

The Fellowship of the Gospel

I'm excited today because we are starting a new sermon series. Aren't you glad that I'm sort of *nerdy* this way? Aren't you glad that I'm excited about stuff like this? I love this part of my job. I hope all of you have at least some big parts of your job that you love.



Today we are starting a series from the New Testament Book of Philippians that I'm calling ***Joyride through Philippians***. We are calling it ***Joyride*** because **joy** is a theme that runs through and ties together this short book. We'll see the word **joy** or **rejoice** 11 times. We see it in what I'm calling the *key verse* of Philippians, at the end in verse 4 or chapter 4.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!¹

The command so good, it is given twice: Rejoice!

Rejoice is **joy** activated, joy in action, joy expressed and shared. It is noisy joy, and joy that makes a difference. *Rejoice* is the verb-form of joy.



Let's say it together:

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!²

If you have been around here for a while, you know that it is pretty common for us to work through a book of the Bible for a sermon series, like we have recently from Deuteronomy and Romans. We often go chapter by chapter, or even several chapters at a time. So for this series, one might assume that we are talking about a short, 4-part series since there are four chapters in Philippians... a good assumption, but a wrong one this time.

We will be taking this a bit slower, a more leisurely pace, a *joyride* if you will... so right now I have 15 sermons planned that we'll spread over ten months. Today it is the first eleven verses, most are fewer verses than that; I think there is one that is just two verses. There is one passage that I've assigned to two different sermons. We are going to have plenty of time to really let the message of Philippians sink in... to capture our minds and hearts.

¹ The New International Version. (2011). (Php 4:4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

² The New International Version. (2011). (Php 4:4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

I like to take this more *granular* approach from time to time, especially with a book like Philippians, since it is packed with so much powerful stuff. One of the reasons I like this approach is because I want to remind us all that the Bible is rational and relevant. We all can understand this, especially when we take a more studied approach, and each of us can apply it. My hope is that this is not the only occasion you take to study and apply the Bible. My hope is that you are involved in other studies, and are routinely (daily) studying and applying the Bible yourself.

It seems that this letter, from the Apostle Paul, to the Church in Philippi is marked by **joy** because it is different than many of Paul's letters. It is different because it is not ***solving a problem***. Many of Paul's letters were written to bring correction or warn of a problem; this letter has very little of that. It is predominantly a letter to the dear ones in this Church founded by the Apostle. It is a joyful, personal message.

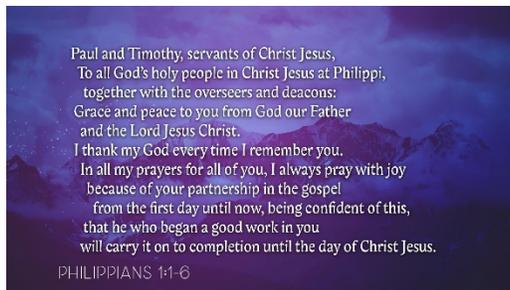
Philippi is a *real place* in northeast Greece, just 10-miles inland from the port on the Aegean Sea. The Church at Philippi enjoys the distinction of likely being the **first** church in Europe (what Paul knew as Macedonia). Unlike most other early churches, *1st Assembly of Philippi* was not started in a synagogue since there were apparently very few Jews; the believers in Philippi were *Gentiles like us*.



So... let's walk through the first eleven verses of **Philippians**.

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi,
together with the overseers and deacons:³



This is the Apostle Paul, formerly Saul the persecutor of the Church (Acts 9), who was remarkably turned around, called to be carry the Gospel to the Gentiles. The church in Philippi knew and loved Paul and his companion Timothy, as they founded the church there, as it is recorded in Acts chapter 16.

