

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE PHILIPPIANS - NOTES FOR PRIVATE OR GROUP STUDY – PART TWO

This man Paul was either crazy - or he had made a great discovery. How could he be sitting in a Roman prison, unlikely to come out alive, and yet so positive and joyful? He used the word 'joy' or 'rejoice' 15 times in 4 short chapters. Let us find out his secret!

As so often in his letters, Paul included someone else in authorship, presumably to encourage him and develop his leadership. This time it was Timothy, who had been with Paul when he visited Philippi and of whom he spoke very warmly in chapter two. He described the two of them as 'bondservants of Jesus Christ', not exactly an exalted status. The bondservant in Exod.21 was a slave who chose to serve his master forever because he loved him. Jesus, not a board or a committee, was their boss. He wrote to 'all the saints' not just some of them. All the saints meant all the Christians, not a special class of super Christians. 'Saint' simply means 'set apart for the exclusive use of the owner', like your toothbrush. This message of joy in adversity was intended to be normal Christian experience. The overseers and deacons, the leaders, were included but not in a class of their own. Overseers were the city watchman who, day and night in all weathers, looked out for danger so that they could warn the people.(Ezek.33:1-9) Their job was not glamorous. They like overseers in the church were to see the big picture and warn or encourage. 'Deacon' was another word for a servant who carried out the really menial tasks. Christian leaders are just servants like every other saint, but with awesome responsibility. This was just a letter from one servant to some other servants.(1:1)

Paul began with his usual greeting, 'grace', the Greek way, and 'peace', the Jewish way, of saying 'hallo'. He was not just being polite. These were his key messages. Grace describes how God gives freely and abundantly according to our need, totally undeservedly, because of Jesus. The Greek word for grace is 'charis', and for joy is 'chara'. Joy is knowing about grace. Peace is our first need, with God, with other Christians and with a hostile world. Peace begins with forgiveness which is the very foundation of grace.(1:2)

If you compare the start of this letter with so many other letters of Paul, you will see how he always began with prayer, and his prayer began with thanksgiving. Look carefully to see for what he was thankful. Notice how many times he used the words 'all' and 'every'. Grace is limitless. Here as elsewhere it was not for their performance Paul was thankful but for grace which had been the secret of their Christian lives from the day they first met Christ, through their ongoing growth, and in their sharing of Christ with others. Grace would be their secret until Christ returned. It would be the answer to the toughest situation they would face as it was for Paul as he sought to be a witness of Christ in jail. Grace, not circumstances, therefore gave grounds for joy. The Greek word for thanks is 'eucharisteo'. Notice that again 'charis', grace, is the root idea. Giving thanks is the way we receive grace.(1:3-7)

Having started with thanksgiving for all they had in Christ, Paul's prayer moved on to expressing his God-given desires for the Philippian Christians. Having everything in

Christ should make us desire more. Paul was motivated by God's love for them and so, not surprisingly, his greatest desire was that they too should love more and more. It was not just a sentimental emotion but it needed to be based on a solid knowledge of Jesus Christ, which in turn would lead to a sensible wisdom about how and where God's love could really make a difference to others. Such a love for others would be accompanied by a genuineness and a superb quality of life which would last until Christ returned, and would evidently be God's doing. It would also produce a clear recognition of what was God's truth and what was not.(1:8-11)

From the wonderful theory of all we have in Christ, Paul turned to the hard reality of life on earth for him and the Philippians. God's grace when in prison did not necessarily mean escape from jail as it had done in Philippi. God can do what He likes about our circumstances. This time good was manifested as several quite different consequences. Firstly Paul's constant contact with the palace guard was an opportunity to share the gospel with them. The word of God was spreading even there. Secondly Paul's example of continuing to be a witness in adversity had inspired other Christians to do the same. Thirdly joy had enabled Paul to respond positively to a competitive attitude in some preachers who saw an opportunity, while Paul was out of the way, to extend their own following, like TV evangelists watching their audience ratings rise. Paul's gracious response had been satisfaction that, from whatever motive, people were hearing of Christ. Again grace stimulated joy, even though prison was still prison.(1:12-18)

Nevertheless Paul was still expecting to escape though he had no idea at this stage which of three ways God would use. He could be let out, in which case he would come and visit them again. He could die in jail which would mean that he escaped to the eternal presence of Jesus Christ. He could stay in jail but escape the sense of fear and failure through the Spirit of Christ in him. Knowing the Philippian Christians loved him and prayed for him was an extra encouraging bonus. So he could still rejoice in all that God's grace was, whether in freedom, death or jail.(1:19-26)

As grace had worked in his situation he longed that it would work in theirs, in their daily living, in their resistance to the Devil, and in their getting on with the work of the gospel. Grace would keep them calm in the face of opposition and suffering.(1:27-30)

Having got us excited about grace and the joy it produces in chapter one, and given us a glimpse of the difference his discovery could make, Paul, in chapter two, took us back to explore the secret of joy.

2:1,2 Q.1 What five ways did Paul use to describe the source of Christian joy? Give a simple definition of each and try to put them together in a practical situation. Now what four terms did Paul use, in verse 2, to explain how we can draw on the source? Again put them into a real life setting in your own words.

2:3,4 Q.2 Which one word best sums up the secret of drawing on God's grace? How does this word change the way we think about ourselves and others? Is not low self-esteem supposed to be bad?(Rom.12:10)

2:5-11 Q.3 How did this attitude show in Jesus in relation to who He was, His status in society, and His suffering? What outcome did the Father promise Him? In what sense are we to expect the same if we have the same attitude?

2:12-18 Q.4 Who is to produce this attitude inside us? What is the connection between 'work out' in v.12 and 'work in' and 'work for' in v.13? What is our commonest mistake in this area? What examples did Paul use in v.14 of this principle in practice? Why are they so appropriate in thinking of humility? Why will this behaviour have such a striking effect on the world around us? How would such behaviour bring special satisfaction to Paul and become a source of joy for him and them?

2:19-24 Q.5 Which two good friends did Paul now use to illustrate the secret of grace giving rise to joy? How did grace show in Timothy's service of the Philippian Christians? How would he help Paul also? Did Paul fulfil his own dream in v.24?

2:25-30 Q.6 What roles had grace led Epaphroditus to take in the past? What personal difficulties had he been through? What was his attitude to the Philippians? What plan did Paul have for him now? How was this to be a source of joy for the Philippian Christians?