

**The Epistle of Joy
Philippians 1:1-2
Part 1**

The theme of this epistle is joy. In its four very brief chapters, the words “joy” or “rejoice” are used 16 times. “This is a lot of joy and stands in stark contrast to the experience of the world.”¹ The world is largely, but not entirely, a sad place. Yes, there are times of happiness, but there is also so much disappointment, discouragement and despair. Yes, there are times of happiness but very little, if any, true abiding joy. To help you understand what I am trying to say to you it is important to understand that there is a significant difference between happiness and joy.

“What do we mean when we talk about happiness? Happiness is ‘an attitude of satisfaction or delight based on some present circumstance.’ Happiness is related to happenings. Happiness is related to ‘happenstance.’”¹ Happiness is related to “hap” which is a word that basically communicates chance. “Happiness is that which you really can’t plan or program. Happiness may or may not happen.”¹

On the other hand when we talk about joy (from a biblical perspective), we are talking about something that is not related to circumstance or change at all. “Joy is a deep down confidence that all is well no matter what the circumstances might be.”¹

Though as Christians we may or may not experience happiness, which is related to circumstances; joy should be our constant companion. Joy should be our expectation. Consider for a moment the emphasis the New Testament gives to this theme in the life of believers. ‘The noun ‘joy’ appears 59 times in the New Testament. The verb ‘rejoice’ appears 74 times in the New Testament. It is part and parcel of the Christian experience.”¹ Let us for a moment consider the theology of joy.

First of all, we need to understand that “Biblical joy is a gift from God” (Psalm 4:7-8; Psalm 16:11). Listen to **Psalm 4:7-8, “Thou hast put gladness in my heart, more than when their grain and new wine abound. (8) In peace I will both lie down and sleep, for Thou alone, O Lord, dost make me to dwell in safety.”** The Psalmist certainly knew his deep down confidence that all was well came from only one source. And that source, the source of his joy, was God. How complete was his joy? Listen to **Psalm 16:11, “In Thy presence is fullness of joy; in thy right hand there are pleasures for ever more.”** First of all, we need to understand that true joy is a gift from God. There is no other source. Now let us continue to build on this truth.

“...to all those who believe (John 15:11).” Listen to the words of Jesus to His disciples in **John 15:11, “These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.”** Joy is not given to those who reject the words of Christ but rather it is given only to those who embrace his words. What have we learned

¹ MacArthur, John. Sermon, “The Epistle of Joy.” 4/10/1988. GTY.org
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so far about joy? We have learned that “joy is a gift from God to all those who believe.” What else do we learn about joy?

“...produced in them by the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17).” Listen to the words of **Romans 14:17**, “**For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.**” How does God impart joy to those who believe? He imparts joy through the Holy Spirit. This is reinforced for us in **Galatians 5:22** which says, “**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace.....**” What have we learned so far about joy? We have learned that “joy is a gift from God to all those who believe through the Holy Spirit. What else do we learn about joy in the Scriptures?

“...as they receive and obey God’s word (Jeremiah 15:16, 1 John 1:4).” Listen to **Jeremiah 15:16**, “**Thy words were found and I ate them, and Thy words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I have been called by thy name, O Lord God of hosts.**” Jeremiah received the Word into his life. He is not talking about a superficial involvement with the Word, but a deep life changing involvement. Listen to **1 John 1:4**, “**And these things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.**” What have we learned so far about joy? We have learned that “joy is a gift from God to all those who believe, through the Holy Spirit, as they receive and obey God’s Word.” What else do we learn about joy in the Scriptures?

“Biblical joy is a gift from God to all those who believe, produced in them by the Holy Spirit, as they receive and obey God’s word, which will thrive in the midst of trials. (**1 Thessalonians 1:6; James 1:2; 1 Peter 1:6.**)” This may be difficult to understand but it certainly is what the Scriptures teach. Listen to **1 Thessalonians 1:6** “**You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit.**” Then again we read these words in **James 1:2**, “**Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials.**” And then again in **1 Peter 1:6** it says, “**In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials.**” This certainly is amazing, but this is what the scriptures teach. What else do we learn about joy in the Scriptures?

“... while focusing on future glory” (Romans 12:12; 1 Peter 4:13). Listen to the words of **Romans 12:12**, “**Rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer.**” And then listen to **1 Peter 4:13**, “**But to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation.**”

What is biblical joy? Biblical joy is a gift from God to all those who believe, produced in them by the Holy Spirit, as they receive and obey God’s word, which will thrive in the midst of trials while focusing on future glory. Biblical joy is the theme of this wonderful little epistle. It is the epistle of joy.

He is writing this letter to the Philippian church to communicate with them his joy in the midst of their concern for him. He wants them to not only know his joy but to even share his joy. Hopefully as we study this epistle this is exactly what will take place in our lives. Hopefully as believers, no matter what our present circumstances might be after we finish the study of this epistle, we all will be experiencing biblical joy. Hopefully we will share in the joy of the Apostle Paul himself.

Let us begin by examining the introduction of this epistle. Let us read **Philippians 1:1-2, “Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: (2) Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”** I would like to divide these two verses into three different parts. Let us begin by looking at the servants.

THE SERVANTS

The verse begins **“Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Christ Jesus.”** The first bondservant mentioned by name in this verse in Paul. I do not believe that we have to take a lot of time telling you about Paul. I am sure that most of you are very familiar with this very important biblical figure. But though we will not spend a lot of time detailing out for you the life and ministry of the apostle Paul, I believe it would be helpful by way of remembrance to consider Paul’s own description of himself in **Philippians 3:4-7**. In **Philippians 3:1-3**, Paul warns the Philippians about those who would say or even infer that mankind must do something in addition to what Christ has done to merit salvation. He is making sure that the Philippians understand that when it comes to salvation, we can’t put any confidence in our flesh and our human efforts at all. And in order to make this point, he points to his own life in **Philippians 3:4-6** to illustrate the futility of such a thing. Let us read these verses.