³ The New International Version. (2011). (Php 1:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The letter was written to ***all God's holy people in Christ Jesus... all*** who were part of the Body of Christ, ***all*** who were followers of Jesus, ***all*** who were holy and belonging to God because of faith in Jesus. And the leaders were recognized; here we see that they are identified as ***overseers*** and ***deacons***. Some translations say *bishops* and deacons, or *elders* and deacons; in our day we would likely say *pastors* and deacons, or maybe even the *ordained-leaders* and *lay-leaders*.

What we have here is an acknowledgement of different responsibilities for leaders, some given to the more pastoral tasks of the church (like preaching, marrying, burying, baptizing and such), while others focused on the more administrative functions (caring for the poor and widows, facilitating the work of the church and such). *We* are organized along similar lines to this very day.

² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴

Peace to you would be a common greeting *from* a Jew like Paul (*shalom*). *Joy to you* would be a common greeting *to* Greeks like the Philippians. But here Paul says grace and peace to you... not merely from himself, but from God.

I'm confident that the order was intentional, grace and peace... because there is only one way to find true peace. We have peace, within ourselves, among one another, and with our Holy God only by the grace of God. It had to be grace and peace... God's grace first before there could be true peace. This is the Gospel.

³ I thank my God every time I remember you.⁵

I wonder if that thankfulness was merely a response to Paul's fond memories, or if it was more a matter of discipline.

It seems that it could have been simply a response to the wonderful memories, thankful for the good friends and good times in Philippi, and thankful to God for what was accomplished through His mercy, grace, and power. It could be that the thankfulness was all in response to genuine affection.

But I suspect that it was more than mere *warm fuzzies*, more than simply thankfulness for the good fortune experienced in Philippi. I suspect, based on what we know about Paul, that thankfulness was also a discipline. Paul demonstrates that thankfulness is among the best possible attitudes. Thankfulness includes humility, and obedience, and submission to God's will and ways.

⁴ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 1:2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁵ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 1:3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Give it a try sometime. When you are remembering someone and find yourself angry, hurt, entitled and such... try being thankful. Work to see how you can be thankful, even in difficult circumstances. Be thankful for the lessons learned. Be thankful for the opportunity to serve. Be thankful for the opportunity to demonstrate qualities of Jesus like forgiveness and unconditional love.

It seems that through thankfulness we provide an environment within which God heals anger and pain.

Seriously... try it. Who knows, maybe I *tick you off* from time to time. Try being **thankful** and see how long being *ticked off* lasts. Maybe your spouse irritates you; try being thankful.

⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now,⁶

Paul prays with joy; there it is... **joy!**

This is a good time to consider Paul's circumstances while writing to the Church in Philippi. Sometimes we refer to Philippians, along with Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians, as the *Prison Epistles*. It might be easy to think of Paul giving thanks and praying with joy from some resort along the Mediterranean; the truth is, Paul was writing **in chains**. He was under arrest in Rome, the Capital of the Empire. And while he was likely treated reasonably well, under a sort of *house arrest*... he was actually on *death row*. This imprisonment ended in martyrdom; he was executed because of his Christian faith. While Paul wrote with thankfulness and joy, he knew that *his days were numbered*.

Apparently joy comes from somewhere other than our circumstances.

I always pray with joy ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel⁷

Partnership in the gospel is a curious phrase. I suppose that we generally think that the Gospel is a thing to be understood; the Gospel is to be had and believed. The Gospel is God's Good News for us to believe and obey. So partnership (or *fellowship in* or *participation in* as some translations have it)... partnership takes on a special meaning for the Gospel. The Gospel, apparently, is not something that we only *believe* or *have*; the Gospel is something that we **do**. It is a **life and way of life**... and since it is a partnership, it must allow us to *bring something to it*. A **partnership** in the Gospel would take on some of our abilities and preferences, our circumstances and opportunities.

⁶ The New International Version. (2011). (Php 1:4–5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁷ The New International Version. (2011). (Php 1:4–5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Furthermore, the Gospel is apparently something that happens *over time*, “from the first day until now.” Not merely an event that happens once, but a process that happens throughout time and into eternity. So, yes, it is vitally important that there is a beginning, a *moment and miracle* of believing the Gospel, but it is not only that first believing step. The Gospel is to be participated in, partnered in together with God and His People the Church.

