

Joy When Life is Tough - Philippians
Part 1
“Joy In Trouble”
Philippians 4:4-7
Pastor Charles Price

Philippians 4, I'm going to read Philippians 4:4-7. And Paul the Apostle is writing this, he says in Philippians 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord, always. I will say it again. Rejoice that your gentleness be evident to all the Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving. Present your requests to God and the peace of God, which passes. All understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

That's as far as I'm going to read for the moment. Over the next few weeks, I want to look with you into this letter of Paul to the Philippians. It's a short letter, just four chapters long. Most of you could read it through in ten minutes, less than ten minutes.

Now I want to look into this letter because it has a message which is extremely relevant to us generally, but very particularly, I'm sure to many of us here this morning. Let me make a few comments, first about its setting and the context of the letter.

On first reading the letter presents itself as something of a paradox. On the one hand, it's one of the most positive books in the entire New Testament. 20 times Paul uses words like rejoice and joy and be glad. It's been rightly called the epistle of Joy.

That's the atmosphere. There's a spirit of confidence and joy that permeates right through this letter. And as you read it, we say to ourselves, Paul is in a very good mood when he wrote this

letter. Maybe he's gone on another missionary journey, we might think, and he's ended up on a sun kissed Mediterranean island like Majorca and he's lying under a palm tree with his toe in the water and Aphroditis his friend, who he's dictating the letter is sitting under the next palm tree. And Paul says, tell them Aphroditis rejoice! And again, I say, rejoice.

Isn't life fantastic. The sky is blue. The sea is warm. The environment is wonderful. I've got this wonderful feeling, everything's going my way. You might think that's the kind of context in which Paul is writing this, but you'd be wrong. You'd be dead wrong.

It gives us another theme that runs through this letter. And if on the one hand, there's this theme of triumph, on the other hand, the theme is trouble, and Paul talks in this letter about persecution, about suffering. In chapter one, four times, he describes himself as being "in chains". Now, why is he in chains? Well, he's in prison. He doesn't tell us where he's in prison. He knew that Bible scholars would need something to do later on. But I'm pretty sure he's in Rome, there are different theories about this.

We know from the Book of Acts that Paul was imprisoned in Philippi. On one occasion, just very briefly he was imprisoned in Jerusalem. He was imprisoned in Caesarea for two years.

He spent two years in prison in Rome. And there's a possibility he spent a period of time in prison in Ephesus as well.

But almost certainly he's writing from Rome, and it's too tedious to go into all the different reasons for that, but not least in Phil 4:22, he says. All the Saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household.

That's a pretty good clue he's in Rome, isn't it? All the Christians send you greetings, especially those in Caesar's household. Where is Caesar's household? But of course, it's in Rome. If you got a letter from somebody saying all the Christians on Parliament hill say hi, you wouldn't scratch your head and say, I wonder if this letter came from Vancouver. It's pretty obvious where it came from. Now, if Paul is writing this from Rome, why is he in prison in Rome? Well, the last eight chapters of the Book of Acts tell us why he was imprisoned in Rome when Paul returned to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey.

He was greeted by the leaders in the church who said, Paul, we've got some good news and here's the good news. Many thousands they said of the Jewish people in this city have become believers in Jesus Christ since you were last here.

That's the good news, but we've got some bad news as well. And it's this, many of these have remained zealous for the law of Moses, and they have been told Paul that you are anti- Moses, you are against the law.

Well, of course, that wasn't true, though we understand why that rumour was circulating, because Paul had made a very strong stand on the fact that to become a Christian, you don't have to be circumcised to become a Jew first.

That was one of the big controversies of the early church, and Paul stood hard on that, that to become a Christian you need Christ, period! Not Christ plus various things. So this had been distorted to give the idea Paul was anti-Moses, and they said, we want to make a suggestion to Paul in order to counter this rumour. We've got four men who have taken a purification right. And that involves them in some considerable expenses they need two lambs and a ram, which they have to sacrifice.

That will take them seven days to go through this ceremony and at the end of it, they will shave their heads and we want to recommend that you do two things. Number one, you join them and go through the same purification rites.

