

INTRODUCTION

There are different ways to relax. Some people go watch movies, others shop at the mall. Some people sip coffee with friends, others prefer to stay home and read a book. Many things in life bring us enjoyment. But what if you are alone, your health deteriorates, or your money runs low. You see, happiness and joy are different entities. Happiness may depend on what you have on the outside. However, joy reflects what you have on the inside. You may be all by yourself, bed-rested or financially poor, but you can still be joyful. The Bible tells us that true joy can only be found in the Lord. The apostle Paul knew how to rejoice even in hardship. When he wrote the book of Philippians he was in prison. Bible scholars commonly agree that Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon are four books Paul wrote during the same imprisonment time. They are called the letters from the prison. Paul was arrested for preaching the gospel. In the first century, a prison cell might be an underground hole. There was no air-conditioning and no window. Inmates were not allowed to go out. If a prisoner did not have family or friends to help him then he would most likely be starved and frozen to death in the bitter winter. Paul had a lot of reasons to harbor bitterness in his heart. Do you have similar feeling before? You expect a smooth sailing, but things only turn bad ever since you became a Christian. Why still believe in God when we do not get what we want? If any of us knows suffering, Paul knew it more. Paul had no freedom and perhaps no tomorrow. But Paul had joy in his heart. In this book, “joy” and related words appear sixteen times. We can learn from Paul’s example. In the next four months we will study the Philippians one section at a time. I give this sermon series the title “Joy in the Lord.” I encourage everyone to spend some time at home to read the whole book. There are only four short chapters. You can read it over and over again in the next few months, or read a portion at a time when you have your morning devotion. Let God’s Word sink into our heart, so that we can rejoice like Paul did in any circumstance. Paul founded the Philippian church in his second mission trip. It was the first Christian church established on the European continent. Paul had a close relationship with the believers there. Therefore, when they heard that Paul was in prison they quickly sent someone to bring supplies to him. As we study 1:1-11 this morning we shall see that Paul rejoiced for the Philippian believers because of their active spiritual growth. Paul’s expectation for the church is the same as God’s expectation for every church, that we should recount God’s blessings as we fix our eyes on the finishing line.

EXPLANATION

Paul began the book with a standard letter format of his days. He put himself and Timothy as the co-authors in verse 1. Then Paul specified that the letter was written to the saints (which means all the believers in the church), overseers (which were equivalent to the pastors) and deacons (meaning, other coworkers). Next, Paul sent his greetings to the recipients. “Grace” can mean joy, happiness or thanks. Then “peace” in Hebrew is “shalom.” Paul was born a Jew and now writing to some Greek people. Therefore, he used both the Greek and Jewish ways to greet his brothers and sisters. What follows in verses 3 to 11 are two aspects Paul wanted to focus on. It is easily distinguishable in the original Greek text because from verses 3 to 8 is one long sentence, then verses 9 to 11 is another sentence.

1. 對教會的稱讚 Praise for the Church

First, Paul gave his praise for the Philippian church. Let us look at **verses 3 and 4**: 3 I thank my God every time I remember you. 4 In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy. Paul expressed his yearning to meet the believers. He repeated similar thought in verse 7 when Paul said that the Philippian believers were in his heart. Also, in verse 8 Paul said he “long for all of you.” Often when I read Paul’s letters I feel that he was a serious person. In his letters to the Corinthian believers Paul was not hesitant to condemn their immoral sins. But Paul also had his tenderness. He treated the Thessalonica believers like a mother takes care of her little children. He said in **1 Thessalonians 2:8** - We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. In the Chinese culture it sounds quite odd for a man to say, “I love you” or “I miss you” to a group of people. But Paul did not have such problem, because he truly cared about the people he knew. That shows Paul’s pastoral heart. In our world, it will send a wrong message if I say so to a sister “I love you.” It is even worse if I say so to a brother! Instead, I can say: “I care about you” or “Is there something I can help you or pray for you?” Or I can pat people on their back or shoulder as a means of encouragement. As we go back to the Philippian letter Paul said that whenever he thought of his brothers and sisters he prayed for them, and he did so with joy. He did not say: “Every time I remember you wrinkles appear on my forehead.” Here we see the key word “joy” shows up in the letter for the first time. Why was Paul filled with joy when he thought of the believers? He explained in **verse 5**: because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. Paul praised the Philippian believers because from day one they were his faithful partners in spreading the gospel. Paul echoed the thought in **verse 7** using a different description: ...for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. The love and prayer Paul mentioned earlier were mutual things. The Philippian believers surely prayed constantly for Paul to give him spiritual support. Secondly, it is likely that the Philippian Christians also encountered the same adversity Paul experienced. In fact, Paul reminded them in **verse 29** of the chapter by saying: For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him. Suffering for the sake of the gospel does not prove that people believe in the wrong faith. It is the contrary. Their suffering validates the truth. Our Lord suffered greatly to save us, and Paul also encountered hardship to preach the gospel. After all, the Philippian believers lived in an environment that was hostile to the gospel. That was why Paul praised the church that it did not only survive, but thrived under hardship. Such trials would last until Jesus’ return. Paul shared in **verse 6**: 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. It was Jesus who saved the believers and gave them a gospel mission. Our Lord would continue to energize them and give them all the resources they needed to achieve the goal. Paul was a missionary, and so he traveled a lot. After he founded a church, gave the new believers discipleship training and identified some leaders, he had to move on to elsewhere. It would give Paul much joy if he heard that years later the church he initiated continued to grow. It is like a company sets up new branches in various cities. The CEO will rely on the management teams in those locations to expand. It will give the leader much joy when business keeps on growing. Whether it is a company or a church we are to build onto what the pioneers had established. From the Philippian church we can think about our church. God brought us here at different times. One senior sister said that she has been around for so long that she has become a permanent fixture in the church. When you have time, I encourage you to take