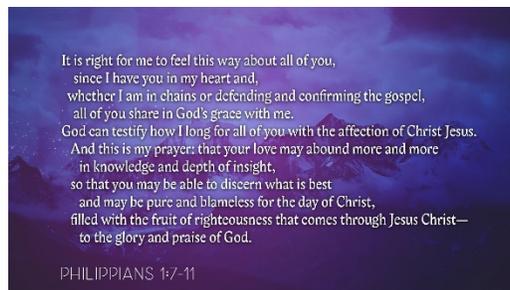
being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. ⁸

There it is, a *beginning* of God’s work in us and through us when we believe the Gospel, and a *carrying it on* to completion into eternity. God is not through with us when we come to faith; He is not through with us together. There is a good work to do, in partnership with God and His People. This is the Gospel.

It is worthwhile pointing out who **you** is in this passage. Philippians 1:6 is a favorite verse of many. And I suspect that when we read the verse, especially when we read it standing alone (out of context), we read you and me. This resonates with us individually, that God is not done with each of us or any of us, that he began something in us when we came to faith and is *working it out* in us. While that is true, that is not precisely what this verse says because the **you** is really a **y’all**.

There is little doubt that God works in us and through us individually; He saves us one-by-one as we believe the Gospel, coming to faith in Him. But while we are saved one-by-one, we are called to be a *People*. It is **together** that we are the Body of Christ; it is together that we will best do God’s work... partnering in the Gospel. What He started in His Church He will complete. That is true of the Church universal throughout the ages. It is true of each congregation, like ours... as well as through each member of the Body of Christ, each one.

⁷ It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me. ⁸ God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. ⁹



⁸ The New International Version. (2011). (Php 1:6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁹ The New International Version. (2011). (Php 1:7–8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

With verse 7, Paul gets back to the personal, expressing his affection for his friends, his spiritual children in the Gospel. And Paul alludes to his circumstances here, mentioning his chains. Remarkably, Paul was in literal chains **and** he was defending and confirming the Gospel. From prison, both in letters like this that have endured through the ages, and his own personal witness, Paul had the Philippians in his heart as he followed God's call, preaching the Gospel.

⁹ And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,¹⁰

Again, isn't this a curious turn of a phrase? How might we expect **love to abound**? Would it be with affection, or fervency? That if we love God we might be more devout, that our louds would be louder and our silences deeper and more enduring? Might it be with acts of charity and social justice? That if we love others we would give more, act more, and even hug more? Doesn't that seem like the way we might see love abound?

While all of that might be true, here the instruction is for love to abound in **knowing more** and **discerning better**. When it comes to knowing, our best knowing is to know Jesus. And when it comes to our insight, our discernment and judgement, it is best about applying what we know of Jesus to our times and circumstances. While love certainly abounds with affection and charity, love also abounds with our intellect and discernment.

¹⁰ so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ¹¹

Another literal translation, in the way that we usually talk, would be: so that we can know and do *what really counts*. The stuff that is pure and blameless is the stuff that is meaningful and lasts... the stuff that carries forward into eternity.

filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.¹²

This fruit of righteousness again affirms the idea that the Gospel is best understood as a process we do over time. The seed of faith is planted in us by God's mercy and grace as we believe, and as we partner and participate in the Gospel, there is fruit. We benefit from this work of God. We benefit individually, we benefit together as His people, and we benefit God's world. All this to the glory and praise of God.

¹⁰ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 1:9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹¹ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 1:10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹² *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 1:11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

We like to win, right? While our Mariners are not in first place, they are not anywhere near last place; they are above 500, winning more than losing (26-19, 2nd in the AL West). That is fun; we like that.

