



Look through God's Eyes

Philippians 1:1-7

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Southern California is known for its sunny summer days, but my best memories growing up in Los Angeles are of its warm summer nights. It's seldom humid there, so once the sun goes down the air cools to the perfect comfort level. The summer of 1989 stands out because that was the year my best friend had just gotten his driver's license, opening all kinds of opportunities for us, good and bad.

One of those nights, he invited me to a youth group meeting at his church where the youth pastor taught on a subject that was strangely foreign to me. He spoke about joy. I think the only time I had ever heard that word used was in Christmas carols. To be honest, I don't remember anything he said. But later that night as we were driving home with the windows down enjoying the night air, my friend asked me a question that I'll never forget. He simply asked me whether or not I had joy. I had to admit that I didn't.

When he asked that question it was like he had tossed a pebble down a hillside. And as it bounced around inside my heart it triggered a landslide. The foundation of my outlook on life began to crumble away unearthing the emptiness of my soul. The things that had been important to me began to seem pointless. I wanted this joy.

Could I toss my pebble at you? Do you have joy? I'm not talking about happiness. We all have times when we're happy and times when we're sad. I'm not talking about a giggly giddiness. We all know people who try to go through life on a constant high from caffeine or sugar or something else. When I speak of joy, I'm talking about a deep sense of satisfaction at the core of your being that enables you to rise above the ups and downs of life. Do you have this joy?

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One of the best examples of joy I've found is the Apostle Paul. Paul's life wasn't easy. He endured countless trials and hardships. He chronicled his experience like this: *Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches (2 Cor 11:24-28).* In spite of all of this, Paul possessed an unquenchable joy.

Paul speaks of his joy most often in a letter he wrote to a group of Christians in a city called Philippi. What makes the letter so amazing is that even as he wrote it, Paul was being unjustly held in prison because of the false accusations of jealous rivals. Today that letter is preserved for us as the eleventh book in the New Testament: Philippians. Every passage we read in Philippians reveals more clues to finding and

deepening genuine joy. As we enter into the summer months, I want to invite you to join me in a study of that letter, a quest to understand Paul's joy and to make it our own.

We begin today with Paul's opening words: **Philippians 1:1-7.**

Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me.

This is just the opening of Paul's letter: his address and initial greeting. But even here we begin to sense the way his life overflowed with this incredible, deep seated joy. We find that Paul had a unique way of looking at life. What was it that shaped his outlook? What prompted his joy? To begin with, Paul found joy by looking through God's eyes. His entire outlook on life was tinted by the grace of God. He looked at life through God's grace colored glasses.

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Paul didn't always look at life this way. Earlier in his life, he thought of God as a demanding judge. Paul was raised to follow God's rules fastidiously. He was part of a strict Jewish group called the Pharisees, and he loved it. He out performed everyone else around him in both his knowledge and his personal conduct. He proudly stood out as one of the spiritual elites of his day, but then Paul encountered Stephen.

Stephen was a follower of Jesus. Like Jesus, Stephen preached that all the rituals practiced by the spiritually elite were hypocritical and empty. Stephen called them all to repent and humble themselves before God. He and the other Christians preached that all people needed God's salvation, and that Jesus is the Messiah who died and rose from the dead to bring about that salvation.

When Paul heard Stephen's message it made him angry. First, Paul and his companions eliminated Stephen. They had him put to death. Then, in his rage, Paul set out to find others who preached this message so that they could be punished and silenced as well. He even requested authority from the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem to carry on his manhunt in Damascus, over 150 miles away.

It was on that journey to Damascus, that Paul encountered a brilliant shining light. It was the risen and glorified Jesus confronting Paul. Paul was left blinded. I think it was God's way of showing him the truth about himself. Paul thought he had life figured out. He thought he knew it all, but it took literal physical blindness to show Paul how blind he was to the true character of God.

Paul's perspective of himself changed. He realized that he was guilty of being a sinner. He had followed the rituals and rules, but he didn't really love God, he didn't really love people. He needed God's forgiveness, and he came to understand that this forgiveness was made possible through Jesus Christ.

Paul explained it this way: *God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.... the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 5:8; 6:23).* That is the grace of God, the gospel, the good news that God offers to save and transform our lives regardless of our past.

