

MEET THE PEOPLE – THE CHURCH AND ITS LEADERS

Phil 1.1-2

Introduction to reading

We're starting a new series of studies this morning in Paul's letter to the Philippians (turn to it).

As an overall banner for the series, I've chosen the title *Living joyfully for Jesus*, because that's what Paul is encouraging us to do throughout this letter.

- In 3.1, for instance, he writes, *Finally* [literally, 'from this point on'], *my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.*
- And so he goes on in 4.4 to repeat himself. *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*

The joy of the Lord is your strength, Nehemiah reminded the people of his day (Neh 8.10). In other words, when our greatest joy is found in Jesus, then we will be strong in our walk for him, whatever the circumstances we may happen to find ourselves in.

And so this letter shows us how to make Jesus our greatest joy. It was written from inside a prison cell. In 1.7 and 1.17, Paul refers to his *chains*. And yet it is the most joyful letter Paul ever wrote. The word *joy* occurs six times, as does the word '*rejoice*'; and the word *glad* crops up three times as well. So 15 times in four short chapters we're brought back to the idea of making *the joy of the Lord our strength*. And what Paul does in this letter is not simply *tell* us to be joyful whatever our circumstances. He reveals the secret of how we can be joyful, through his own personal example.

- In 2.14 he tells us to *do everything without complaining or arguing*.
- And in 4.12-13 he tells us that he has *learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength*, he explains.

So this morning, we are going to meet the church and its leaders from the opening two verses of the letter. But to see how there came to be a church at all in the city of Philippi, let's turn back to Acts 16. For here we see that the founding of the church in Philippi was no accident. It came about through the very clear guidance of God; and its birthplace was a place of prayer.

Read Acts 16.6-40

INTRODUCTION

It would be all too easy to skip over the first two verses of this letter in our eagerness to get into the meat of it. But there's a very real sense in which this introduction to the letter sets the tone for everything else that follows it.

First of all, we're introduced to

1. THE CHURCH PLANTERS (v1a) – *Paul and Timothy*, without whom, there wouldn't have been a church in this city at all! But what's striking about the way in which they introduce themselves is that speak about themselves as *servants* [or more literally, *slaves*] of Jesus Christ. And that's very significant as we think of this theme of *Living joyfully for Jesus*.

Paul and Timothy didn't go around the world trying to build up an empire for themselves, a sort of 'franchised chain of churches' that they would come to regard as their own – like a chain of McDonalds fast food outlets. McDonald's, as a big corporation, seeks to expand its operations throughout the world, in order to increase its own glory and prestige, not to mention its profits, too.

But Christian enterprise is never like that. We're not in it for ourselves. We operate as *servants of Jesus Christ*. Paul and Timothy both recognized the enormous privilege of having been called into the service of Jesus Christ, God's unique. They recognized there is no higher privilege than that, and so went about their church planting enterprises with true servants' hearts. They weren't in it for themselves. They were in it for Jesus – to maximize *his glory*. And I want to suggest that this is a crucial element in *living*

joyfully for Jesus.

You see, if we are in something for what we hope to get out of it for ourselves – whether we think in terms of own satisfaction, or a sense of personal achievement and satisfaction, or recognition by our peers, popular acclaim, or public admiration – sooner or later I believe we will end up disenchanted by our work. We'll be disappointed when what we had hoped to get out of the work, for ourselves, doesn't materialize. Disappointment, of course, can quickly lead to discouragement, which in turn may lead to disillusionment, and eventual drop out.

But if we see what we are doing as a service to Jesus, even the most humdrum of activities takes on a new purpose. It's lifted to a higher plain. "I'm doing this for Jesus," we'll be able to say. "I'm doing this for *the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me* (to quote Paul, in Gal 2.20). Wow! What a privilege. I'll want to get it my very best."

- The parable Jesus told about sheep and goats, in Mat 25.31-46, reminds us that whatever we do for a fellow Christian is ultimately being done for Jesus.
- And even a cup of water offered to someone in need, won't go unnoticed by Jesus. Indeed, it will receive its own reward (Mark 9.41).
- This is why, in Col 3.23, Paul says to us *whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.*

Later on, Paul will spell out the secret of contentment that he has learned. And part of the secret of being content, regardless of the circumstances we happen to find ourselves in, is learning to live a life of service to the Lord. It's something that doesn't come naturally to us, because our old sinful nature will constantly be whispering in our ear, "What's in this for you?" The pull to do things, simply because we feel they will satisfy us, or bring us a sense of achievement or fulfilment, is never far away. But the secret of *living joyfully for Jesus* is to cultivate a sense of doing every for him – for his satisfaction and pleasure, for his greater honour and glory. And that has to do with us cultivating a true servant heart, like Paul's and Timothy's.

