

JOY AND THE PERSON I AM

Philippians 3:1–4:1

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The theme of our study in Philippians is “The Life of Continual Rejoicing.” We have looked so far at the themes of joy and the circumstances I am in and joy and the people I’m with. How often this seems to be so directly related to the circumstances we find ourselves in and the people we find ourselves with. Paul is reminding us, through this letter out of the prison cell, that true joy is not rooted in favorable circumstances. Nor is it necessarily rooted in favorable people. But that we can find a deeper level of joy than the things that are around us and the people that are around us.

We may have favorable circumstances and we may have favorable people, but still have no joy within ourselves, because we are not satisfied or happy with ourselves. So tonight we focus on the theme “Joy and the Person I Am.”

There are probably three really basic questions in life: “Who is He?” “Who am I?” And, “Who are you?” Somehow, if we can get the answers to all of those questions, we can go on living rather successfully.

“Who am I?” I struggled a great deal of my life with feelings of ugliness and dumbness and lack of social acceptance, until, a while back, I looked into the rearview mirror of my car as I was driving and said to myself, “George, I like you.” It was kind of a significant moment for me, because it happened so spontaneously. I grew up in a spiritual environment where, somehow, that sounded egotistical or prideful. We were not taught to like or to love ourselves. There is obviously an unhealthy way of doing that. But to be able to say about the way you are, at any particular point in life, “I am content with who I am and what God made me.” I’m no longer

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saying to the Lord, “Were you paying attention when I was assembled?” And, “Why did you give the other person all the talent and looks and intelligence and the ability to be a social charmer and why did I wind up as I am?”

We discover who we are, obviously, when we’ve had a vital personal experience with the Lord Jesus Christ. We begin to work out that experience in our lives.

This evening, we see a window in Paul’s life—Philippians 3—and find him talking about himself. As we look at this chapter, I want to see the joy that is reflected, through maybe a negative way, which will segue into this passage—look at some dead end streets for the attainment of joy in our personal life.

What Paul does in this particular chapter is discuss three ways that we do not find joy if we’re looking for acceptance of ourselves in God.

I. The first dead-end street for the attainment of joy is a relationship with God that is based upon our own personal performance (verses 1–11).

“Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord!” (Philippians 3:1, NIV). Isn’t it interesting that Paul would say “finally” to his sermon midway through it? Ministers are notorious for saying, “I’m coming to the end,” and they keep on going. We do this because it’s biblical and because the apostles did it. We always try to be correct. So Paul, midway through the letter, is saying, “Finally, 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. Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a

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Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Philippians 3:2–11, NIV).

Paul here is saying that a dead end for joy is a relationship with God based upon our own personal performance. It is referring to the legalists of his day called the “Judaizers.” Or people in the Christian church who came out of Judaism, who tried to bring their package of do’s and don’ts, and their relationship to the law on to their Christian faith. What he is saying is, “I’ve tried that route. I excelled in that route of basing my relationship with God on how well I was doing. I discovered that there was no joy if you base your relationship with God on performance. Even if you succeed in keeping all the rules, as did the Pharisees, that still does not bring the true inward joy. Joy comes about as a result of Christ bringing us into His family and giving us himself.

I heard of an adopted child who was visited by natural born twins into his mom and dad’s life. This little boy was old enough to make a comment on the occasion of the birth of these twins. He said, “I feel sorry for them because they did not have the chance to be chosen.”

Paul reflects that kind of self-worth when he thinks of Jesus Christ. Christ chose us.

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The source of our joy then is to know Christ. To know both His resurrection and His suffering.

Maybe that is something that we find a difficult time embracing in our own life—that call to embrace Christ’s suffering—because we would like, all of us, things to be pleasant, or everything in life to sort of turn out ice cream and peaches and be pleasant.

But there is a part of the Christian life that cries out to know God in such a way that we can walk with Him when we are severely tested and not let the floor be swept out from under us, because of trials through which we pass. It is Christ in us who gives us strength. So it is so easy to live with goals that depend upon other people to be fulfilled, which are dependent upon favorable circumstances. I think that we need to be very careful about relating or rooting our happiness on what someone else will do. I know I’m guilty of saying, “If such and such a person would only do this, it’d make me feel better.”

It’s so nice to read the apostle Paul and to recognize that he did not root his joy in what someone else was going to do for favorable circumstances. But he adopted goals that were possible for him to attain within himself. That goal is “that I may know him” (Philippians 3:10). That is possible to attain.

That’s so different than saying, “My happiness is tied up with getting this mortgage taken care of.” “My happiness is tied up with getting acceptance by this person.” “My happiness is tied up with unraveling all the knots in my relationships.” Relationships depend upon two people cooperating. One person cannot do relationships by themselves. And circumstances require favorable disposition of events to be able to put together a very good circumstance in our own life. But there are some things just I and God can do.

