

Philippians 1.1–11

Abounding in love

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Finding Joy in the Journey (1)

Joy

Why was the mortgage so upset? Because it was a loan.

How many tickles does it take to make an octopus laugh? Ten, of course: ten tickles.

Do you want to hear two short jokes and a long joke? Joke, joke, jooooooooooooooke.

Two dogs are walking along a street. They are passed by a third dog driving a lorry load of logs. One turns to the other and says: 'He started fetching a stick and built up the business from there.'

What do you call a Frenchman wearing sandals? Philippe Philoppe.

Why was the bee flying down the motorway with his legs crossed? He was looking for a BP station.

A Roman walks into a bar, holds up two fingers, and says: ‘Five beers, please.’

I met a Dutch girl with inflatable shoes last week, phoned her up to arrange a date but unfortunately she’d popped her clogs.

Hopefully by this point people should be laughing (!).

God made us for joy. He made us because he wanted to enjoy us, and he wanted us to enjoy him, one another, and this wonderful world. In Philippians 4.4, Paul says **J**:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice!

Philippians 4.4 (NIV)

In Philippians, Paul was writing to his friends, to encourage and challenge them to learn what it means to follow God, particularly when we face difficult circumstances, with joy and contentment.

Philippians is all about how to be a follower, a disciple of Jesus – so I thought it would be a great book for us to look at together over the summer. For me *joy* is a vital part of church life. We should enjoy coming to church, we should look forward to joining our Christian brothers and sisters to worship God together each week.

And yet I know that when we face particularly hard situations, it is almost impossible *not* to be overwhelmed by those powerful negative emotions of guilt, anger, hurt and sadness. We are not happy all the time, though often we pretend to be, and hide our deeper struggles. But the pain is real.

Paul faced real hardship too: he wrote this letter from prison, and had been thrown into prison when he first visited Philippi years before. He had been betrayed by friends, beaten by the authorities, shipwrecked and falsely imprisoned.

Like us, Paul knew what it meant to suffer. And yet he also knew the secret of joy *even in the middle of the struggle* – the deep joy in God that brings with it also the feeling of contentment.

And so Paul commands us:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice!

Philippians 4.4 (NIV)

I don't know about you, but *I want that*. I want that peace in my innermost being, deep in myself, in that place the Bible calls the soul. I want to know that peace, that no-matter-what-happens-contentment, that unshakeable joy in God.

Joy is not the same thing as happiness – which is how it is possible to rejoice *while* suffering – and it's much harder to find.

That's why I decided to preach on Philippians this summer and call it **J** 'Finding Joy in the Journey'. We all have different journeys through life, different struggles. We may not be falsely imprisoned like Paul, but we will know other troubles that he didn't face.

But the *way* Christians face those difficulties should be the same, and that's why Philippians has so much to teach us. Each week we will be looking at a different aspect of joy in Philippians, so that hopefully, we will all find and grow that deep joy in God.

Humility (1-2)

There are few people in the world right now who terrify me as much as Donald Trump. On the website Politifact, which checks politicians' statements against the truth, 70% of his public statements have been rated 'mostly false', 'false', or 'pants on fire'.

He once said, 'The beauty of me is that I'm very rich.' About his show *The Apprentice* he said, 'All of the women on *The Apprentice* flirted with me – consciously or unconsciously. That's to be expected.' And, 'My IQ is one of the highest – and you all know it! Please don't feel so stupid or insecure; it's not your fault.'

Let's see how Paul describes himself, shall we?

Please open a Bible to Philippians 1 so you can follow along. It's a great habit to get into when someone is preaching. Philippians 1 – look at v1 with me §:

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus...

Philippians 1.1 (NIV)

I can't see Trump describing himself as a § servant, can you?

Paul was one of the most important church leaders of all time. He planted churches all over the Roman Empire. He wrote half of the books in our New Testament. Together with the other apostles, he laid the foundation on which the church still stands.

And yet, how do Paul and Timothy describe themselves? In v1 they are **servants**. In fact, the word they used really means § *slaves*. They don't have an inflated opinion of themselves, but instead recognise that in all they do, they are servants – *slaves* – of Jesus.

Often the world tells us that true joy is found in being able to do whatever we want, with no constraints. For the world, finding joy is about being as rich as Donald Trump – who can do or say what he wants, and may become the most powerful man in the world.

But actually, that is a lie. Paul and Timothy knew the importance of true humility – knowing someone else is in charge: God. They knew that we were created to serve Jesus, and so only in serving him can we find true fulfilment and joy.

Gratitude (3)

Look at what Paul says next ¶:

I thank my God every time I remember you.

Philippians 1.3 (NIV)

Now, I've been thinking about this, and I don't think there is anything more encouraging than someone coming up to you and saying, 'That thing you did / said – *thank you so much*.'

Knowing that something *I* did helped someone else *so much* that they made the effort to say thank you – there's nothing quite like it for encouraging your heart. Imagine how the Philippians felt when they read those words from Paul – **I thank my God every time I remember you** (3).