Next up, still in verse 1, we meet

2. THE CHURCH MEMBERS (v1b)

And again, Paul's description of these members is very significant for our theme of *living joyfully for Jesus*. Paul refers to these church members as *saints*.

- We sometimes use the word in a rather flippant or light-hearted way, don't we? We might say to someone, "You're a real saint" if they do something kind for us.
- Some parts of the church use the word to describe outstandingly heroic Christians, who have worked miracles in their day – the crème de la crème.

2.1 Commitment

But in Greek (the language Paul wrote in), the word simply meant someone who was *committed*. So when he speaks about '*the saints*' here, he is referring to people who are wholehearted in their commitment to Jesus Christ.

And so we see here another part of the secret of *living joyfully for Jesus*. Joyful living is wholehearted living. There is no joy in doing anything half-heartedly – including, living for Jesus. Christian joy is a product of wholehearted commitment.

- When Paul describes the *fruit of God's Spirit* in our lives, in Galatians 5.22, he speaks first about *love*, which has to do with our commitment to Jesus; and then about *joy*. You see, *joy* is the product of *love*. The more we love Jesus, the more committed we will be to him; and the greater our commitment to him, the greater will be our joy over him.
- It's what Peter speaks about in his 1.8 of his first letter. *Though you have not seen Jesus, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.*

A Christian is someone committed to Jesus Christ. That's what the word 'saint' means. And the more committed we are, the greater our joy will be. There's no joy for the half-hearted.

2.2 Two addresses

Next Paul goes on to speak about the two addresses we have as Christians. One describes our physical location, and the other our spiritual position. He mentions our spiritual position first, because it is the more important of the two.

(a) In Christ

Spiritually speaking, we're *in Christ*. A Christian is someone who lives his life 'in Christ' in much the same way as a fish lives its life 'in water'. When we are committed to Jesus Christ, he is the very environment in which our whole life is lived out. We experience his presence both within us and all around us.

- To change the metaphor, we are like a tree planted in rich nourishing soil, drawing all its life and energy from the ground in which it is rooted.
- Jesus said we were like the branches of a vine, an integral part of it, drawing all our life from the rootstock. It's why he says to us (in John 15.5), *apart from me you can do nothing*. If we cut ourselves off from Jesus, we're spiritually dead. But if we remain in him – if we stay in a vital living relationship with him, drawing our strength from him day by day – then we will not simply stay strong and healthy, spiritually speaking; we will bear *much fruit, to the Father's glory* (John 15.8).

There's no joy in trying to go it alone in the Christian life, just as there's no joy in a half-hearted commitment to Jesus Christ. We live with joy when we keep in touch with Jesus. *If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love*, Jesus instructed us – and then added, *I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete*. Living joyfully for Jesus means staying in touch with him, drawing our strength from him day by day.

But what about the other address Paul gives us here? For if these church members were spiritually 'in Christ', physically they were

(b) At Philippi Paul tells us.

Philippi was a city with a proud past and a privileged present.

- The city had been named after Philip of Macedon, who had captured it from the Thracians in 300BC.
- He had subsequently enlarged and fortified it, to turn it into an important frontier town on the Ignatian Way, the main trade route from Rome to the Far East.
- By Paul's day, the city had been awarded a special privilege. It had been designated a Roman colony, so that its citizens enjoyed exactly the same privileges as those living in Rome itself.
- This probably explains the background to Paul's words at the end of chapter 3, where he reminds his readers that our true *citizenship is in heaven*.

And this is another factor in us living joyfully for Jesus. In a sense, it doesn't really matter where we live here on earth. It doesn't matter what earthly privileges are ours, as citizens of this town or the next. For all of us who are true believers are citizens of heaven. God has adopted us into his royal family and made heaven itself our true home. What enormous joy that thought should give us as we seek to live out our lives for Jesus here on earth! Our role is not to get too attached to the place where we live. Our role is to *shine like stars* wherever we happen to be living, *as we hold out the word of life* to those around us, to quote Paul's words from 2.15-16.

