

REJOICE IN THE LORD!
Philippians 3:1-4:1

Keeping the Joy Alive Series
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In moving my 94 year old mother a few times these past years—from condominium to independent living center to care center—we ended up going through lots of her stuff. In this transition one of my brothers found a letter my father had written to my Mom back in their early years of marriage. It was a touching letter of love and thankfulness—it deeply touched us all.

When we read the Book of Philippians we need to remember that we are reading that kind of caring letter. In fact, it is like we are reading some very personal mail. Paul calls these people his beloved ones; he talks about the longing in his heart to see them. It is very caring and loving.

These weeks of July/August we have been looking at how do you keep the joy alive in your life? The reality is that there are a lot of joy stealers out there that can easily sap us as we face the many ups and downs of life. Each day can be a challenge.

Paul is reminding people in this letter that he is there to help them in their progress and growth in their faith. He is there to help them find joy in following Jesus. So today: Phil. 3:1-4:1.

So how do you keep the joy alive? You rejoice in the Lord. As we go through life there are times when we might find ourselves rejoicing in other things—like the Viking’s draft, or a personal success or whatever. Yet the truth is that these things will never last.

Paul says I want to warn you about some dangers out there. In fact he says to “*watch out for those dogs, those evildoers...*” He is talking here about some bad company, some bad teaching, some bad theology that can easily corrupt one’s mind and relationship with Jesus—and in turn can easily steal your joy.

So what was this bad theology, this bad God-thinking and talk that Paul was referring to? Well, what would happen in these churches after Paul had left them is that a group of people would move in and would put an addendum on Paul’s teachings.

They’d say—you know it’s nice to say you believe in Jesus but you’re not really a Christian until you become like us. We’re Jewish so you Gentile people need to be circumcised, you need to follow our strict dietary laws, etc—only then will you be saved by Jesus.

That’s the problem, my friends, with bad theology. It ruins people’s assurance of Jesus and his love. It causes someone to question—you mean there’s something more that I need to do to be saved; something more I need to add to God’s promises?

Paul is saying that there are people in this world that can be hazardous to your spiritual health. If you do what they say it can easily mess up your head. Doing these things can easily drain the joy right out of your relationship with God.

In history, of course, this reminds us of the Dark Ages. What happened at that time was that the church put conditions on how people needed to get to God. It said they needed to do good works, buy indulgences for heaven, follow the right rituals. Not only that, but God was to be seen as an angry and fearful judge.

But then came along Martin Luther. He said that early in his life he actually hated and feared God's wrath. He said that there was no way that he could ever feel as if he'd done enough to get God to like him. Yet Luther then preached that he had discovered Jesus Christ, had discovered Christ's love and had discovered grace.

Even today, my friends, there are false theologies around—false ways to think about God. One of these false theologies is the prosperity and success gospel that is so prevalent on TV; people who preach that God wants you to be wealthy, successful, to have it all.

Yet where do you find that in the Bible? It is amazing how some preach this as being truth. But then something bad happens and your life is shaken. You think—I thought that since I was a believer that God would not allow anything like this to happen to me.

People are teaching all kinds of crazy things today about what it means to be in a right relationship with God. That is why Paul is so concerned. He says to beware that there are people out there who are hazardous to your spiritual health.

In fact Paul says in verse 4 and following that if anyone has anything to brag about it is him. He tells them to look at his life—born a Jew, circumcised, a Hebrew of Hebrews, born of the tribe of Benjamin, in regard to the law a Pharisee.

In other words, as far as background Paul says that he has studied the Word of God inside and out and he really knows it. As for zeal he was a persecutor of Christians. As for being righteous under the law, you can't do any better than him—he was blameless.

And yet Paul says that even with all these religious trophies, none of them can get him into a right relationship with God. He says, *"I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things, I consider them garbage..."*

How do you have a right relationship with Jesus? Paul says that you can't do it on your own with your good works. In fact, he says that everything he does—every great religious and spiritual activity and good work—everything he does is like a filthy rag in God's sight.

My friends, did you know that there are really only two kinds of religions in the world? One religion is spelled "do." You've got to do these things, follow these steps, meditate this way. Yet how do you know if you've ever done enough? There is no joy in this.

The other religion is "done" which is Christianity. We celebrate what God has done in Jesus Christ. Jesus went to a cross for your sins and mine. Like a sponge Jesus soaked up all our unrighteousness. He was raised from the dead on the third day.

Paul says, now that's something that we can rejoice in. And because of that Paul says he now has a new goal in life. That goal is that *"I want to know Christ—yes, to (really) know Christ and the power of his resurrection."*

The good news, my friends, is that our God in Jesus is a living presence. He is a friend you can know in a personal way. The good news is that you don't just know some thing about him, but you know him so well that you know you are never alone.

Arthur Burns, a Jewish economist of great influence in Washington during the tenure of several presidents, was once asked to pray at a gathering of evangelical politicians. Stunned by his hosts he prayed thus: "Lord, I pray that Jews would come to know Jesus Christ."

"And I pray that Buddhists would come to know Jesus Christ. And I pray that Muslims would come to know Jesus Christ." Yet the most stunning of all he prayed: "And I pray that Christians would come to know Jesus Christ."

Paul continues in verse 12 by saying that he has certainly not arrived—he certainly does not have it all together. But then he says, *"But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and striving toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."*

Paul says we need to leave the past behind—leave behind all our sins, mistakes and futile attempts to make ourselves look good. He says we need to keep striving ahead, to keep your eyes on the finish line, to not fall away. In striving forward there is joy.

Yet Paul is still not done warning the Philippians of the dangers of straying from this vision of following Jesus. He warns them of those who *"live as enemies of the cross of Christ."*

Paul says of these enemies that *"their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things."* Paul says—don't imitate these people and their example—their end is destruction.

Do you know any people today who glory in their shame? A few years ago there was a NBA basketball great that wrote a book saying he had slept with 10,000 women during his basketball career. And recently some people have been bragging about their binge drinking, about their drug use, about their indiscriminate hookups. Some do glory in their shame.

Remember when your parents used to say to you, "Don't hang around with certain kids and don't hang around with that certain crowd." Paul is warning that there is a bad crowd out there that can easily mess up your spiritual life. It can cause you to fall away from Jesus.

Paul says that if you want to find joy—trust completely in Jesus. Rejoice that you are a citizen of heaven, and that he is going to make you a new being. Stand firm in him, striving forward toward his glory, and you will know his love and joy.

This morning, my friends, perhaps Jesus has been speaking to you. Perhaps he has been knocking at the door of your heart. Receive him today by faith. Claim his love and promises. Be assured that there is joy in the Lord.