I wonder if you ever take the time to sit quietly and remember all the people who have loved, supported and helped you in your life, and then made sure you thank God for them?

Love (4-11)

Paul is *full* of gratitude – and also joy:

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.

Philippians 1.4-6 (NIV)

These words speak powerfully to me, because they encourage me that *God isn't done with me yet*. You know what, ¶ I'm a work in progress. I'm not the finished article – God is and will continue to work in me.

When I've been through the darkest times, I could hardly dare to believe this verse ¶:

he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Philippians 1.6 (NIV)

Seven years ago I thought I was done, finished, through – I had failed, big time. I couldn't see how God could possibly be at work within me. For a while, this verse rang hollow.

But it rang hollow, because I was so fixated on my own problems, on my own guilt, on my own pain, that I wasn't able to see God at work in me.

Through that awful experience, where I felt so utterly unloveable, God taught me how much I am loved. As everything I had was stripped away, and I was left, alone and afraid – so I started to learn what God's love *truly* is.

You see, it's easy to feel loved when you're on top of the world, when things are going well, when success masks the truth of what lies beneath, within each of us. When all the flimflam is gone, and all that you're left with is yourself, your guilt, your shame, your pain – *that* was when I started to learn about what God's love *truly* is.

There's a hymn, it starts like this:

§ My song is love unknown,
my Saviour's love to me;
§ love to the loveless shown,
§ that they might lovely be.

Samuel Crossman

The **good work** which God will **carry on to completion**, is to make the loveless lovely, by showering them with his love.

God loves us as we are, but he loves us too much to *leave* us as we are – damaged and broken by sin. He wants to heal us, to restore us, to make us lovely by loving us. That is the **good work** which God will **carry on to completion**.

Which means, even in the very darkest time, God's work in us carries on, because he never stops loving his children.

He never stops. Let that sink in for a moment.

Slowly: he never stops.

God's love is stronger than our mistakes.

God's love is more powerful than our failures.

God's love is deeper than our wounds.

God's love never stops, it never runs out, it never gives up, but it keeps on coming, because God knows there are no shortcuts. To build character, to form a disciple, takes time, and a *lot* of love §:

he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Philippians 1.6 (NIV)

You may have heard of the River Jordan in Israel. ¶ At either end of the River Jordan are two large lakes, so large they are called seas: the Sea of Galilee, and the Dead Sea.

Various rivers flow into the Sea of Galilee at the top, and the Jordan flows out at the bottom. The lake is full of life, teeming with fish, supporting the communities that live around its shores.

The Jordan flows into the Dead Sea at the top, but nothing flows out. It is stagnant, so rich in salt and minerals that you can't swim in it, you sort of float strangely on top of it.

The two seas are pictures of how we can respond to love. If we simply receive, receive, receive, then we end up like the Dead Sea: stagnant, no life, dead. But if as we receive love, so we give love away, then we start to come alive, like the Sea of Galilee.

Love isn't like a bank account – it never runs out, because the more love you give away, the more God gives. Listen to Paul:

I have you in my heart... God can testify how ¶ I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Philippians 1.7-8 (NIV)

Paul *loves* the Philippians. But this love doesn't come from within himself, it comes from Jesus: **I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus** (8).

The gratitude Paul feels for the Philippians, the joy, the love – is simply not possible in our own strength. We need help, Paul needed help – which is why seven times in these eleven verses Paul mentions Jesus. Count for yourself: seven times.

¶ Finding joy in the journey begins with learning where to look: ¶ Jesus Christ. It is *his* love, *his* good work, *his* grace, *his* peace, *his* joy that all people everywhere are searching for. Finding joy in the journey begins with learning where to look: Jesus Christ.

And when we look at Jesus we see love, holiness, new life, freedom from sin and guilt – when we look at Jesus we see everything we always wanted, and he wants to grow all that in us ¶:

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1.9-11 (NIV)

I almost made my whole sermon about this prayer. It is a summary of the whole letter – for this is how we find joy in the journey: as our **love abounds** in **deep knowledge** of God, as we **discern what is best**, and see how in Christ we are **pure and blameless**, as we are **filled with the fruit of righteousness** – *then* we will find joy and bring God **glory and praise**. I almost made my whole sermon about this prayer – but I decided to do something different instead.

Wouldn't it be great if we could all pray that prayer for each other, every day, for the next couple of months? To help with that, I have made some cards with the prayer on the back. Stick it on the fridge, on your bathroom mirror, use it as a bookmark – anywhere that you'll see it, to remind you to pray. However you do it, please, *please* make an extra effort to pray this prayer every day.

Finding joy in the journey begins with abounding in love: knowing how much God loves us – and being full of love for others. Finding joy in the journey begins with abounding in love: learning to see God at work, making us lovely by loving us – and delighting to see God at work in others, making *them* lovely as well.

Finding joy in the journey begins with abounding in love – but not just any love: the love of Jesus Christ. So let us fix our eyes on him as we pray for each other this summer.