And number two, you pay all the expenses and that will let people know you're not against Moses. Well, Paul agreed to this. But as you know, when there's some juicy gossip going around, the truth doesn't really help very much, because the gossip is too interesting and so persisted.

And one day Paul went into the temple in Jerusalem, which he had the right to do as a Jew, but he'd brought back on his missionary journey a friend from Ephesus, who is a gentile and his name was Troughphinas. A great name.

I'm sure they called him Trough for short, and they saw Paul go into the temple and put 2 and 2 together and got 378, because they concluded he's taken his friend Troughphinas, which he hadn't. But when Paul came to leave the temple, there was a crowd waiting ready to lynch him.

The Roman soldiers arrested Paul in order to preserve his own life, and they said, we'll simply flog him and that'll satisfy the crowd and let him go. And as I was stretching Paul out to flog him, he said, I'm a Roman citizen.

You have no right to flog me. And so they put him into prison because he was a Roman citizen. And then some men took a vow they wouldn't eat until they had killed him. So they took Paul down to Caesarea, to get him away from Jerusalem, brought him before the Roman governor, whose name was Festus. No, it was Felix. And they brought him before Felix and Felix said, If you pay a bribe Paul you are a free man tomorrow.

Well, Paul didn't pay bribes, and so he stayed for two years in prison in Caesarea. After two years, Felix was recalled to Rome and replaced by Festus, and Festus arrived. Paul was brought before him because he wanted to clear the outstanding cases that were still there. And Paul said, I'm a Roman citizen. You have no right to hold me like this. I appeal to Caesar. That was the ultimate court of Appeal. And they said, you have that right? So they sent Paul to Rome.

He travelled on several boats, some of which sank on the way. He spent the winter shipwrecked in Malta. And when he eventually arrived in Rome, quite predictably, Caesar wasn't interested. And the Book of Acts finishes with Paul spending two years under arrest in Rome.

Some of that time with a measure of liberty under house arrest. At other time evidently chained in a Roman prison. And I'm telling you this because this is the context in which Paul is writing this letter. This is not written in an ivory tower.

This is not Paul sitting down behind an oak desk, writing the correct thing. This is a man writing from a Roman Prison, deprived of five years of freedom, two years in Caesarea and two years in Rome. The best part of a year getting to Rome in round figures, five years.

Five peak years of his life. And yet he's discovering the utter sufficiency of Christ and getting excited by it. So much so, he says to them in the verse we read just now, rejoice! And again, I say, in case you think I wrote the wrong word down by mistake, I'll say it twice.

Rejoice! Why? Because this is a great prison. Great bed, great food, great company, great sanitation. No, of course not. Because I've discovered it's not what's happening to me that's important, there's something even more important, as we'll see this morning.

It's what's happening in me. That's what's more important. And I want to talk about this because I wonder if there aren't some of us here this morning who need to get to know this man Paul, in this context.

I wonder if there aren't some here this morning who are in something of a prison. It doesn't have prison bars, like Paul did. But nevertheless, there are things in your life which seem to restrict you and have chained you.

We have an expression in England, which I understand you don't have here in Canada, "chained to the kitchen sink". Some of you mothers know what that's like, we husbands don't always

appreciate that. But the routine every day, as my wife says, you do everything one day and it's finished.

You have made the food. It's all been eaten and you to do the whole thing all over again. You wash the clothes and then they need washing again. Maybe that's how you feel, you are chained to the kitchen sink. Maybe you are chained to your desk, maybe in a job that you wish you weren't and you wish you could get away from it and you can't. There's no alternative for you and you don't bounce out of bed every morning with a spring in your step. It's a chore to go to work every day, and it's become a prison to you. Maybe you don't have a job at all.

Maybe your prison is the seeming pointlessness of every day. Where do I find my significance today? Just passing the time. Maybe in some financial prison inhibited and restricted because of that. Maybe your marriage has become a prison to you.