a good look at the pictures in the hallway. When you walk down the corridor from the front entrance it will be like going through a time tunnel. A few decades ago some American Christians reached out to a group of early Chinese immigrants, cared for them and led them to Christ. Then gradually more people accepted Jesus and this church was founded. From borrowing facilities from another church, later we bought this land and built our own church. All that history is a collection of God's mighty work through the hands of faithful believers. They responded to God's calling, and put vision into actions. God gave them insight and courage, diligence and perseverance. Then one wave after another God brought in more devoted coworkers. We should never take God's grace for granted. Every time when we think of our church, and whenever we step into this building we should give thanks to our God. When you understand our root then you cannot help but give praise to God. This building is not just a structure anymore. You do not just come once or twice a week to enjoy the programs. This is your spiritual home. Now it is our turn to continue to build on what the forerunners had started. The gospel mission is not done until Jesus' return. There are still many people outside of the church doors. Will you be a part of God's plan to reach out to the lost?

2. 為教會而禱告 Prayer for the Church

We should recount God's blessings as we fix our eyes on the finishing line. Paul gave his praise for the Philippian church. Next, Paul also offered his prayer for the church. There are two major things that Paul prayed for. The first is from **verse 9 to the first half of verse 10**: 9 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best... Paul prayed that the Philippian believers would increase their love out of knowledge and insight. Both words for "knowledge" and "insight" have to do with wisdom acquired through personal experience. Genuine love and wisdom can only be obtained when we build a close relationship with God. In our upbringing we know the importance of nurturing. The family background we grew up from and the kind of friends we associated with helped shape the type of person we became. As believers we must go back to the Bible as the ultimate guidance for our life. It is not he said, she said or what any expert said that counts. God said it, and that is our final answer. Paul went on to say that such love based on knowledge and insight will equip us to "discern what is best." The idea here is not only to distinguish between good and bad, or to separate good and better things. But that after such evaluation one will accept what is excellent. It is like people use different criteria to pick a watermelon – color, weight and the sound when you tap your finger at it. Your intent is to buy the best one. In our Christian life we should also discern what is God's best. We should hate sins but love sinners. Paul said in **Romans 12:9** that: Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Recently, I read an article about a renowned Catholic college that has become more and more liberal. It invites speakers who support abortion and same-sex marriage to deliver speeches. It hires professors who advocate for those matters as well as assisted-suicide, and a Catholic priest who officiates same-sex marriages. The school also approves an LGBT-only student dormitory. The student body said that it was a right move to promote "respect, compassion and sensitivity" that are consistent with Catholic values to embrace different people. However, a student organization is criticized for defending traditional marriage. See the hypocrisy there? People who encourage tolerance of everything are intolerant of the things they do not like. A famous judge who graduated from the university long time ago summed it all by saying: "(The school is) not Catholic anymore." When the church stands up for what God

discerns as the best more than likely the secular world will oppose it. Christians will be labeled as narrow-minded or outdated. But you know what? God does not need to lower His standards to satisfy human sinfulness. A church can only stay pure if it holds onto what God sees as the best. However, as we defend God's truth there should not be any trace of self-righteousness. While we may not commit homosexual sins, stealing or murder we are still prone to other sins like lying, pride and slander. We should always pray like the tax collector in Jesus' parable in **Luke 18:13** – "...God, have mercy on me, a sinner." We should always accept people of diverse background as we expect God to accept us. After all, Christians are always in the process of becoming more like Christ. That is why Paul continued in the second part of his prayer in **verses 10 to 11** by saying: 10 ... and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God. The word picture behind the term "pure" is like holding something up to examine it against sunlight. We do that when we do laundry. It describes someone who is sincere without mixed intents. Then the word "blameless" does not mean perfect. It refers to one's action that does not cause others to stumble. Therefore, "pure" describes someone's motive, whereas "blameless" points to the behavior. Paul's prayer was that inside and out the Philippian believers would please God. How? Paul told us in verse 11 that it is through bearing "fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ." It is not our natural tendency to bear such fruit. It is the result of Christ working in us. The simple truth is that a tree can only bear its kind of fruit. Whether it is an individual Christian or a church, when we say that we belong to Christ, then there must be fruit of righteousness. **James 3:17** puts it this way: But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. There are eight virtues listed here. We need to ask ourselves if these are the qualities that we pursue after. When someone sees your life can he/she uses any of those words to define you? Can people outside of FCBC think of any of those descriptions when they look at our church? It is true that the unbelieving world sets the bar too high for Christians, thinking that we really have halos above our heads. But here is the truth: men's standards will never supersede God's requirements for us. Therefore, while we can never be perfect like God are we pursuing God's standards as our goal? If not, then no wonder the world condemns us as hypocrites. You see, Christians should always be in a mode of work in progress. We should always pray for ourselves and pray for our church that we can become more like Christ. By relying on God's grace, as we look back, we should confidently say that 2018 is a year that we bear more fruit of righteousness compared to a year ago.

CONCLUSION

We should recount God's blessings as we fix our eyes on the finishing line. Paul gave praise for the Philippian church because it was a church that was faithful in sharing the gospel. Paul also offered prayer for the church that it would continue to stand firm. Just like Paul shared we should always have Jesus' return in sight. We are actively preparing for His coming back. Our mentality should not be just getting things done. Indeed, there are many things in life we need to take care of. However, every now and then, we need to step back and ask if we are doing something that is of eternal value. In church ministries we do not just repeat whatever was done in the past. We need to constantly ask if there is a better way to serve our Lord and His people more effectively, to help everyone grow stronger in Christ, and ultimately bring more glory to God.