

JOY AND THE PLACE I'M IN

Philippians 1:1–26

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Philippians 1:1–26 is divided into two parts. First, verses 1–11, the letter of joy and introduction. All of Paul's letters have an introduction. Then verses 12–26, describing joy in the place he is in. The introduction to the letter really consists of three parts: the greeting Paul sends (verses 1–2); the gratitude Paul shows (verses 3–8); and the growth Paul seeks (verses 9–11).

I. The letter of joy and introduction (verses 1-11)

A. We want to begin by looking at the greeting which he sends. "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:1–2, NIV). Paul's letters always begin courteously, with a greeting. And unlike our letters, where we sign our name at the end, and we have to wait to get to the end to find out who wrote it, the ancient people did things far more smart. They put the author's name at the beginning, so you know right away who it is that is addressing the letter.

There are three elements to the greeting that Paul sends that are reflected in these two verses. One certainly is the theme of the obedience of the servant. Acts 16 tells something about the obedience of Paul in coming to the city of Philippi. If I could lay out a map of the biblical world for you and trace it, it would look something like this. The founding of the church at Philippi began at a time when Paul and Barnabas were getting ready to go on what is called "the second missionary journey." They have an argument between them as to whether or not to take John Mark with them on this second missionary journey. They do not come to an agreement because Paul wants to leave him behind and Barnabas insists on taking him. So rather than forcing the

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issue, Paul and Barnabas agree to separate and Barnabas takes John Mark and goes elsewhere, to Cyprus. Paul takes a person from the church of Jerusalem named Silas and heads out north across what is present-day Syria. When he gets north of the Mediterranean, he heads west and overland goes through his home of Tarsus and into the area where he founded churches on the first missionary journey—Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Antioch, working his way westward.

In the moments I have to describe that one is not able to describe, the amount of time that passed in making this trip, as the crow flies, it would have been 400 miles walking, not including all the ups and downs and curves of the trail. Paul, however, is not content to stay in the area where churches already existed and that he had brought into being with Barnabas. So he strikes out again west, in what is modern-day Turkey. He leaves Antioch of Pisidia, and begins walking toward the Roman province of Asia, which is western Turkey, no doubt headed for the capital city of Ephesus. But the Spirit says he cannot go there. So he turns north, trying to go into northern Turkey, south of the Russian border. The Spirit says he can't go there. By that time, he has walked, as the crow flies, an additional 400 miles. Probably if he had walked straight and never retraced his steps or never taken a curving mountain route, he would have walked straight 800 miles. But in all likelihood, he had by that time walked 1,200 miles. During that long trip, he had with him Silas, and then he picked up Timothy at Lystra. But he did not know where he was going, except the Spirit was telling him where *not* to go.

Some of you in this audience have had that experience, of the Lord telling you *not* to do something and you sure wish he would tell you what you *should* do. But all he seems to be doing right now is saying, “No, you can't do this,” “No, you can't do that.” The wonderful thing about the apostle Paul on this trip is that he never lies down in the path and starts kicking and screaming and saying to God, “I'm not going to take another step until You tell me what to do!”

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I imagine there were times when the young missionary Timothy said, “Where are we going?” And Paul said, “I don’t know where we are going, I just know where we are not going.” So in that spirit he continued to walk those hundreds of miles.

He finally gets where he can walk no further, because there is the ocean. While there, at this city of Troas, he sees a mystical vision saying, “Come over to Macedonia [which is Northern Greece, south of present-day Yugoslavia] and help us” (Acts 16:9). So on the basis of that man of Macedonia, he catches a ship, and by this time he has picked up Luke. So there are four full-time pastors going to evangelize and pastor a church where there is not even a single member. That’s a lot of faith, to take four full-time people into a place where there are no Christians, to plant the church.

The journey by boat is another 200 miles. So by the time he reaches Philippi, he’s 1,000 miles away from Antioch of Syria, where he started out. When he gets there, there is no man from Macedonia to meet him. No mayor with the key to the city. We know from history that Philippi at this time was a Roman colony planted right in the middle of northern Greek culture.