Maybe you are in a prison of loneliness and you long for company, you long for intimacy, you long just for somebody's touch and it's become a prison to you. Maybe you are in a prison of a body that doesn't function the way it's supposed to function, it has become unable to work as other people's bodies work, and it's become a prison to you. Maybe a prison of resentment, because you've been hurt and hurt badly at some point and the pain is with you every day. Maybe you're in a prison of unfulfilled dreams and the years are rolling by and they don't look as though they're going to come to fruition.

Or maybe like Paul himself, you're the victim of gossip. And it was gossip among Christians in Jerusalem that was the cause of his original arrest. I don't know what your prison may be. But if you feel you are in prison this morning, I want you to hang in here this morning and in these next few weeks, because this is the context in which Paul is writing his letter. And he is speaking through his prison bars. And he is saying there are resources for life and not just for life, but for joy, no matter what your situation may be. You see, if your relationship with Jesus Christ will work in a prison, it'll work anywhere. And if your relationship with Jesus Christ doesn't work in a prison, it's not likely to work and be of much value anywhere else, either.

We are going to discover with Paul, what it is that enables him in the midst of all these disappointing circumstances, as they must have been to him, humanly speaking, the frustration of being inhibited in the way that he was, and restricted in the way that he was to discover the source of joy.

To experience triumph in the midst of trouble. Not over the trouble, but in the trouble. That's different. Now, let me read you some verses from Philippians 1 because we're going to work through this letter. And we won't have time to look at every word and every verse, of course.

But I want to read Philippians 1:3-6. In Philippians 1:1-2 Paul simply introduces himself and his colleague, Timothy, who is with him at the time. And then the Saints, as he describes them in Philippi and in Philippians 1:3, he says, "I thank my God every time I remember you in all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, 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."

"I am confident", he says in Philippians 1:6, and I want to talk about this, if we talk about the context of the letter first, let me talk about the confidence in the letter, especially in these couple of verses here, where Paul talks about confidence and looking back on what he describes as the first day they received the Gospel in Philippi, and then his confidence and looking forward to his expectation of what God is going to continue doing in those people.

First of all, he has confidence in looking back there in Philippians 1:4-5, "I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now." Paul says that first day the gospel came to you has been deeply embedded in my memory, in my mind. And we know about that first day because you could read it in Acts 16. Paul came to Philippi on his second missionary journey.

It was his first visit into Europe, the first city in Europe in which he preached. And when he got there, he found a group of women who met down by the river to pray on the Sabbath Day. They were probably Jewish women.

Many Jews are scattered throughout the Mediterranean world, and that's why you find synagogues all over the Mediterranean world or most cities Paul went to as he began to preach in the Jewish synagogue, but there clearly was no synagogue in Philippi. In order for a synagogue to be established there had to be a quorum of ten men.

If there were nine men and 100 women, you still couldn't start a synagogue. And so, it's thought very likely these women were Jewish women, they were unable to form a synagogue, but they met by the river to pray and Paul joined them and as he joined them, he began to explain to them how Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of all that the Old Testament the Jewish history had been anticipating. And as he explained that to them, it says that God opened the heart of a lady called Lydia, who is a leader among that group.

She was from Thyatira, she was in Philippi for business. She was a seller of purple and that would have made her probably quite a wealthy woman, it's quite a rare and expensive item. And she was probably some businesswoman, probably high class in the community.

And she was converted, she had a large house. She invited Paul and his companions to remain and live in her house, which he did and then Paul went down the street and a girl, a slave girl began to follow them.

This slave girl was demon possessed. And she began to cry out after them and Paul ignored her at first, and then he turned and drove the demon out of this girl. This girl was owned by some slave masters who used her to tell fortunes.

She foretold the future by demonic enabling. Now that the demon was driven out of this girl, she can no longer tell the future. And so, her owners became so angry they grabbed Paul and Silas and they stripped them naked it says, they beat them, they flogged them and then they took them

to the jail, had them thrown into the inner cell with their feet in stocks. That is the high security section of the cell, and at midnight it says they were singing.

