

**The Epistle of Joy
Philippians 1:1-2
Part 4**

The theme of this epistle is joy. Biblical joy is a deep down confidence that all is well no matter what the circumstances might be. It 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. It is not diminished by trials. Trials only cause biblical joy to focus on future glory. Though as Christians we may or may not experience happiness, which is related to circumstances, joy should be our constant companion.

Biblical joy was the companion of Paul. He wrote this epistle while he was imprisoned in Rome. He was facing the very real possibility of being executed, but in spite of these circumstances he wanted to communicate to the Philippians his joy. Not only did he want the Philippians to know about his joy, but he also wanted them to share that joy.

Hopefully as we study this epistle, this is exactly what will take place in our lives. Hopefully we will not only know about Paul's joy in the midst of terrible circumstances, but we will share in his joy as well. Hopefully we will share with him that deep down confidence that all is well no matter what the circumstances might be in our lives.

We have begun to work toward that goal by examining the introduction to this epistle. Let us read **Phil. 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 have divided these verses into three different parts.

The first part that we have considered, I entitled "The servants." In **Phil. 1:1** Paul, the author of this epistle, identifies himself and his traveling companion, Timothy, as bondservants of Christ. They were not forced into Christ's service. They willingly chose this. Hopefully each of you this morning have made this same willing choice, knowing that it is only when we come to Christ and make Him our Savior and Lord, that we will find life and life abundant.

The second part of the introduction we considered I entitled "the saints." Paul, the bondservant of Christ, addressed His epistle to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi. The word "saint" (HAGIOS) is the noun form of the verb "sanctify," meaning "to separate or set apart". Paul was addressing all the set apart ones in Christ Jesus at Philippi. Or in other words, he was addressing all Christians at Philippi. All Christians are set apart ones because all Christians are "**in Christ Jesus.**" Hopefully this is how you see yourself. Hopefully you see yourself as set apart in Christ and see this truth being worked out in your life.

But even though it was addressed to all Christians in the city of Philippi, there were two groups of saints at Philippi that were specifically addressed. The first group he calls overseers. Last week we considered this particular group.

God's design for the local church was that the church would be led by a plurality of biblically

qualified men (Titus 1:5). Most often in the New Testament, this group of biblically qualified men were called “elders” but they were also called “overseers” or “pastors.” The term “overseer” (EPISKOPOS), “elder” (PREESBUTEROS), and “pastor” (POIMEN) all refer to the same person (Acts 20:17-38). The term “elder” emphasizes the maturity of the church leaders. The term “shepherd” or “pastor” emphasizes their care for those given to their charge. The term “bishop” or “overseer” emphasizes their function. The first group that Paul specifically identified amongst the saints at Philippi were the “overseers,” or in other words, the leaders of the church. The second group that Paul identifies at Philippi amongst the saints were the “deacons.” Let us again look at **Phil. 1:1** and see that this is so. **“Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons.”** It is this group called “deacons” that we will be looking at this weekend.

My hope for this weekend’s message is that we will appreciate the importance and necessity of deacons if a church is going to be healthy and vibrant. My hope for this weekend’s message is that we will not only appreciate the importance and necessity of deacons, but that we will come to personally value them.

THE DEACONS

Our church is not a perfect church, but I believe it is a good church. And a large part of the reason for the health of our church is our deacons. I do not believe that I could adequately express to you how important our deacons are to us. If you remove our deacons or if they ceased functioning, Valley Bible would be dramatically affected in terms of what you presently see and enjoy.

Who are the deacons? The word “deacon” (DIAKONOS) means “servant.” The word is used frequently in the New Testament in a general sense to refer to any particular person or persons who might be performing a serving role. But the word also has a more technical usage. The word “deacon” in its more technical usage is an officially recognized servant in the church. We find it used in this more technical sense in three passages. Here in Phil. 1:1, in 1 Tim. 3:8 where it says, **“Deacons, likewise (or in other words, like elders) must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain.”** The last reference to this group of officially recognized servants is found in the very same chapter in **1 Tim. 3:12** where it says, **“Let deacons be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households.”** A fourth possible reference is in **Rom. 16:1**, where we find a woman named Phoebe being referred to as a servant or deacon in the church at Rome. Clearly there was a group of officially recognized servants in the early church who were called deacons. Though these passages clearly establish for us the fact that there were officially recognized servants within the church, none of these passages really help capture for us the importance of these individuals.

But there is a passage, though not directly referring to deacons, that captures the importance of such a group. Let us turn in our Bibles to **Acts 6:1-6**. **“Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against**

the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. (2) And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. (3) But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. (4) But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.”

This incident being described took place a little over a year after the birth of the church. The apostles were serving as the overseers of the Jerusalem church. As the church grew in Jerusalem, so did the apostles’ work. Not only did they lead and teach, they also administered the community’s funds and distributed funds to the poor according to **Acts 4:34-5:11**. This responsibility soon became too much of a burden, and a problem arose over the fair distribution of food to the widows.

The “Hellenistic Jews” were the Greek-speaking Jews who had come to Palestine from other nations, and therefore may not have spoken Aramaic, while the “Hebrews” were Jewish residents of the land who spoke both Aramaic and Greek. The fact that the “outsiders” were being neglected created a situation that could have divided the church. However, the Apostles took steps to address the problem.

When a church faces a serious problem, this presents the leaders and the members of that church with a number of opportunities. Just as problems in our lives also provide us opportunities.