And while our Seahawks didn't make the playoffs last year; we are accustomed to being there, and it wasn't that long ago when we *won it all*.

We won it all... isn't it funny how we think we have a lot to do with that? Chris Jensen and I were laughing about that the other day... about how we seem to think that what we wear or eat, whether we are watching or not, the volume of our cheering or the extent of our fanaticism somehow has something to do with whether or not our team wins.

That is what is so powerful about the notion of a 12th Man when it comes to the Seahawks. There is something to it; there is a statistically verifiable home-field advantage, especially here at Century Link field for the Seahawks. And while that is fun... the impact of the 12th Man is miniscule when compared to any of the 11 on the field.

Nevertheless, it is fun to be any part of a winning team.

Here's the thing: God is calling us to be on **His** winning team. Not merely as fanatics on the sideline, merely observing what is going on... but literally being on the field, in the work, on the team, as **partners in the Gospel**.

Of all that is here in this passage, that is the phrase that I want to end with and consider a bit more for a few moments.

your partnership in the gospel¹³

God is calling us into active engagement with His Gospel... partnership and participation in the Gospel.



¹³ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 1:5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Perhaps you do not believe, you don't think of yourself as a Christian, **not on the team...** I'm sure glad you are here today. What is holding you back from taking a step of faith today? Are you worried of what you might lose... like control, or your personality, or initiative. Well... it is true that when we believe Jesus we do surrender our lives, our wills, our claims on control and such... but it is not so that we can become some sort of *boring robot*, or just set aside in *Heaven's waiting room*. A step of faith like this, believing in Jesus, is a step into an exciting life on the ultimate winning team. Not always easy, and not even *everyday winning* (consider Paul's imprisonment and martyrdom)... but worth every *knock* for the glory and praise of God.

Perhaps you are *just going along for the ride*, in the stands, just part of the crowd (fanatical or not), but not really on the field, engaged in a partnership with the Gospel. Friend, come down from the stands and get on the field. This is what Jesus saved you for, for partnership in the Gospel.

Perhaps you've **benched yourself**, entangled in sin, burdened by all manner of concerns other than the Gospel. This, too, is part of our partnership in the Gospel. What God began in us can be completed. Because of the power of the Gospel, we can be free from sin, and be partners in the Gospel. Contained in God's call to partner in the Gospel is the power to be free from sin. So if you have *benched yourself*, get up and get on the field. Sometimes we call that repentance. We can stop it; we can leave behind whatever it is that is benching us. This is the Gospel.

Perhaps it is time to *step up and make a change*; maybe it is time to be called up from the minors into the majors. Could today be a day to take another step of faith, to lean in?

I was thinking this week about one of the first one-on-one conversations I had in my office here when we came to serve nearly three years ago. I don't want to embarrass anyone or betray a confidence... but I'll *risk it*. It was with Dan Olson. He explained that he wasn't going to be an engineer any longer, retiring from that work... but he intended to step up and lean in to the work of ministry. Although he didn't say it quite this way, he was talking about a deeper, more meaningful partnership in the Gospel. It was a great conversation... but a lot of you know how I am, I took a wait and see approach. Well... I waited, and I saw. When it comes to partnership in the Gospel, Dan has stepped up his game.

I'll tell you *when* I flashed back to that meeting about three years ago, it was as I was leaving Wednesday night, pulling out of the parking lot, and I saw Dan coming down the stairs out of the corner of my eye. It then occurred to me that Dan was helping with the boys in Royal Rangers. I know that Dan would rather have been with the men's group that meets on Wednesdays... but last Wednesday he was with the Rangers, because we needed the help, or more accurately those boys needed to see the Gospel through Dan's actions that night. Dan has stepped it up, in prayer, and service, and support, and leadership. He's a great, practical example of one partnering in the Gospel among us.

That is merely one example; there are lots of examples of folk partnering in the Gospel.

Let's respond to God's call and be partners in the Gospel.