They were praying and singing hymns to God when suddenly there was an earthquake unrelated, I'm sure, to their singing. But there is an earthquake and the walls of the prison fell down. And the jailer assumed his prisoners had made a bolt for it, and he took a sword, was about to commit suicide because he knew if he didn't kill himself, he'd be killed for this and they'd probably kill him slowly and tortuously. So, he was about to kill himself when Paul said, excuse me, don't kill yourself, we're all here. We're having a praise time. Come and join us.

And the jailer said, what must I do to be saved? Almost certainly he was meaning saved from my masters who are going to punish me for this. But Paul quick as a flash jumped in there and said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you'll be saved, explained to him the gospel and he was converted to Jesus Christ. His whole family were converted and baptized. And here in this church in Philippi in these early days that Paul looks back to. You've got Lydia out of the top drawer of society, along with her a slave girl from the opposite spectrum of the social scale a slave girl. You've got the Philippine jailer possibly sent from Rome in order to look after the jail. He would have been hated by the locals who were being oppressed by the Roman Empire. And you've got some of his prisoners, Paul, Silas and some of the others who are in the prison, and they're all together to form this first church.

And Paul says, I look back on those days with joy because there is no explanation for this other than God did something among you. I didn't create that church in Philippi, Paul is saying, I didn't

make you Christians. I'm simply the agent through who God did his work. It was God who calls the Lydia's and the slave girls and the jailers and the prisoners into a relationship with himself. When Paul came back from his missionary journeys there are four occasions that he gave a missionary report and every time he said the same thing.

This is what it says. This is a paraphrase, because it's different, but this is basically what he says. He reported all that God had done among the gentiles through him. He didn't come back and report, this is what I have done for God.

I didn't start this church. I didn't make you Christians. This is what God did. It was my lips he spoke through, that's true. It was my hands he worked through, that's true. It's my life, he revealed himself to, that's true.

But don't congratulate me. Don't pat me on the back. Don't call me the founder of the church in Philippi, I deny that. This was the work of Jesus Christ. That's my confidence, and then he says this.

Having looked back with joy on that, "I'm confident of this", in Philippians 1:6, "that he who began the good work in you will bring it to completion in the day of Jesus Christ." If he's confident looking back, this is something God did, he's equally confident in the future of these believers in Philippi. I am confident that he who began the good work in you will bring it to completion. You see Paul's message was not Christianity. His message was Christ. And there's a difference.

If we simply embrace Christianity, if we simply embrace a doctrinal system, it'll never excite us. But I gave you Christ, says Paul, and it is he who brings the work that he began to completion. His message was not preaching a lifestyle or a Christian worldview of some kind.

His message was preaching a life, the life of Jesus. Not a lifestyle, the life of Jesus to be lived in men and women and boys and girls who respond to him. He wasn't preaching a religion, but a relationship that was going to be fresh every day.

Great is thy faithfulness we've already sung this morning, morning by morning, new mercies, I see. All I have needed your hand; notice the tense has provided, not will provide but has. Why? Because I already have the presence of Jesus in me what I need every day to enable me to grow, mature and begin to exhibit something of the character of the Lord Jesus Christ. You see, never underestimate the role of Jesus Christ in the life of a Christian.

We are not in his fan club. we're not simply following him, by the way. This is another subject, disciples were not God followers after Pentecost. They're not following anymore, they are in Christ, that's different. When they followed him, they failed again and again. But after Pentecost they are not trying to walk in his footsteps, they're allowing him to walk in their shoes. It's different, it's dynamic, it's powerful. And Paul's follow up strategy in Philippi is simply this. I left you with Jesus. That doesn't mean, of course, we don't need to meet together like we do here this morning and express our worship and study the word of God together, of course we do. It doesn't mean we don't need to sit alongside those who come to Christ and nurture them and teach

them how to grow in their knowledge in relation to Christ. That's the essential ingredient in the spiritual growth of every one of us here this morning, it's going to be the presence of Christ himself by his Holy Spirit in you.

The less we introduce people to the living Christ, the more intensive has got to be our follow up programs which in some cases almost become brainwashing exercises, but we introduce them to a living Christ and they'll wake up with new appetites in their hearts as later in this same series, in Philippians 2:13, Paul says there, "It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." And part of the evidence is that we have been genuinely born again of the Holy Spirit of God is you have an appetite you never have before.