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Paul says, “If you try to do that by keeping the law, you will find that no one can keep the law. But if you make it your goal to know Christ and His sufferings and His resurrection, you will find joy in your experience.”

To know His resurrection is to experience His victory. I feel toward the resurrection of Jesus Christ much like a sports fan shouting, “We won!” when they didn’t have much to do with it. They’re able to say that because the team which they were rooting for had won. And they therefore identified with a victory that someone else had won.

As Christians, we do the same thing. In all of life, we keep saying, “We won! We won!” It isn’t as though we ourselves won. It’s, He won! And we participate in His triumph. So to know Christ in our inner life, above all things—if that is our goal, it will keep us away from judging ourselves on the basis of personal performance.

II. The second dead end street that Paul talks about, that will keep us from joy, is a relationship with the Lord that has grown stagnant.

“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. [I love the charity Paul is allowing for disagreement.] Only let us live up to what we have already attained” (Philippians 3:12–16, NIV).

A relationship with the Lord that has not grown stagnant.

Probably you can guess that, by the time that Paul writes this, if you do a chronology of his life, he’s around sixty-one years of age. I wrote a resume of the apostle Paul as though he were

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applying for a ministerial position somewhere. It's pretty impressive. He looks at his resume and makes a comment in regard to it that, although he's done all this, he has not yet attained and he's not looking back toward the past. He's looking toward the future.

Saul of Tarsus, rabbi, age sixty-one (probably by the time he writes Philippians he's sixty-one).

Education: Magna cum laude, Jerusalem School for students studying the law.

Professor: Gamaliel (a professor known outside the New Testament and a very important professor within Judaism). *In those days a student was known for who he studied under, not where he studied. Today, if you put Harvard after your name in your resume, it looks pretty impressive. But in those days, it was who you studied with.*

Work experience: Pastor at Antioch, world's first Gentile church.

Additional: Founder of churches: Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus.

Tradesman: Skilled tentmaker. Spiritual scout and coach. *Here are the people that Paul birthed into the ministry, and you pick this up and go through all the Book of Acts, and his thirteen letters, and you find that these are the people that God helped him to assemble and thrust into the ministry: Timothy, Titus, Luke, Phoebe, Priscilla, Aquila, Tertius, Stephanas, Gaius, Sopater, Aristarchus, Secundus, and many others. Thirty-seven names in the list of people that he personally equipped for the ministry.*

Then he could have added to his resume: Author. Up to the writing of the letter to the Philippians, he had authored the letter the Galatians, the letters to the Thessalonians, the letters to the Corinthians, and the letters to the Romans. He could have rested after that!

Then under the category of "experienced and seasoned veteran," he could have added 2

Corinthians 11:23–28, which by this time he had already lived, "I have worked much harder,

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been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches” (2 Corinthians 11:23–28, NIV).

What an impressive resume! Yet Paul is saying at this point of life, “I haven’t already obtained. I’m still going forward. In fact, one of the most impressive of all of Paul’s remarks—to me—on this theme of “I have not yet attained it” is when he is writing his last letter to Timothy—2 Timothy 4—and he’s in prison in Rome, a dungeon, a cold and damp holding cell. And he’s telling Timothy what he needs. He has some very simple requests. He says, “Bring the cloak” (which suggests that he is cold and has only a thin wrap to keep him warm), “and by the way, come before winter” (which means he wants it before it really gets cold). And he says, bring the books and the parchments.” The parchments I can understand, because that was the Scriptures. But what I can’t understand is that he wants the books, which is Paul’s reading material, in addition to the Scriptures.

If learning were a simple utilitarian thing—that is, to study, to get a grade, and you only read books because you have to pass a test—then Paul was not that kind of a person. Because when you’re facing death, you don’t need to learn anything more. You could put your mind in park at that point and not do anything the rest of your life. But Paul, facing certain execution, is telling

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Timothy, “I need books. Bring them.” Why does he need books? Because he has more sermons to prepare? Because he has more letters to write? No, he just wants to know! He has this quest in life and living, and because his stance in life is always forward, and not backward, he’s going to press on.

It is a dangerous time in life when we look back and say, “The best of our years are over.” Or we look back and say, “That was such a wonderful time, I think that was the best time of my life.”

Let’s treasure the memories that are in the past, but let’s not get stuck in them. Not that I’ve already attained, but rather, “forgetting what is behind,” washing it out and starting afresh.

Because it isn’t our failures in the past, it isn’t our successes in the past that count as pertains to today. It is what this day holds and what tomorrow holds.