So Paul arrives in that city and, as was always Paul’s custom, he looked first where the Jews might be worshipping, and he’d got to the synagogue and explained the Scriptures on the Sabbath Day. But Philippi didn’t have a synagogue. That means it didn’t have ten Jewish men twenty years and older. So he goes out to where he knows that, if there’s a group of less than ten Jewish men, they would gather for worship. As was the custom, the Jews on the Sabbath day, if they didn’t have a synagogue, would worship by a river outside of the city. Paul goes out there and finds a small company of women. Contrary of the views of some who think of Paul as a woman-hater, Paul explains to that group of ladies who are gathered that Sabbath day by the river what the gospel of Jesus Christ is. One of them opens her heart to the Lord. Her name is

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Lydia. She became the first convert in Europe. Then she opens her home to Paul and to his company.

They go to her home and then Paul begins walking the streets of the town. Still no action. No man of Macedonia has met him. And no male converts to the church. Finally, in the marketplace, Acts 16 tells us that a demon-possessed girl met him there, who began crying out after them.

Paul turned around and cast the demon out of the girl, and her owner was so mad—because he'd lost his source of income from the girl's fortune-telling—that he had Paul arrested. Paul and Silas were arrested, thoroughly beaten by the Romans, and thrown into prison.

By that time, I would have been second-guessing God. I would have been reflecting over these last few months and the fact that this trip had begun with an argument with my best friend. And saying, "Maybe I got out of God's will." Then I would've been thinking about the hundreds of miles that I had walked not knowing the will of God. I would have begun to think how I had served God faithfully and done my best for Him and obeyed this visionary call to go to Macedonia and meet some man who never showed up. I'd have said, "Lord, if this is how You treat people who follow You, if I ever get out of this jail... Get me out!" But there is this beautiful moment in the jail at midnight, they are found singing praises unto God. That was the key to the whole founding of the church at Philippi, and really a key to the apostle Paul's life.

There are moments in our life when we are so down and things have so fallen in upon us, that we want to throw in the towel, cover ourselves with self-pity and outright blame God for the jam we're in. It's at that very moment when we are at the lowest and we are the most needy, that we need, like Paul, to release a hymn of praise to God.

That was a catalyzing moment for Paul, because suddenly everything broke loose. God sent an earthquake, and the man of Macedonia in the person of the Roman jailer got saved. And the

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church was born in that city. Because a man had simply been a servant of the Lord and had gone where the Lord had sent him, even though the journey was difficult.

So behind this greeting to the church is the obedience of a servant and secondly, the operation of the Spirit.

The Spirit had been at work, collecting the founding members of the church. Every church, I suppose, has its charter members. When Paul says “to all the saints of Christ Jesus at Philippi,” you can, from Acts 16, put three people there—Lydia, an unnamed demon-possessed girl who was delivered, and an unnamed Roman jailer. These three people tell us what the church of Jesus Christ is all about. It’s not a Rotary Club, people gathered together who have the same income, the same disposition, the same interest. But the church of Jesus Christ is the only thing on earth that unites people who are totally different from one another. When they found Jesus Christ, they had something in common. The church of Jesus Christ is not made out of people who had simply the same social interests and social identity. It is that unique instrument of God in the world that has the stamp of the Lord upon it. The thing that unites the church is not society, and not all being alike—all being the same age, having the same interests. It’s being alive to Jesus Christ. That’s the operation of the Spirit. No one can build anything like the church except the Spirit of the living God.

That’s part of what Paul is saying when he greets the saints of Christ Jesus. Then, this greeting also reflects the opposition of society that, when the world is opposing the church, we find Paul, in Acts 16, being sorely tested by circumstances at Philippi. Paul says, “Grace and peace.” There is no peace unless there is, first of all, the grace of God. Persons vainly look for peace if they do not first find God’s grace.

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B. Then Paul, in verses 3–8, shows gratitude for three things. For life shared together, verses 3–4, “I thank my God every time I remember you” (Philippians 1:3, NIV). Then labor, consistently giving thanks that they indeed have been with him, partners in the gospel, and that God had begun a good work in them and would complete it. Then he gives thanks for the love that is ever-experienced. He says “I have you in my heart” (Philippians 1:7, NIV). Those were the days before pictures. But Paul says, “I have you in my heart.” When I want to feel good, I get in my heart and read the picture of you people, who I dearly love.

C. Then Paul seeks some growth (verses 9–11). He gives a greeting, he expresses gratitude and he seeks growth. What he is seeking growth for is love. He seeks first a profusion of love, verse 9, “That your love may abound more and more” (NIV). He seeks both a perception and a perfection in love “so that you may be able to discern what it best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ” (NIV).

II. Paul, once he comes to verse 12, is done with the introductory remarks—his greetings, his gratitude and the growth which he seeks—and begins to really reveal his own heart about being joyful in the place he is in.

