

Praying With Joy for You

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 26th of December 2004. The preacher is Carol Elfverson.

Her sermon is entitled Praying with Joy for You and is based on Philippians chapter 1 verses 1 to 30.

As we come to the hearing from God's word, let us pray. Dear God, thank you for the joy of coming here together and we pray that as we now look at your word that you will be with us and help us to hear what you are saying.

Help us to hear and to be changed. In Jesus' name, Amen. Well, two words are particularly prevalent over the Christmas season. They are chief amongst the greetings we find on Christmas cards and in the carols we sing.

And these two words are joy and peace. Two little words that speak volumes. They remind us of the essence of Christmas. That on that very first Christmas day, nearly 2,000 years ago, Jesus' birth ushered into the history of the world.

[1 : 17] The means by which God's kingdom would be established and inaugurated, bringing everlasting peace and joy to his people. This peace and joy is a gift of grace from God to his people and Paul's greeting to the church of Philippi in verse 2 acknowledges this.

You may like to follow the passage along with me. It's on page 953 in your Bibles. The letter finds Paul in a tough spot. His physical freedom has been seriously curtailed because he's in prison. He's prisoned in probably Rome and he's being guarded continuously with a one-on-one guard. He's in chains and he's also facing the very real possibility of death by execution.

And as if that pressure in the Roman authorities wasn't enough, there's still more. Halfway through the first chapter of this book, we find that Paul is also facing challenges from some of the believers in the church in Rome.

And added to this is the fact that the church in Philippi are also going through struggles. The Philippians is a church where Paul had particular affection for.

[2 : 35] He had established it some years earlier. And them being in difficulties, going through hard times, he would dearly like to go to them and to be with them personally to help them through those times.

But of course he can't. So it's trouble within and trouble without. It seems that he's got enough catastrophes facing him to hit the very top of a stress register scale.

And so what's his reaction to these adversities? The reading of chapter 1 this morning leads us to see how Paul handles his own afflictions and how he also then encourages others to do so as well. Faith in Jesus Christ is his answer. And he resolutely trusts God in all and every circumstance. In fact, the words God and Christ appear 25 times in that first chapter.

25 times out of 30 verses shows the emphasis and the trust that Paul has in God. These tough times, Paul knows he needs endurance.

[3 : 48] But Paul's isn't a stoic, gritting of the teeth, I'm going to get through it, determination no matter what. What comes through throughout the chapter and then throughout the Bible, throughout this whole letter of Philippians, is actually Paul's joy, his love and his absolute trust in God.

He writes to the Philippians a letter of friendship to encourage them in their suffering, telling them about his own suffering. And by doing this, he does it joyfully and prayerfully.

And that then sets a good example for them. Philippi was a Roman colony in Macedonia. And by the time that this letter was written, probably in the early 60s AD, the emperor had been exalted to a godlike status.

And so in Philippi, being a Roman colony, most of the public gatherings, their assemblies, their games and other things, would begin by worshipping and acknowledging this emperor. And the emperor had become known by terms such as Kyrios, meaning Lord, and Soto, meaning Saviour. And so when the games or the assemblies or the theatres began, they would always begin acknowledging their emperor as Lord or Saviour.

[5 : 09] Now this was difficult for the Philippians, who had already given their allegiance to Jesus Christ as their Lord. And so therefore they couldn't swear allegiance to the emperor in the same way.

And so it was causing difficulties for them socially. Paul addresses this letter to the saints in verse 1. He says, To all the saints in Philippi.

And it's a very short statement, but in it it's very concise. It's a reminder to the believers of just who they really are. It reminds them, the word saints, that they are God's chosen people, God's holy people, a people who, like the people of Israel back in the book of Exodus, have been chosen and set apart to be the people of God's kingdom.

In this very short greeting, Paul places the question of citizenship concisely and clearly into the heavenly and biblical perspective where it belongs.

After the greeting, Paul prays, thanking God for the Philippians, both for what he is doing in their lives and for their sharing in the gospel.

[6 : 17] It's this partnership in the gospel that brings Paul much joy. They've shared a fellowship that has a special bond, which is at the heart of their friendship, that of their relationship to God through Jesus Christ and to each other.

It's what lies at the heart of all Christian fellowship, what ties us together, whether we're near or far. It's what ties us together when we're supporting and praying for missionaries who are far away. And for missionaries such as the Youngs and the Quins and all the other missionaries we pray for every week. It's what ties, and we may only see them once every three years when they come out here.

But it's that tie, we know them, we pray for them because they're Christian. We know that we're supporting them in our giving for Christian ministry and they're over there doing the job.

It's also then been the tie and the special joy for me over the past four years that I've been here at Doncaster. A joy that will persist for me as I think very fondly of all of you here at Doncaster in the years to come because we too are shared in a participation in the Gospel.