You have a desire you never have before for holiness and righteousness and goodness, and not just the will to do it, but the power he says he works in you to will and to act. We'll look at that verse on another week, more particularly.

But it is the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in our hearts and lives, that is the only real valid evidence we've got the real thing. I say that because Paul said that in 2 Corinthians 13:5. Let me read you this verse.

He said to the Christians there, examine yourselves. So, to his readers, he says, examine yourselves to see whether you're in the faith. Test yourselves. Now let me pause there for a moment. What would you expect to be examining? What would you expect to be looking for?

If I said to you this morning, examine yourself. Are you in the faith? Well, here's what Paul says. Examine yourself to see if you're in the faith. Test yourself. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you, unless of course you fail the test.

That's 2 Corinthians 13:5. He doesn't say examine your Bible to see if this is what is taught in your Bible, because it is taught in your Bible. It doesn't say examine your doctrine to see if you include this. He says, examine yourself. Does your life give evidence to the fact that Jesus Christ is in you? Because that's the basis on which Paul says, I'm confident. He who began the good work in you, and when I left you in Philippi, I knew I left men and women, boys and girls in every strata of the society of Philippi from every spectrum on the social scale. And what you had in common was this, Jesus living in your heart. And he was in you in order to complete what he's begun.

And that's why we need to place our confidence exclusively in Jesus Christ. I mean, how are you sustained, can I ask you this morning, how do you sustain yourself as a Christian? Is it with every day saying, Lord Jesus, I want to thank you. You're not up there somewhere above the bright blue sky? I don't even have to ask you to be with me today. That's what we pray a lot of times. We don't need to pray that at all. I can thank you, you are with me today. I can thank you, you are my life today.

You are the bread of life, therefore, you feed my soul. You are the light, therefore, you illuminate me today. You are the shepherd, therefore you guide me today. You're the truth, therefore, you will instruct me today. You're the life, therefore you will empower me today. Thank you, Lord

Jesus. whether it's Sunday morning or Monday morning or Tuesday night or Thursday morning. Thank you, you are in me today. Thank you as I live in dependency on you today, I'm sustained.

And whether you find yourself in a prison you are not expecting, and there are thousands, if not millions of people around the world right now who are in a prison of fear. But into that prison came Jesus the moment Paul came into that prison.

And I say to the Philippians, says Paul, rejoice! Not because I'm a masochist. Not because I'm trying hard to put a kind of nice smile over these terrible circumstances. Not because this is the Christian thing you're supposed to do, but because I've discovered that Jesus Christ is sufficient, as we will see more particularly next week how Paul found that it's sufficient even in a prison. Let me ask you as I close. Is this your Christianity this morning? Or do you have a sentimental Jesus? That on Sunday mornings it's good to sing about, maybe get, you know, sort of excited and hope the momentum will last for a few days, but by the end of the week, we're crawling back in flat again to get lifted up again on Sunday morning.

Or is this Jesus that you know, and that you love and that you have embraced, that you invited to come into your life is the one on whom you depend on, the one from whom you derive your sustenance every day.

I'm confident, says Paul, because I know who began the good work in you and it wasn't me. It was Jesus and I am confident that if you take me out of the picture, you'll still continue. You'll

still grow because it's Christ who will be the source of that and he'll bring it through to completion.

And this is the great confidence that you and I can have. seven days a week. And what you discover when you know that, you discover when the lights go off and everything seems to become dark. As in life, it happens at different times to all of us. You can say thank you Lord Jesus. You're right here with me and you're my strengths. You're my joy. If you don't know Christ for yourself, you need to know him. But you see, this is not simply ideas, this is reality we're talking about. I need to experience this as Paul did in the darkness of his prison.

Let's pray together. Father, we're grateful this morning that you don't just meet with us in every circumstance, you abide in us, you live in us in every circumstance, whether the good times or bad, when hard times are tough.

And I pray, Lord Jesus, that we will know what it is for Christ to be the source of our joy, and the source of our security, and the source of our salvation, and the source of our future. For we pray it in His name. Amen.