Right now, as he writes this letter, he is in a prison cell. Philippians is one of the most positive letters in all of Scripture. It's a letter that abounds in joy. It puts to rest the idea that one must be in pleasant circumstances to be in a pleasant frame of mind and spirit. In fact, one of the keys to what is going on in Paul's life is the fact that, in the first thirty verses, he mentions the name of Jesus Christ seventeen times. I think that has a lot to do with his mental state. Because when we are down, the mention and the adoration of the Lord's name begins to go down with our being down. But Paul is up on the Lord. Because he is, God helps him to be up in his emotional state.

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This place that he is in has three dimensions to it. It has a bitterness that can spoil. It has blessings that can surprise, and it has a boldness that can sing.

A. When we are in difficult place in our lives it is easy to become bitter. And no bitter person is happy or joyful. There are three things that could have made Paul bitter. The first is the sheer unfairness of Paul's bonds. He is in chains. And that's not fair. It's not fair because in Acts 23:29, the Roman governor who had held him first under arrest said, after two years of holding him, "There is no charge against him that deserves death or imprisonment." The governor seceding him said, "I find he has done nothing deserving of death." His whole imprisonment had come about as a result of injustice. Paul originally got arrested while he was going to do a good deed. He had brought to the saints of Jerusalem a very large offering, which was meant to help them in their poverty. While bringing that offering and during the time he had been in Jerusalem, he was arrested.

So often things go wrong for us, just when we set out to do something we think is splendid, that will benefit the work of God and the people of God. He is held in a stinking jail in Syria and no one wants to be in jail then or today, held for three years, and finally he is let go and is taken as a prisoner by ship, which cracks up in the middle of the Mediterranean and he winds up shipwrecked and washed onto an island where he winters as a prisoner. Then he gets to Rome, where he's imprisoned for two years, during this time Philippians is written. There are five years of his life—when he's at the apex of his career as a missionary. When he's ready to cash in his Social Security check and retire at a villa or be a missionary to Spain and further west. And there's this unfairness of five years of his life being taken away from him for seemingly no good purpose at all.

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We have to, as Christians, cope with unfairness in our life. We can think of things that have happened to us that simply were not fair. We didn't deserve the treatment that we got. We didn't deserve the breaks that we got. You were treated unfairly. You didn't get the grade you deserved. Or you weren't loved or cared for when you needed to be cared for. Resentment can seep into our life like a poison, if we let it. And there's certainly reason there for Paul to be bitter because of the sheer unfairness of life.

Lots of things in life are not fair. How we handle those times is going to determine the quality of person we are going to be. For absolutely, in some situations, there's no difference we can make in our environment, no difference in our circumstances. The only difference that can be made is in our perception of what is happening. The only difference that can be made is in our character and our response. Paul had a bitterness that can spoil, with the sheer unfairness of the situation he was in. Perhaps you're in an unfair situation in your life that even a homeless dog shouldn't have happen to them what has happened to you.

Then there's the subtle unfriendliness of Paul's colleagues, the second reason why he could be bitter. He notes that some are preaching Christ, verse 15, out of envy and rivalry. Why in the world would anyone do that? Because there are ladder-climbers, Paul knows, among the clergy in the church. They're saying, "Paul is in prison. Who's going to be the next one to take his title? We can have his place of influence and stature in the church." Paul knows that there are people that are preaching for fame. People who are preaching for position. People who are preaching for financial rewards. Using the ministry instead of letting God use them in the ministry.

There is no exception to that today. There are people with orthodox theology who are unorthodox in their lifestyle. They are preaching Christ, but they are elbowing Paul out of the way. There are a lot of believers who have dropped out of Christian service because they've been

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mistreated by another believer. Every once in a while, I look at another ministry whose ethics perhaps I do not agree with, whose motives I suspect. I get all wrought up about doing something about that and correcting it. Then I remember Paul's words, that if Christ is preached, whatever the motive, he will rejoice that Christ is preached. I think that may be the way to avoid being a church cynic. It's easy to be a cynic in the Christian church today, as well as in the world. A cure to that cynicism is backing off and saying, "If Jesus is being preached and if God hasn't called me to correct that situation, I will simply stand back and rejoice over the good that is happening and leave to God the rest."