Now next up, at the end of verse 1, Paul speaks about

3. THE CHURCH LEADERS(v1c)

He refers to them as *the overseers and deacons*. A whole variety of terms is used to describe church leaders in the New Testament – words like Pastor, Minister, elders, overseers and deacons, as here.

Most churches, in New Testament times, seem to have a pastor with overall responsibility for leading the church - by teaching it God's ways from the Scriptures, and by caring for the needs of individuals, sensitively and appropriately. But alongside any Pastor, there would always be a group of co-leaders.

- Sometimes they were called *elders*, a predominantly Jewish term emphasising the leaders' spiritual maturity;
- But elsewhere they are called *overseers*, a predominantly Greek term, emphasising the leaders' spiritual function.
- And these two terms, 'elders' and 'overseers' seem to have been interchangeable.

But whatever the precise terminology that's used, the leadership of a local church was always to be a shared activity, not one in which the reins of power were held by a single individual.

- In Acts 14.23, for instance, we read that *Paul and Barnabas appointed elders [plural] for the Christians in each church* they had founded on their first missionary journey.
- And in Titus 1.5, Paul explains that he had left Titus on the island of Crete in order he *might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders [plural] in every town*, where a church had been established.

So the leadership of a local church is to be shared amongst the spiritually mature, who have responsibility for the overseeing the fellowship – its members, its mission and, most importantly of all, its message. The leaders of a local church are to ensure that the church is taught the truth, as we are given it in God's Word.

The term 'deacon' is less common, but probably refers to those entrusted with particular tasks within the fellowship, under the direction of the overseers. The word simply means 'a household servant' – a helper. That's how the Good News Bible translates the phrase. It refers here to the *church leaders and church helpers*.

But perhaps the most important words to notice here, in connection with what Paul says about the leadership of a local church, are the two words '*together with*'. The members and the leaders were *together*. And that's what makes for joyful living within a local church – when the leaders and members are together, one in purpose and spirit!

- It's why, in 1.27, Paul tells us to *stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel*.
- And in 2.2, he tells us to *make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose*.

When the members and leaders of a local church are together, everyone can live joyfully for Jesus. But when there's friction, or disagreement, or disharmony, everyone ends up miserable!

- Back in the Old Testament days of the Judges, Deborah and Barak sang a song that began like this, after the Lord had given them a famous victory (Judges 5.2). "*When the princes in Israel take the lead, and when the people willingly offer themselves-- praise the LORD!*" It's a picture of leaders and church members, as it were, pulling together in a common cause.
- There's lots more that could be said about good leadership in the local church, and Alex Motyer has some very helpful things to say about it in his Commentary on Philippians, which I would warmly commend to you.

But let's finish our study this morning by looking at

4. THE CHURCH'S FOUNDATION STONES (v2)

Sound foundations are vital for the lasting stability of any building, as we will be reminding ourselves with the children in a couple of weeks' time. And here we see the truly wonderful foundation Jesus has laid down for every local church fellowship – his very own *grace and peace*.

- God has been so **generous** to us. We should never forget that if we want to live joyfully for Jesus.
- God didn't even hold back his own Son from us, but gave him up freely for our salvation. It's by God's grace that we've been saved, not any merits of our own. That should always leave us with a

profound sense of indebtedness to God.

- And we have not only been saved by God's grace. His grace is such that he has lavished one blessing after another on us. And whenever we remind ourselves of just how blessed we are in Christ, then our hearts will be filled with fresh joy.
- And the product of God's mercy and grace towards us is the **peace** we now enjoy both from him and with him. We have peace of mind, knowing our sins have been forgiven and our destiny is assured. But more importantly than our peace of mind, is our peace with God. It's impossible to be both joyful and disturbed, or anxious. Peace is essential for us experience joy. And peace is what God gives us in abundance so that our lives, and his churches, can be full of joy.

The message of this book is to live joyfully for Jesus.

That will happen when we cultivate the heart of a true servant, seeking the honour of Jesus our master;

It will happen when of dedication to Jesus is wholehearted;

It will happen when we live our life in daily dependence on Jesus

It will happen when our sights are more fixed on heaven than wedded to our place on earth;

It will happen when as members and leaders we work together;

and when we appreciate the grace and peace that are God's precious gifts to us.