I love the story of Robert E. Lee. After the Civil War, Lee visited a Kentucky lady who took him to the remains of a grand old tree in front of her house. There, she bitterly cried that the limbs and the trunk had been destroyed by federal artillery fire. She looked to Lee, the commander of the South, for a word condemning the north, or at least sympathizing with her loss. After a brief silence, Lee said, “Cut it down, my dear madam, and forget it.” It is better to forgive the injustices of the past than to allow them to remain and allow bitterness to take root and poison the rest of our life. Forgetting what is behind.

Some live with the mindset that their greatest victories and service to Christ is behind them.

That’s a deadly mentality. Others live with the idea that they have made so many mistakes and there is so much there that has ruined and poisoned the well of life, that there is no hope for the future. We need that wonderful experience of forgetting and going on fresh with the Lord and not letting our relationship with the Lord be dependent upon the progress that someone else is not making, or is making. Letting it be independent upon what someone else is doing. Joy comes

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as we keep fresh in our experience with Christ. Living in the good old days will kill our experience.

III. Then a third thing that Paul notes as a dead-end street that will rob him of personal joy is a relationship with the Lord that tries to go on with self-indulgence.

A relationship with the Lord is destroyed because of self-indulgence, a dead end street.

“Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!” (Philippians 3:17–4:1, NIV).

In the first eleven verses of chapter 3, Paul had warned against the legalists as a danger and basing our relationship with God on the basis of performance of religious duties. But here, in these verses, he is warning against the libertarians, those in the church who say, “Do anything you want and rely upon the grace of God.”

There is a drift toward a libertarianism that is in the church today; the church today is not gripped as I was growing up, with legalism. Instead, it is more gripped with how far can we go and still call ourselves a Christian. Paul tells us to not let the self-life be the destruction in our experience and a drift against libertarianism is not to impose more laws, but it is through repentance to reawaken love, for it is love that brings us really to Christ.

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Follow my example and take note of the pattern I gave you. Set your mind on things that count.

Verse 20, Paul makes a very important remark to the Philippian Christians. He says, “Our citizenship is in heaven.” The word “citizenship” had a very important ring to the Philippian Christians. You have to understand a little of the history of Philippi. In Acts 16:12, when Paul first comes to the city of Philippi, Luke refers to this city by its proper title, “From there, we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia.” A Roman colony. Philippi was a town solely created by Rome. It was a town to which it sent its retired soldiers. It was a city that later included Greeks and Jews, but it was a city in a class by itself in Greece. It was not governed by the laws that pertained to the provinces of Macedonia. It was governed by Roman law. It took great pride in the fact that it was Rome’s colony in the Greek world. Therefore, Roman citizenship was extremely important in this town. It operated by Roman law.

Paul likens the Philippi existence in Greece as a Roman colony to Christian existence in the world, when he says, “We are the colony of heaven. We are out of heaven and God has sent us to colonize this world. Our citizenship really belongs in another place.” George Webber, in a book—*God’s Colony in Man’s World*—speaks of this idea of a colony having three important ramifications for us as Christians living in the world. He says that a colony, first of all, is utterly dependent upon its homeland, if it is to be sustained in the midst of a hostile world. When the early American pioneers came to Jamestown and to other colonies, they were absolutely dependent upon the infrequent ships that brought them supplies and brought them encouragement and made it possible for the life in the colony to be sustained and for connection to be maintained with the homeland. Thus, being the colony of heaven on earth, it is vital for us likewise to be sustained by the communion and the communication we receive from heaven.

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Then Webber notes that secondly, in the colony, there was an unmistakable unity which accompanied the colonialists. They were all in the same boat. If one child contracted smallpox, the life of everyone was in danger. If the Indians attacked, all came to the defense of the colony. They were, in a unique sense, one family. So God's colony, as it exists in the world, must likewise have that sense of unity. Then he notes thirdly that the colony recognized that its only reason for existence was in the world. Although, by night, it was necessary for the colony to withdraw behind the stockade for protection from the Indians and from the marauding beasts, the work of the colony was outside the fence, in tasks of subduing the wilderness and bringing it under the lordship of the king. The work of the colony was in farming the land, fishing the streams and colonizing the Indians. The colony, in its interior life, only existed to support its work on the outside.

That was not only true for the American colony, but that was true for the Roman colony at Philippi. And that is true for the colony that we belong to, that is in this world. We depend on our lifeline from heaven, the Word of God, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the personal presence of Jesus, to sustain and renew us, because we cannot keep our joy without our line of communication with the Lord being open and being encouraged by Him.

It helps too—in this colony—to have unity, unity with one another and within the body of Christ, to bring us encouragement and to remember, as we're in the colony, that our purpose is to spend most of our time outside its walls in witness.