I have found there are a lot of situations I'd like to straighten out in the body of Christ, but God hasn't called me to straighten them out. I've volunteered more than once, but He's chosen not to give me that opportunity. Paul's a Christian realist. He recognizes that some who name the name of Christ and serve Him do not serve Him out of love, and he has to come to grips with that subtle unfriendliness of people who preach Christ from selfish ambition.

So there's unfairness and unfriendliness.

And the third thing that can make Paul bitter is the seeming unfaithfulness of his Lord. He has been a prisoner in Palestine these long years, on the sea, in chains in Rome. Surely people were praying for him, praying for his release. Paul was praying for his own release, but in spite of the prayer, God has not intervened. God has allowed things to happen which have the potential of great hurt in his life. It's no wonder Paul is not popular with the positive confession movement, because many negative things happen in his life, which in spite of prayer, did not change. There was this seeming unfairness of the Lord. The Lord could have, at any time, released Paul from chains. So Paul, I'm sure, went through moments of depression where he wondered if the Lord had forsaken him.

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We identify so much with him because we can see, if we were in a similar situation, we would be having the same kinds of problems. We've had them ourselves. There is bitterness that can spoil in life. Every one of us will face it. If you haven't already, it's going to happen. It's a test of character in the Christian life. How you're going to respond to bad breaks and unexpected things that threaten to sweep you off your feet and make you bitter against God and other people.

I'm convinced that a great deal of mental illness and trauma that we're seeing in our society come as a result of not being able to work through in a positive mental health, a spiritual mental health-way the terrible trauma that has been done to us in life. And the bitterness of hurts stretching from our childhood years on to our adult years has been such, that it has created a poison in our atmosphere which is sometimes difficult for us to articulate, but it's there and it's saying, "I want to lash out," and it hurts so bad. There's that bitterness that can spoil.

B. That's why we need to turn to this second dimension that Paul faces and that is the blessedness that can surprise.

If we will look at all the things that can make us bitter, we can find the blessedness that is there for us to take advantage of. There are three for Paul.

The first is that, because of this trial, opportunity has been given for him to proclaim the gospel. So he says in verse 13, "As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ" (NIV). The palace guard is the Praetorian Guard. It consisted of the crack troops of Caesar. We know that there were about sixteen thousand soldiers. They were headquartered in Rome. The soldier served in this elite part of civil service for sixteen years. At the end, he retired with the free gift of his citizenship and a large sum of retirement money. These people who would never have attended a synagogue, a Christian worship service of any kind. But one by one, sometimes in groups of two, they were hand

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clasped by a short length of chain to Paul's arm or foot. We know from historical records that they served in four-hour shifts. This was the common shift of the imperial guard. So every day of his two years of Roman imprisonment, Paul had a shift of soldiers for four hours, six times a day. He had a different soldier clasped to him, and sometimes he may have had two. So everyday the opportunity of witnessing to six to twelve people was brought to him. You can be sure that in that time Paul was not idle.

A soldier would naturally get curious and ask him, "Why are you here?" And Paul could be excused in saying, "Because everybody's been nasty to me. I had a raw deal, and God's deserted me... and Lord knows why I'm here." But instead, he takes the attitude that "God has allowed me to be here to tell you about the Lord Jesus, who was crucified and rose again from the dead." By the time he is through witnessing one-on-one, he is able to say that the gospel has come, even into Caesar's household. That means his inner administration. The gospel got into places where it would not have gone had he not been a prisoner. Maybe you're in a place where you're saying, "I don't want to live here. I hate it." "I don't want to be doing what I'm doing." But if we will all look around us, we will see that there is an opportunity in that place we're in to bear witness to Jesus Christ. Life is made up of positives and negatives, and in that very difficult experience, we can choose what our response will be, whether we will blame God and sing the blues, or whether we will praise God and sing His praises. The way we respond is going to determine how we come out of that whole devastating circumstance. Opportunities given for the gospel. There are times when God doesn't change our circumstances and we must ask Him, "God, change me in the circumstance. Give me opportunity to take a stand for You."

A second blessedness that Paul found was that there's not only opportunity given for the gospel, but there was ministry achieved among other Christians. "Because of my chains, most of the

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brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the Word of God more courageously and fearlessly” (Philippians 1:14, NIV). We sometimes have the point of view that, if we let anyone know our struggles and our weaknesses, it’s not going to give them courage or hope. It will discourage them. But such is not the case. It is when we let our life become transparent with one another that we give each other courage to live for Christ. It is when I am weak that I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:10). It is when I am weak that others find the strength of God. Paul found that his imprisonment, instead of scaring other believers, had in fact given them a new boldness to witness, because they had watched his boldness. Paul literally lives out what he had earlier written to the Roman Christians, “We rejoice in our sufferings because suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope never disappoints us” (Romans 5:3–4). Opportunities to minister to others abound in our time of need and suffering.

