshipped as a god. In his very palace, there were workers who were quietly going about their lives worshiping Jesus as Lord rather than Caesar. They sent their greetings to their brothers and sisters in Philippi whom they had never met.

In the time I have been your pastor, I have been to Israel, Mexico, and Russia, and I met some of our dear family members in each of those places. We have family just about everywhere, and we will get to meet them and hear their story in heaven. As the chorus of the great hymn says, "When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be!" There can also be great rejoicing in this day as get to know others of our family.

We have looked at glory and at greetings. There is one more way we can plant the seed of joy.

Experience the Deep Grace of Jesus

We come to v. 23. This is a prayer, a benediction. By the way, that word *benediction* comes from two words. The first word *bene* means *good*. We find that idea in words such as *beneficial*, *benefit*, *beneficent*. The second word is *diction* which has to do with words such as *dictionary*. Literally, *benediction* means *good words*. Just as a preacher closes a service with a benediction, Paul closes this letter with good words.

Nothing could be better than to have the grace of Jesus take up residence in our lives and for His grace to be with us wherever we are and go with us wherever we go. Your spirit is that inner part of you that makes you, you. When you die, your body ceases to function, but your spirit goes on, and you continue to be you.

There is nothing we need more from the Lord than His grace because it is by His grace that He gives us **wisdom** when we are at a loss of what to do next. By His grace, He gives us **strength** when our is giving out. By His grace, He gives us **help** when we are struggling to get the job done. By His grace, He gives us **courage** when our is in short supply. By His grace, He gives us whatever is needed just when it is needed. His grace never arrives too early or too late; it is always right on time.

Whose grace is it? It is the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul began this letter with the name of Jesus, and he ends it with Jesus. The name of Jesus is found over 40 times in this short letter. Every two or three verses, we come upon the name of Lord, Jesus, or Christ, and here in the last verse, we get all three.

If you are going to find joy, you must find it in Him. As Paul wrote in v. 4 of this chapter, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, rejoice.”

There are some here today who might say, “Pastor, I would love to have joy, but somewhere along the way, I lost my joy, and I don’t know where to find it.”

If that is where you are, I want to show you something from God’s word. Turn to Psalm 137:1-2. God’s people were in captivity in Babylon. They had lost their joy. They had lost their song. They hung their harps on a tree because their joy had fled.

There is a woman named Jill Briscoe who spoke about this passage many years ago. She told a story. She said:

I remember talking to a girl here in this church two or three years ago. She said, “Jill, I’ve lost my joy, I’ve lost my peace, and I want it back.”

“Where did you lose it?” I asked.

“That has nothing to do with this,” she replied. “Help me to get it back.”

“But where did you lose it?”

“I don’t want to talk about that.” But eventually she did talk about it. She lost it when she moved in with her boyfriend. That’ll do it.

There are other things that will do it, too. Jill referenced Psalm 137. She said that many of us have hung up our harps, but instead of hanging it on a willow tree, we have hung them up on another tree. She identified four different kinds of trees.

Some have hung up their harp on a **grief tree**. You have experienced great loss, and when you lost that someone, you lost your joy.

Some have hung up their harp on a **gripe tree**. You have become a complainer. When something is not to your liking, you complain about it. In the midst of your griping, you have lost your joy.

Some have hung up their harp on a **grudge tree**. You are holding on to a hurt. You are nursing a grudge against someone. You have allowed that grudge to take away your joy.

Some have hung up their harp on a **guilt tree**. You have sinned against the Lord. You

haven't confessed it. You haven't dealt with it, and as a result, your joy has disappeared.

Jill offered the following invitation: "Come close enough to be forgiven, right now. And then stay close enough to be strengthened." I offer that same invitation: Come. Come to Jesus. His grace is sufficient. His grace is enough.