[7 : 31] And I think of the times and many of you that have engaged in different ministry activities. And it's that tie because we're doing it for the grace of God and for the spreading of the Gospel.

And that tie is a very special, special tie. Paul can be joyful despite his difficult circumstances because his joyfulness isn't about a feeling.

It's not about being happiness which is determined by external circumstances. Charles Virgin put it quite succinctly saying, happiness is an emotion and joy is an attitude.

Emotions come and go but attitudes come and grow. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit as listed in Galatians 5. And so it transcends the here and now of our present circumstances.

Being of the Spirit it's a sign of God's presence with his people. Therefore, Paul has no problem in praying to God with thankfulness and with joy for the Philippians.

[8 : 38] And it's his wish for them to copy him, to emulate him in doing this also, to being joyful given their present circumstances. Hardships and difficulties often ought to draw us closer to God but too often they're the reasons people give for actually drawing apart from falling away from God.

And this was a lesson I learnt as a fairly new Christian. My son Tom had developed depression and despite the prayers of myself and others Tom didn't seem to be getting better but he was getting worse.

And I realised after some time that I was actually feeling very angry and I was feeling very angry towards God. I was blaming Tom's deterioration I think on the fact that God wasn't answering the prayers.

You see, my faith was still very immature. It was based on a belief, on a triumphalist belief that God would keep me and my family from bad experiences of life.

I was wanting the perfection of heaven here and now. Fortunately, through God's grace and the help of a Christian friend I became aware of my anger and was able to repent of it and allow God to grow me in this difficult certain time.

[9 : 51] I came to accept the reality that we live in a fallen world and that as Christians we can and we will suffer from illnesses and from hardships and at times from relationship difficulties and death even though our true citizenship is in heaven.

It's in accepting the grace of God that we can have joy despite our external circumstances because we have a relationship with Christ that absolutely nothing can separate us from.

As Paul says in his letters to the Romans in chapter 8 he says, Now in all things I am convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When we allow difficulties to draw us away from God's love we are left joyless slandering and our faith can wither and die. During my recent holidays I was reading Tom Winton's book Cloud Street and in it it features a Christian family who experienced the tragedy of their beautiful outgoing clever young son drowned in a fishing accident.

When they're retrieving pulling him out through from fishing nets and onto the shore his mother revives him by frantic thumping of his chest and loud prayers.

[11 : 22] When he finally begins to breathe they call it a miracle and they go noisily into town and wake up everyone around and gather together in the church to praise God and to state that this has been a miracle that their boy called Fish has come alive again.

But sadly as time goes on we discover that Fish has actually suffered severe brain damage. The result has been that the parents and children turn away from God and from Christian fellowship.

They continue to hold to the moral conduct of Christianity but reject God and his people.

So this becomes a double tragedy. Not only do they adapt to their lives with the loss of the full potential of their son but also they start to live a life of total self-reliance.

At a time when they most needed God they rebuff the love and grace of God and the support of his people. As the story progresses we get glimpses of their yearning for wholeness for a relationship with God that in their stubborn rebellion they continue to refuse to accept.

And this is most evident in the mother Oriel a woman who becomes joyless living a life that's constantly hard working but lacking in loving relationships. And it's reminiscent of the scene at the end of Genesis 3 where the man and the woman have been expelled from the Garden of Eden they put out of a close walk with God that they enjoyed previously because of their decision to sin and rebel and they're left to live a life of harsh toil.

[12 : 58] Turning away from God didn't help that family in Cloud Street that didn't help his brain damage at all but it changed radically the way that they lived the rest of their life.

Joy and peace was gone. Being a Christian doesn't keep us from difficulties or sufferings. In fact for many a believer will actually it will increase the suffering as Paul and the Philippians experienced. But by maintaining a vital relationship with the Lord and with other Christians suffering will not cause one's faith to falter but rather it can be an opportunity for it to grow and strengthen.

It's this relationship that is the basis of Paul's confidence in verse 6 the confidence that God will bring about the salvation of the Philippians because of his grace through Jesus Christ and their growth in this relationship as they work together in the gospel.

That they remain true to the gospel is Paul's deep yearning for the Philippians as it's seen also in verses 7 and 8. These longings are with the affection of Jesus Christ revealing the depth of Paul's love for Jesus and through him for the believers.

[14 : 09] Paul is passionate about the good news about Jesus Christ. Since his own dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus he has lived his life in such a way so that nothing would hinder the spread of the gospel.

Advancing the message of salvation through Jesus has been always his utmost priority from the time he was converted. Therefore his evangelism has not been hindered by his imprisonment. In fact verses 12 and 13 Paul says that it's actually helped to spread the gospel making it known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that his imprisonment is there for Christ. He's had opportunities to individually one on one talk with the guards to tell them about Jesus Christ and from there those guards have probably gone out and talked to others so that there's been the message has spread in Rome.

And then there's been another offspring in verse 14 because of his jail his detainment the brothers and the sisters in the city have then become emboldened to speak the word of God without fear.