Verse 4: “Although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more.” Paul is saying if anyone on the planet was ever going to merit salvation by their efforts in any way, shape, or form, it would have to be himself. Then he goes on to explain it.

Verse 5: “Circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews.” Paul, in this brief description of himself, is saying no one has a better pedigree than I do. His lineage is impeccable. But it is not only his pedigree that sets himself apart from many Jews, it is the way he conducted his life. Look at the end of **V. 5 “as to the Law a Pharisee.”** He conducted his life as a Pharisee. He lived his life committed to righteous living. Certainly that set him apart from the vast majority of the Jews. But he goes on in his description of himself to separate himself out from even his other fellow Pharisees.

Verse 6: “as to zeal, a persecutor of the church.” Zeal was a very valued quality in Jewish circles, and there was no one more zealous than Paul. And if anyone might question him about this, all he had to do was to point out his persecution of the church.

There was no one that brought the church greater suffering than Paul. But Paul is not done. He goes on to say, “**as to righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.**” Is he saying that he was blameless in the sight of God? No. If not God, then whom? He is simply saying that he was blameless in the sight of man, in respect to the law. Paul not only stood out from the Jewish multitude, he stood out from among even the Pharisees themselves. Paul was without equal when it came to all that he was and did.

And yet Paul knew that even though his pedigree was impeccable and his conduct in the eyes of men was blameless, it was all worthless when it came to being acceptable to God. Therefore, we read **verses 7-9, “But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. (8) More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ. (9) And may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.”**

Understanding what Paul shares with us in these verses helps us to understand how Paul has come to identify himself as a bondservant of Christ and Christ alone. But he is not the only servant in Philippians 1:1. The second bondservant mentioned is Timothy. What do we know about Timothy? Timothy was Paul’s son in the faith.

The first reference to Timothy is found in **Acts 16:1-3** at the beginning of Paul’s second missionary journey when he revisited Derbe and Lystra in Lycaonia. It seems probable that Paul had led Timothy to faith in Christ on his first visit to the area and has found Timothy on his second visit to the area, as having distinguished himself amongst the brethren as a godly man and a fruitful disciple of Christ. Therefore, Paul asks Timothy to accompany him on the remainder of his journey and Timothy agrees to come. Paul took Timothy under his wing and taught him so well that Timothy took on the heart and mind of Paul himself. How do we know this? We know this from this epistle. Listen to what Paul says about Timothy in **Philippians 2:19-22. “But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, so that I also may be encouraged when I learn of your condition. (20) For I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. (21) For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus.”** Like father like son. Paul views himself as a bondservant of Christ and Timothy is a bondservant of Christ as well.

What is a bondservant or slave? The word “bondservant” or “slave” (DOULOS) conveys ownership, possession, subjection. When most Americans think of slavery they think of it in negative terms and for good reason. They think of it in negative terms because of our history as a nation, when people were bought and sold against their will to serve the purposes of the one who owned them. But this is not the sense that we should read into what Paul is saying about himself and Timothy in this verse.

What is the difference? Paul and Timothy's enslavement to Christ was willing. They very much mirrored what we see recorded for us in **Exodus 21:1-6**, "**Now these are the ordinances which you are to set before them: (2) If you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years; but on the seventh he shall go out as a free man without payment. (3) If he comes alone, he shall go out alone; if he is the husband of a wife, then his wife shall go out with him. (4) If his master gives him a wife, and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall belong to her master, and he shall go out alone. (5) But if the slave plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out as a free man,' (6) then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him permanently.**" When we come to Christ and receive Him as our Lord and Savior, we are in a very real sense doing this very same thing. We are willingly putting ourselves in a position of servitude, not because we have to, but because we want to in light of all that the Lord has done for us through His death, burial and resurrection.

Those who willingly become the bondservants of Christ are bondservants of Christ alone (Matthew 6:24). What did Christ say in **Matthew 6:24**? "**No man can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.**"

Paul and Timothy do not see themselves as slaves in some abject way, but as willing bondservants of Christ and Christ alone. This is ironic in light of his circumstances. Where was Paul as he was writing this epistle? He was in prison. How do we know this? The book of Philippians itself tells us this. His imprisonment is referred to in **Philippians 1:7, 13, 14, and 17**. Where was this imprisonment? It is most likely in Rome. Why would we conclude this? Listen to **Philippians 1:13**, "**So that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else.**" Then again in **Philippians 4:22** we read these words, "**All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.**"

Though Paul was imprisoned in many different places at different times, the imprisonment we are talking about here refers to his first Roman imprisonment, which started, it appears, in the early part of 62 AD and extended nearly two years. During this time he wrote four different epistles. He wrote Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon. Yes, he was a prisoner of Rome but Rome was not his master; Christ and Christ alone was his master.

CONCLUSION

What is biblical joy? Biblical joy is a gift from God to all those who believe, produced in them by the Holy Spirit as they receive and obey God's word. Biblical joy will thrive in the midst of trials and will focus on future glory. Biblical joy is the theme of this wonderful little epistle. It is the epistle of joy.

Paul writes this letter to the Philippian church to communicate with them his joy in the midst of their concern for him. He wants them to not only know his joy, but to even share his joy. But this goal will certainly not take place if the Philippians fail to appreciate this opening statement by Paul that identifies he and Timothy both as bondservants of Christ. And certainly we will not understand the message of this epistle and personally experience it if we do not understand that it all begins with us being bondservants of Christ as well.