First of all, church problems give us the opportunity to examine our ministry and discover what changes must be made. In times of success, it is easy for us to maintain the status quo, but this certainly may not be in the best interest of the church. The apostles, during this problem, were able to examine their ministry and found it deficient. They had created a problem because they were trying to do too much, and as a result were not doing anything very well.

When problems occur in your life and in your family, you should view the problem as an opportunity to discover changes that need to be made, just as the apostles in Acts 6. Are you doing this?

Secondly, church problems give us an opportunity to exercise our faith, trusting God, that He will work through the leaders that He has established. This is exactly what happened in the church at Jerusalem. Listen to **V. 5, “And the statement (the statement of the apostles) found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.”** The church did not have to follow their leaders. They could have chosen to work a different plan, but they willingly chose to support the plan proposed by the apostles. As a result of this cooperation between the leaders and the church, seven qualified men were selected and the Apostles set them apart to perform a very important ministry.

When problems occur in our life or family, we should see it as an opportunity to exercise our faith by trusting God to work through the leaders that he has established in our lives, whoever

those leaders might be, just as the congregation in Jerusalem did in responding to the leadership of the apostles. Are we doing this?

Thirdly, church problems give us the opportunity to express our love. We see this in **Acts 6:5** when we look at the list of names of the men who were actually chosen. What do we immediately notice? These are Greek names. The Hebrew leaders and the predominantly Hebrew members of the congregation selected six men who were Hellenists and one man who was both a Gentile and a proselyte.

When problems occur in our life or family, we should see it as an opportunity to exercise love just as the congregation did in selecting out Hellenistic Jews to help distribute food to the widows in Jerusalem. Are we?

This problem that occurred in the early church did not harm the church. It strengthened the church. And not only did it strengthen the church in the ways that I have just shared with you, but it provides a wonderful model. Even though the seven men selected by the church in Jerusalem were not called deacons in this passage or in other passages such as in Acts 21:8 where Philip is called “one of the seven,” Acts 6 provides a dynamic, apostolic example that later leaders could follow which resulted in a formal deaconship.

How important are deacons in the local church? How important were these seven men that were selected in Acts 6? If these seven men were not set apart to address the problem in Acts 6 what would have happened? I really cannot tell you specifically the answer to that question, but generally speaking I know that whatever would have happened would not have been good and it could have even been catastrophic.

From the example of the seven in Acts 6, we learn that deacons provide a complementary service to the elders, who bear the overall burdens of oversight. Without the deacons, the elders would no longer be able to see the forest for the trees.

In light of this important role that deacons serve; the goal of Valley Bible Church is to have every existing ministry overseen by a deacon. If this can be accomplished, any need or problem arising in or from that ministry will typically be handled righteously and maturely by the deacon. This will in effect protect the elders from becoming embroiled in issues that would distract them from their role as overseers. Has this goal been realized? The answer is not yet. In fact I don't know if this goal will ever be fully reached because new ministries are starting all the time. But even though we have not yet reached that goal, we have come a long way. Currently we have 18 deacons; 17 men and one woman. And very realistically we will be adding more deacons to that number this year.

What criteria are used in the selection of deacons? There are two criteria that we use when selecting deacons.

They must fulfill the qualifications of 1 Tim. 3:8-12 **“Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, (9) but**

holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. (10) And let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. (11) Women (we believe that this is a reference to women deacons) **must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips but temperate, faithful in all things.**” And then it shifts back to speak of deacons who happen to be men. **(12) Let deacons be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households.**” The first criteria that we use in selecting deacons is that they fulfill these qualifications.

The second criteria is that before they are formally recognized, they must demonstrate that they can faithfully and effectively lead the ministry that they will be overseeing as a deacon. Someone might ask how long will they serve in that capacity. And the answer is, indefinitely. We do not have deacons rotating in and out. In fact, this approach to our deaconship has led to great stability. I don't believe that we have had a single deacon leave their position of responsibility for any reason in 10 years.

We presently have people who are leading ministries that are still not recognized as deacons. Our goal is that each of those individuals eventually will be. In the eyes of many, we may be very slow in working through this process of recognizing deacons, but we need to be slow because of the strategic role the deacons play and the very high standards the scriptures themselves establish for them.

CONCLUSION

I asked you the question earlier, “what would have happened if the apostles did not take the action they did in Acts 6 asking the congregation to set aside seven men full of the wisdom and the Spirit to take the responsibility for the distribution of food to the saints in Jerusalem?” I can ask you the same question about our church. Where would our church be if we had not established a deaconship that functioned as it is presently functioning? More personally, where would we be if we did not have Rick Balogh, Steve Bentley, John Del Frate, Dale Hobart, Larry Hudson, Dan Jenison, David Johnston, Anita Karlis, Gordon Kemble, Bill Lokos, Tim Moes, Brad Neal, Daisuke Okada, Rocky Osborne, Lance Richards, Terry Riley, Maurico Rivas, and Randy Thompson functioning as they are now functioning? I can't speak for you, but I can speak for the elders. Without these deacons functioning as they are now functioning we could not be able to effectively oversee this fellowship.

In **1 Tim. 3:13** it says, **“For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”** And to this I say Amen. And to this all the elders say Amen. And I hope that you would as well.

How did Paul start the introduction to this epistle? **“Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons.”** That is how he started, but how does he finish the introduction? **“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”** In these closing words to all the saints, including the elders and deacons, he points to the blessings of grace and peace needed by them. He points to the grace and peace available to them from God our father and the Lord Jesus

Christ and which through this epistle he hopes they will experience. And with this same awareness and hope this morning I declare the same thing to you. No matter what your circumstances. No matter how many troubles you might have, **“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”** And I hope the study of this epistle will help make that a reality for you.