Paul had not only found that the gospel was advanced and others were ministered to, but he found qualities secured in his own life. “For I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance [or, “for my salvation”]” (Philippians 1:19, NIV). What Paul means here by “deliverance” or “salvation” is not the idea of salvation from sin or salvation in the sense of becoming a Christian. But it has a reference to the emergence of the whole and healthy personality. That he is also going to come out of this well. For greater grace is at work in him. God is not only working in the Praetorian Guard. And God is not only working in other Christians. But God is working in him for whole spiritual health. There is a quality of life being advanced in Paul through his imprisonment that could be advanced in no other way.

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If you could look at the situation you may be in and say, “What good could come out of this?” If you’ll hold steady, and if you’ll let your heart stay open to God, and remain sweet in your disposition and personality, and instead of blaming, and instead of speaking things that are going to be hurtful to you and to others, remain calm and say to God, “Though he slay me, yet will I trust him” (Job 13:15), you will find that strength comes into your life. It is a wonderful thing to be able to go through the worse that you can imagine and find, when you have gone through it, that you haven’t been knocked off your feet, that your feet have found solid ground. I don’t know of anything that builds Christian character better than to take on a real wrestling match with something that is bigger than you. Something that is more difficult, something that is stronger than you. And you wrestle that thing to the ground. And you find, as you continue to wrestle and struggle with it, that there develops a resiliency in your heart and you say, after that thing has been thrown at you, “I survived it. Christ in me survived it. I took the worst blow that I could take, and I’m alive and in God, and I’m still serving the Lord.”

Somehow, when you come out of one of those experiences and you choose not to be bitter, and you choose to continue to praise the Lord, you get back up and say, “I’m ready for another one. Let’s see what’s going to get hit next!” But through that, a process of strength is being developed. Weightlifters get big muscles because they keep lifting bigger loads. What is true on the physical dimension is true on the spiritual dimension. I have never been a person who liked to work out physically, so the Lord more than compensated by causing me to work out spiritually. While my physical muscles may be small, I hope my spiritual muscles are getting big. What is being secured in life? A Christ-likeness. Paul is learning from his Lord, who went to the cross and was not bitter about it, who said, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46). Not with a tinge of anger in His voice, but with a truly innocent, questioning

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heart. Here was, secured in Christ's suffering, an example for us to follow in His steps. Every trial we face is producing an opportunity for us to advance the gospel. It's producing an opportunity to minister to other Christians. It's securing qualities in our life that would not be there if we did not walk through this.

Paul has met that bitterness that can spoil with blessedness that can surprise. And he's found Christ sufficient. We would do so much better in our life if, instead of wishing that God would make things better for us and change our income or location or residence, we would take it and ask Christ to beautify our heart where we are. If rather than seeking a new place, we would ask the Lord to redecorate the present place and do a refurbishment on the inside of our hearts and lives.

C. This leads us to the third thing about Paul's joy in the place he is in and that is: He finds a boldness that can sing (Philippians 1:20–26).

Anyone can sing when the sun's shining bright, but you need a song in your heart at night. Paul finds that there is some boldness that comes for him as he continues to praise God and serve Him. One boldness is that he is exercising concern for the glory of God. Verse 20 says, "I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death" (NIV). Paul is saying, "Lord, help me to face this situation. Martyrdom may be waiting. More unfairness, more time in prison. You've not promised me any quick escape. But whatever is facing me, help me to conduct myself in such a way that I give honor and glory to You and people can look at me and say, 'That's how a Christian ought to face a problem like that.'" A concern for Christ's glory. Then in verse 21: a contempt for his own comfort. "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (NIV).

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Then a confidence in the Lord's control, "If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body" (Philippians 1:22–24, NIV). He was confident that his life was in the Lord's hands. He didn't lay burdens or demands upon God. Like, "Unless You do this for me, I don't know if I can ever trust You again. Unless You get me out of here, I'm not sure I can ever witness for You again." No demands upon God. Just the confidence that God has His hand on our life.