[15 : 20] Because of Paul's chains God has prodded them into action where they've also then discovered new found faith and boldness. And this too has been a great cause of joy for Paul.

But it's not all perfection as verse 15 then indicates. Paul says some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry. It's selfish ambition. It seems that some of the believers have seen Paul's imprisonment as God's judgment on him and on the way he's doing things.

So these people have taken the opportunity to bring attention to themselves and to put down Paul by preaching in their view in a different way and in a better way. It's important to note here though that what they're preaching is the gospel.

They're not spreading false teaching. They're still teaching correctly but their motives are impure. But such is the power of the gospel for salvation that it's effective despite their motives.

Others however preach out of goodwill and love. And these are probably the people that Paul greets in Romans 16 and acknowledges their hard work in the Lord. But whether out of goodwill or envy the overriding concern is that Christ is proclaimed and it's in this proclamation that Paul rejoices.

[16 : 40] and it may be helpful to think about when when was the last time you experienced joy because the gospel was being proclaimed or rejoiced because someone previously timid and shy found the boldness to speak about Jesus.

When was the last time you overcame your own discomfort about speaking of your faith with a non-Christian and about what the Lord's doing in your life? How's the fruit of the spirit growing and maturing in your own life?

Is there any difference between last year and this year? I think as we come towards the end of another year it's helpful to stop and reflect and think about these things. Think about how our own spiritual growth is going and to think about perhaps new areas that God may be calling us to. Paul's will is so totally aligned with God's that he rejoices because he is certain that with the Philippians' prayers and the help of the Holy Spirit he is confident that it will turn out for his deliverance in verse 19.

His desire is that Christ will be magnified regardless of whether he lives or dies. See at this point Paul is seriously contemplating the fact that he may receive the death sentence and yet nowhere does he pray that this will not happen.

[18 : 08] He's confident of deliverance but the deliverance may be life or it may be death. By the help of their prayers and by the Holy Spirit Paul prays that he will remain faithful.

That's his concern. Not about his freedom. But he wants to remain faithful. He's concerned that nothing he would do that would bring shame to the gospel.

He's seeking courage in these circumstances so that Christ will be exalted. In everything Paul's viewpoint is thoroughly theological. people. In verse 21 Paul puts everything into this perspective with the words for me living is Christ and dying is gain.

Paul has only one consuming Christ and that is Christ himself. One consuming passion is Christ himself. I don't know if you saw the movie Forrest Gump out a few years ago but there's two things I can remember really when I'm thinking of that movie and one was when he just started running and kept running and running and running across the whole of America.

But the other was about a friend called Baba and when they were serving the war in Vietnam he had this friend called Baba and Baba was passionate. He was totally and utterly consumed about a passion and his passion was shrimps.

[19 : 30] And so he talked continuously about shrimps and he talked about how they could be used in all different types of recipes, cooking and everything and how he could control for them. they were in absolutely every part of Baba's conversation.

So whether the two of them were hiking, whether they were in the jungle fighting, whether they were washing floors or lying on their bed, Baba just talked about shrimps.

Paul's passion is Jesus Christ and as he faces the very real possibility of death he reflects on the situation in verse 22.

He weighs up the merits of remaining alive and he sees that this would result in fruitful labour and particularly it would be helpful because he could go back to Philippi and help them through this difficult time.

So he sees that that would be an advantage not particularly for himself but he sees it as an advantage for others. And then he also sees an advantage of dying. So he ends up concluding that

whether he lives or whether he dies he wins either way because if Paul is executed he decides the goal of living will have been reached in that he will finally have gained Christ in verse 23.

[20 : 48] Paul sees death as the gaining of his lifelong passion Christ himself. And it's not so much a death wish but an understanding of his certain and desired future.

desire. He knows for sure the great hope of all believers that it's eternal life of living with God in a perfect world for all time and that would be his great desire.

He knows fully that in Christ death has lost its sting and so he's not afraid of death. Verses 25 to 26 conclude this reflection that he began back in verse 12.

He concludes it as it began on a note of joy. His desire for the Philippians is for their progress and joy in the faith. This progress is for the joy and it also becomes Paul's joy.

It's for their joy, Philippians joy, it's also for Paul's joy. Paul's boasting comes from the idea found in the Old Testament in Jeremiah which says a truly wise person boasts not in wisdom or might or wealth but in the Lord.

[21 : 53] Paul's boasting is not a self boasting but a confidence that comes from totally trusting in God. Jesus brought joy and peace into the world.

As Christians it's one of the great treasures we have from God. Develop and cultivate an attitude of joy. It is after all as C.S. Lewis said the serious business of heaven.

Do not neglect this fruit of the spirit. It's a gift that will help us through our times living in this broken world and as we await joyfully the second coming of Jesus Christ when all will be fully restored to total perfection.

Amen.