One of the early unknown Christians described the true Christian character as a colony when he says Christians sever themselves from others, neither in dwelling nor language. Although they live in the towns of Greeks and foreigners and follow the uses of their country, they are yet distinguished by a peculiar and striking mode of life. They inhabit their own fatherland, but they

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do so as foreigners. They do whatever is their duty as citizens and yet suffer all things as aliens. They live in the flesh, but not according to the flesh. They dwell on earth, but they live in heaven. They obey the existing laws, but by their conduct, they exact themselves above the laws. They are poor, and yet make many rich. They dwell in the world, and yet are not of it. They are seen as dwellers in the world, but their true life is unseen. They are hated of the world, although they are benefiting it by contending with its evil. Such is the noble office assigned by God to His people and they dare not decline it—God’s colony in the world.

I never have need of a passport when I am in America. But the minute I go overseas, it never leaves my body. I’ll even sleep with it at times, depending on where I am, underneath my pillow, so I can get to it quickly. I could lose everything else, but I don’t want to lose this. It is my protection in a foreign country. It identifies me when I am in another country, as belonging to a different land.

Paul is saying to the Philippian Christians, “You really belong to another country. You don’t really belong to this world. You have a passport from another world. Your citizenship is in heaven, so live like your citizenship is in heaven. Don’t live like the rest of the world. Don’t get hung up like the rest of the world in this simple desire to fulfill and satisfy yourself. Be God’s colony. There’s work to be done. There’s the wilderness of the land and sin to be beaten back. Live as God’s people in this age.”

Dead-end streets that will lead us away from joy. A life that is based upon performance, which turns us critical and argumentative when we do not see ourselves and other people living up to the performance that we exact of them. The only way to live is to live with a relationship with Jesus Christ, who knows us and understands us and totally accepts us and receives us. I found in my life that, in my down moments, the moments when I have failed even God, it is the assurance

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that Christ loves me, that Christ knows me, that Christ wants me, that gives me the personal strength to live and to go on and to face life. Christ in us.

Then, living with the Lord in a relationship that does not grow stagnant, but saying, “Lord, help me to grow. Help me to realize that most of my growing moments will occur on the cutting edge of pain and on the cutting edge of risk. Lord, help me in my life not to just settle back with the level of faith that I am living at in this present moment, but help me to take on more, to believe more, and to get out and grow.” Even in difficulties which Paul faces as he writes the Philippians, “Rejoice! Get out on the cutting edge of pain and risk and watch your growth.”

I think you’ll find, in your Christian experience, that your greatest growth moments as a Christian will always occur when you’re on the cutting edge of risk and pain.

Then don’t be destroyed by self-indulgence. We’ve come too far to turn back, too far with the Lord to look at other alternatives, too far to simply satisfy ourselves and our own ends. Duty, commitment to Christ, living for Him, not making our flesh , or as Paul says, “our stomach” our god. But eagerly awaiting a Savior, who is going to bring us into His colony and one day transform our lowly bodies by the power that enables Him to bring everything under control.

Are you joyful with yourself? Deep in the heart of your being, have you accepted yourself and realized that God accepts you? If you can make that discovery—that because God accepts you and loves you, you can accept and love yourself without imposing any other conditions upon your life—you’ll have joy. A joy not based upon being smart. A joy not based upon being good looking. A joy not based upon spiritual performance or being somebody important, but a joy that is rooted in the fact that you’re special to God and therefore special within yourself.

Closing Prayer

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Lord, give us Your joy. There are probably friends here this evening who do not at this moment have a high level of joy in their life. We do live, Lord, in a world that beats against us and tears us down and seeks to destroy us and fill us with despondency and discouragement. If we look for answers within ourselves, we so often find a dead-end street. If we look for answers in others or in favorable circumstances, likewise, we find that dead-end street. But when in the privacy that is our own heart we come to You, we find that You assure us and You say, “Though all forsake you, I’ll never forsake you. I will always love you. I will always care for you. I will always wrap My arms around you. I will always forgive you. I will never hold the past against you. I will never throw your many failures against you. I will love you. I will forgive you afresh again each time you want to start over. I will take you. I will help you. I will help you live in the present and in the future. I will help you to forget the past. I will help you to reorient your gaze toward the future.” You come to us, Lord, with that word and You save us from death. You save us from psychological death. You save us from spiritual death. You save us from emotional death by coming into our life with Your presence and by orienting us toward You and turning our hearts and our eyes toward You. Lord, it is as we begin to relax in being the person that You have made us that we then set out with others to understand that our mission is to be Your colony in this world. Help us, Lord, in the hostile zones we live in—at work or at play or at school or maybe even within difficult relationships—help us in those hostile zones to be the colony of God, which maintains our communication with You and our unity with one another and does the work that You have called us to do in this world. Let us live in Your joy forever. We ask through Christ, our Lord. Amen.