Paul experienced God's grace, and it changed him. Even here in these opening words to the Philippians, it's clear that grace enabled him to see three realities that produced this fullness of joy in his life. I believe that to the degree that you and I experience God's grace and grasp these realities, we will experience that same joy.

1. Grace enables us to see God as Father.

Paul begins his salutation: *Grace to you and peace from God our Father...* If you have been around Christianity much at all, you're used to hearing God referred to as Father, but that wasn't a part of Old Testament Judaism. I doubt Paul ever addressed God this way during his Pharisee days. You really don't find God described in such personal terms until Jesus came.

Jesus had a special relationship with God. He was the only begotten Son of God. As Father and Son, they share a oneness that is unlike anything that we can comprehend. On one occasion Jesus said, "*I and the Father are one*" (**John 10:30**). Another time He said, "*...if you knew Me, you would know My Father also*" (**John 8:19**). The Jewish leaders of the day found this kind of talk to be blasphemous. They tried to stone Jesus for speaking this way.

Today, everybody calls God Father, but that is wrong. God isn't Father to everyone. **John 1:12-13** states, "*But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*" Being a child of God is something special. It doesn't happen when you're physically born. It's not our natural state. That's why Jesus said that we must be born again. We have to enter into this relationship with God, and that only happens when we receive or accept Jesus as our Savior and Lord. This relationship with God is a free gift from God, a unique blessing bestowed upon us who do not deserve it.

What does becoming a child of God have to do with joy?

Think of the normal human relationship between child and father. My son Matt just celebrated his ninth birthday. You wouldn't know it to look at him now, but there was a day long, long ago when he fit nicely in the crook of my arm. For the first few weeks of his life, that was the only way he would sleep for more than half an hour. Mom wasn't able to do that. She was able to feed him, but only Dad was able to calm him down so that he could rest. My strength, limited as it is, made him feel secure.



When you become a child of God you come under the protection of someone who has unlimited power – someone who rules over the entire universe with legions of angels to carry out His every wish. There is incredible joy in knowing that kind of security.

And it's not just that we are secure as children of God. He isn't passive in His care over us. When you have a relationship with God, He Himself listens to us. When we call out for help, He hears and pays attention. Look at what Paul has to say about

this. In **verses 3 & 4** he writes: *I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all...* There is joy in knowing that we can come before our Heavenly Father in prayer.

But God doesn't listen to the prayers of everyone. **Proverbs 15:29** says, "*The LORD is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous.*" **Isaiah 59:1-2** says, "*Behold, the LORD'S hand is not so short that it cannot save; nor is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.*" It's only by God's grace that we can experience the security of becoming God's children and have the privilege of Him hearing us when we call.

Friday night our family was out shopping at Kohl's down on Westnedge. Even in that huge store, when one of my three children calls me, even when I'm halfway across the building, somehow I recognize that call. It's the same way with God. When you pray to him, he hears and he responds. That doesn't mean that He always gives us what we're asking for. I don't do that with my children. God knows what we need better than we do.

If you want to find joy, it starts when you look through God's eyes of grace. You see yourself as sin scarred and unworthy, but you also see the incredible love of God that he is willing to adopt you as his child and to care for you as His own, listening whenever you call. Grace enables us to come to see God as Father.

2. Grace enables us to see Jesus as Lord.

The title "Lord" is a bit hard for us to swallow as Americans. We're a democratic country and we deeply value freedom. The Declaration of Independence declares Liberty to be an unalienable right given to us by God. We tend to think of submission as repugnant.

It may shock us then to hear the terminology Paul uses. In **verse 1**, he calls himself and Timothy, "*bond-servants of Jesus Christ*." That translation sounds somewhat noble, but he is actually calling himself a slave. Then in **verse 2** he refers to Jesus as *the Lord Jesus Christ*. We're used to hearing Jesus referred to as Christ, but we have to remember that this wasn't part of his name. It is a title—Lord Jesus the Messiah, the promised King. Now to us this may all appear oppressive (Slaves submitting to a Lord?), but Paul looks at it all through God's eyes of grace and it gives him joy.

We tend to think of submission to a Lord as something harsh and demeaning. That perception keeps many people away from Christianity. They believe that becoming a Christian will mean being burdened with an endless list of rules that will squelch all the enjoyment out of life. Remember, that was how Paul lived as a Jewish Pharisee, but that wasn't what he found in Christianity.

