



15th Sunday of Pentecost
10th September 2023

Joyful Living in a depressingly dying world

“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.”
(Philippians 1:6)

Main Point:

Paul’s letter to the Philippians is one of his most cheerful letters. Even though Paul sat chained to a guard while under house arrest, he wrote to encourage the church to be confident in God’s transformative ability in their lives and in the lives of their fellow believers. This confidence paves the way for joyous living while we find ourselves in a depressingly dying world.

Living with joy isn’t always easy! It seems like there are just so many opportunities to become caught up in a wave of despondency or a season of difficulty and pain. Whether it be frustration about our own inadequacies, deficiencies or frustrations with the shortcomings of others ... seasons of frustration, sadness and hurt stir feelings which make us ask, “When will these storm clouds move? I just want to experience the joy of God’s love and favour again.”

Now, if you are anything like me, when I’m feeling down or grumpy, often the last thing I want to hear is someone telling me to “not worry and be happy!” If I’m feeling mopey and depressed, I really want to hear someone say, “Oh how awful your life is. Poor you. You have every reason to be depressed.”

So, before I open myself to listen to someone encouraging me to ‘cheer up!’, I need to know that they understand how hard life can get.

That’s what makes Paul’s letter so relevant for us – particularly if you are in a season that is hard, and a bit depressing. ... Because if anyone had it hard ... it was Paul.

Point 1 | Paul wrote this cheerful letter while in Rome, chained to a soldier, under house arrest.

Let’s step back into the year 61 AD. Paul found himself in prison in Rome awaiting trial before Caesar (see Acts 28-17-30). Despite being under house arrest, he could still receive visitors, and even preach and teach.

But let us not think of ‘house arrest’ as being like when we were in lock down two years ago.

Because house arrest in Paul’s day, meant he was chained to a guard at all times. So, life was no rose garden for Paul. It probably gave him lots of time to reminisce about the ‘good old days’ when he was travelling around preaching the Gospel, arguing with the Jews and converting many to Christ.

No doubt, his first visit to Philippi was in his mind. Ten years ago he had led Lydia, the Coco Chanel of her day, to Christ. He'd rescued a demon possessed slave girl, and then led a prison guard and his entire family to Christ, thus birthing a new church (see Acts 16).

He remembered these people fondly. He loved them, and they loved him. So, when they heard about Paul's imprisonment, they sent Epaphroditus to give him some money. During his visit, Epaphroditus had become really sick, but thankfully he recovered, and Paul sent him back to Philippi carrying this brief thank-you note to the church.

So, that's what makes this, one of Paul's most cheerful letters - its spontaneous, warm and personal.

This really helps put Paul's urging us to 'Rejoice in the Lord always' in perspective.

I'm prepared to listen to Paul, knowing that as he holds his quill in one hand, the other ankle is chained to a Roman guard!

But the chain on his ankle doesn't stop Paul opening his letter with thanksgiving for their partnership with him, and his overwhelming joy and love for them (v3-5).

Every time Paul thought of them, he focussed on remembering all the wonderful things God was doing amongst them, and this made his prayers burst with thanksgiving.

He writes, "*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.*" (Philippians 1:6)

If ever there was a verse to memorise and take to heart, it would be this one.

It so powerfully communicates the perseverance and persistence of God, despite all our shortcomings and failings.

We could sum it up this way: 'What God starts, he always finishes.'

Point 2 | Paul experienced joy because of his confidence in God's ability to finish the transformative work, started in the lives of his churches.

I'd like us to notice three things from this verse.

First, God takes the initiative in starting his work in you.

He is the one who "begins a good work" in us. Salvation always begins with God. He makes the first move, and if he didn't make the first move, we would make no move at all.

There is a story about a candidate going for ordination into the ministry.

When asked how he had become a Christian, he replied, "I did my part and God did his."

This made the examining board a little unsettled, so they asked him to explain 'what exactly was his part in his salvation?'

"My part," he answered, "was to run from God as fast as I could. While God's part was to run after me and catch me and bring me into his family."