All through Paul's prison experience, he has a confidence in the Lord's control. Things may seem out of hand, but they're not ever out of God's hand. They're always in His hand, and they are secure, and He is secure because He's in God's hand. No matter how dark the night and how bad the storm, Christ is with us. He's either in the boat or He's got His hands underneath the boat and is holding on. So there is a boldness that can come, because we have confidence in the Lord's control.

Paul has a fourth dimension to his boldness, that he's then ready to live for others. He's ready to check out and go be with the Lord. He's not one of these persons who talks about heaven and then doesn't want to go there when the time comes. I'm amazed about how many of us Christians talk about heaven and then, when the opportunity is afforded us, we don't really want to take God up on it. I hope that when my time comes to go, I'll have the attitude of Paul, that to die is much better.

Sometimes our prayers for healing for someone block out the opportunity to have an authentic conversation with one who is dying and wants to tell us what's going on in their heart. Before the coma. Before all the tubes go in. I hope I can encourage you when you lie on a bed of suffering and you sense that maybe death is imminent for you, that you'll somehow, in the midst of your

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praying for healing, find ways to reach out and touch your family, and they'll touch you in a way that will be helpful. I hope I have that opportunity for myself. I don't want to go in a quick accident. I'd like to have a few minutes to tell the people of my family who are near and dear to me what they mean to me. I hope I have that time.

Paul has that view of death. Death is the enemy, but it's the opportunity by which we go to be with the Lord. In verses 23 and 24, he says, in essence, "To die is far better, but to live is necessary," he says, "for you." When you talk about a healthy self-image, here is a person who has a marvelous self-image, who is locked away in his imprisonment, but who says, "My life is valuable and I'm able to help people and to get people to be motivated to serve the Lord. And it may just be, if the Lord has me live any longer, that it's not because I need any more time, but because people need me for a little while longer. If I'm going to live, it's not from a selfish motivation. It's from the motivation to help others."

Maybe we ought to ask ourselves, what would most benefit the people we live with—if we die, would that be the greatest benefit? Or if we live?

Paul has the boldness that can sing.

I've directed this message as much to myself as to anyone here. Joy in the place I am in. All of us go through times when we wish we could change places and think we would be happier if we could. The Lord does have control over our lives and He does block us when He doesn't want us to do things. Paul said, "You can be happy and joyful and satisfied in the place you're in." You don't need to change places to be joyful. You don't need to change occupations even, although for some, that may be God's will. You can be joyful in the place you're in, if you'll learn, as we struggle, to bring the stresses to God. Learn to find that our security is in God and not in other people's approval or disapproval.

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The bottom line is to have the Lord look at us and approve us in words that seem so often trite, but are nevertheless true. It really matters to me what my family, my closest friends, the church, thinks of me. But it matters most what God thinks of me. Life can be delightful and not be lived in a palace. Life can be wonderful and filled with joy, and it can be lived like some of you are living, in a single utility apartment, where the rent is sky-high and the furniture is sparse and the food is not all that good. But it's loyalty to the Lord and our bondedness to Jesus Christ that makes the difference in our heart and life. Sure, we take joy in our work. Sure, we take joy in our friends and our family. But the ultimate source of joy is Christ in us, Christ being shaped in us, Christ's attitudes dominating our life. For if I am in the right place and have the wrong attitudes and the wrong priorities in that place, I will not be a joyful person. If only God can help me to be joyful in the place I am in—for some of you, it's a place of separation; for some of you it's a divorce; for some of you, some things have been in your life that you did not ask for, that are unfair and you did not seek. It's tough to be joyful in that place. For some of you, it's being a senior citizen and wishing you had your youth all over again and your kids back in your home running around tugging at your clothes. Those days can't come back now. It's finding "What, Lord, do You have for me today?" It's saying, "God, I thank You for where I'm at. Help me where I am to see the opportunities to bear witness to You, to see the ways that I can strengthen others and to see that refinement of character that You're bringing into my life, through this time and through this place, that are making me a better and purer and wiser and more loving servant of Yours. Help me to be joyful in the place I am."

Closing Prayer

Father, we pray that in our hearts. That Your power in us will help us to resist and overcome the tremendous mood of our day to escape, to drown ourselves in leisure time or in chemicals or in

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dependency of some kind or in despair. And that each of us right now, from our hearts, could say to You, “Lord, I thank You for the place I’m in. Help me to be joyful in the place I’m in. We know, Lord, that Your great pleasure is to answer that prayer. Bring Your joy deep into our life. We ask, in Jesus’ name. Amen.