That's so true for us. Even those who were raised in a Christian family, should be aware that we were born running from God, and unless God took the initiative to find us, we would still be running away from him.

Second, God takes personal responsibility for completing his work in you.

I find this incredibly comforting.

God has a "good work" that he intends to do in your life and in mine.

Nothing will block the accomplishment of that divine purpose. God intends that all his children be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, and he will not rest until that "good work" is finally finished.

Third, God guarantees the outcome of his work in you. Not only does God start the process, and continues the process, he also guarantees its ultimate outcome. He will "*carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*"

This means that God won't be turned aside by difficulties of any kind. He is so determined to make you like Jesus that even your own failures won't ultimately hinder the accomplishment of his purpose.

Someday you and I will stand before Jesus Christ as redeemed children of God—holy, blameless, and complete in every way. We're a far sight from that today. But a better day is coming for the people of God.

A day when what is incomplete will be made complete. When what is unfinished will be finished.

When what is lacking will be made full. When what is broken will be fixed.

When what is hurt will be healed. God has promised to do it and he cannot lie.

This truth, 'that God's Spirit is still at work in each of us' has tremendous ramifications – not only for how we see ourselves, but also for how we see and relate to our fellow believers.

Point 3 | If we wear the lenses of faith when we look at our own heart, confident of God's transformation in our life, we will wear the same lenses when we look at the hearts of others.

Firstly, if God's Spirit is at work in us, and we are confident that He will bring this transformative work to completion, then it impacts how we regard ourselves.

When we look in the mirror, in self-reflection, we must stop before we wade into the swamp of self-criticism and condemnation. Rather than focussing on all our failures, shortcomings and defects, Paul encourages us to say:

"Listen self! I may not look like much now – but God isn't finished with me yet. My Saviour, the Lord Jesus, has begun a good work in my life, and I am confident that he will continue his work in me until I am made perfect and complete lacking nothing."

When that confidence in what God is doing in our own life, grows and becomes strong – it seems to develop in us an ability to see others in the same joyful and confident light.

What I'm saying is: the spiritual glasses we wear when we look at our own heart, are the same glasses we'll wear when we look at others. If we are constantly viewing ourselves through the lens of criticism, hostility and condemnation, then we will look through these same lenses when we look at others.

These are not the lenses through which Apostle Paul viewed the Philippians.

This reminds me of a story about an artist who asked a friend to comment on a painting he was working on. He told his friend, 'This is my best work, a true masterpiece.'

The friend responded, "Hmm ... I don't really see what you see. It just looks like dabs of different colours to me ... what exactly is it supposed to be?"

The artist replied, "Oh I forgot. I'm seeing it as it will be when finished. You are seeing it as it is now."

When Paul wrote this letter, he was confident of the good work that God was doing in the Philippians. He was seeing them as they would be, and he thanked God it was going to happen.

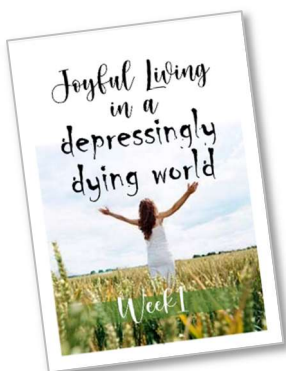
This gives us a totally different perspective when we look at the world around us, the church and even our fellow believers here at Southlakes.

While we could become depressed, discouraged and despairing about their decrepit state – we choose not to!

Rather, we choose to look at them with the eyes of faith, confident of the transformative power of God to complete his good work.

Allow me to conclude the way Jude, the brother of James, ended his letter,

Now unto him who is able to keep you from falling,
and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy,
to the only wise God our Saviour be glory and majesty,
dominion and power, both now and forever. **Amen!** (Jude 24-25)



A Devotional Journey through Philippians

If you really want to experience the joyful living that Jesus obtained for us, why not download a copy of the Philippians devotional! For the next six weeks we'll journey through Paul's letter and learn how to experience joyful living in a depressingly dying world.