Jesus said that he came to set people free from that kind of oppressive burden. **Matthew 11:28-30** tells us that Jesus said, "*Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.*"

Becoming a Christian means following Jesus as His servant—submitting to His direction and obeying Him. But ultimately there's no fear of failure. Paul had always lived in fear that his good works would never measure up—that maybe somehow he missed something. But once he began to see through God's eyes of grace, the Lordship of Jesus Christ gave him confidence.

Look at **verse 6**. Paul says, "*For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.*" Once you enter into that relationship with God, accepting Him as Father and Jesus as Lord and Savior, God doesn't let go of you. God keeps working in your life to make you perfect, exactly what He wants you to be. We won't ever achieve that perfection in this life, but we're assured that God will bring it about in us in the day of Christ Jesus – that is, the day when Jesus returns to earth. When He returns to earth to judge people and to establish His kingdom, we will be ready. God will have worked in our lives to prepare us to follow Him perfectly.

I saw a news article online the other day about the growing popularity of plastic surgery, particularly among the rich and famous. The reporters had an expert plastic surgeon review old pictures and recent pictures of different celebrity's. He was able to point out all the different types of procedures they had endured: facelifts, nose jobs, Botox injections, taking away loose skin from eye lids. Those kinds of procedures are painful, time-consuming, and expensive. But people endure them willingly, sometimes even multiple times, because they believe that the end result would be a better appearance. But in a lot of the pictures in this article, people didn't look better. Sometimes their skin was stretched too tight. Sometimes their eyebrows arched up because of the procedure, giving them a wicked sneering look.



When we talk about following Jesus as Lord, we're not talking about your appearance. We're talking about something vastly more important—the condition of your soul. It requires commitment and personal sacrifice to follow Christ. Paul even faced imprisonment. Unlike superficial plastic surgery, the outcome when we follow Christ is guaranteed. *He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.*

Even though we stumble. Even though our commitment falters time and time again. When we look through God's eyes of grace, we see that our Lord Jesus Christ cares for us and is bringing about an incredible transformation of our soul.

I love the way Paul expresses this in **2 Corinthians 3:18**. He says, "*But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.*"

Paul's perspective is so influenced by this that as he addresses his letter to the Philippians, he calls them saints—holy ones. Practically speaking, we are not there yet, but positionally in Jesus Christ we are saints.

That should excite our hearts and fill us with joy and hope even in those times when we've failed miserably in our walk with God. Grace enables us to see God as Father and Jesus as Lord and that gives us deep, abiding joy.

3. Grace enables us to see people as valuable

Thus far, we've examined the undercurrents behind Paul's thinking in the opening words of Philippians. Here we deal more directly with what is on his heart in writing. In **verses 3-5** he says, "*I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now.*" There's joy in being a child of God and praying to him. There's joy in being a servant of Christ with a certain future. There's also joy in seeing God at work in the lives of other people.

I don't know if you've noticed this, but people aren't always easy to get along with. Someone has said, "As long as we have each other, we'll never run out of problems." Conflict is a part of life. Someone else has said, "Never underestimate the power of stupid people in large groups." Just imagine how much easier life would be in our families, our jobs, and our church, if we didn't have to interact with people. Nothing steals our joy like conflict with people.

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When we look through God's eyes of grace, we see the true value of people. They are valuable enough that God the Father would send His Son to die for their sins and valuable enough that God would work in their lives to perfect them and prepare for them an eternal home. Do you look at people that way?

Paul describes his outlook on people in **2 Corinthians 5:16-17**: *Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer. Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.* This perspective was part of what fueled Paul's passion for telling people the gospel. Whenever he looked at someone, he asked the question, "New creature or old? Born again or not?" If they had not been born again, then he felt compassion for them and tried to communicate the gospel to them. If they had been born again, then he thanked God for them and viewed them as a trophy of God's grace.

Bear in mind that even though Paul calls these Christians in Philippi saints, they weren't perfect people. In chapter 1, Paul indicates that they were loving, but they needed discernment. That sounds as if they were naïve or gullible. In chapter 2, he has to tell them to be humble and do things without grumbling or

disputing. In chapter 3, he tells them that they need to persevere. Perhaps some were being lazy. In chapter 4, he addresses an ongoing conflict between two women, Euodia and Syntyche. These were normal people with normal problems.

Nevertheless, Paul's heart is overflowing with joy and he gives thanks to God for these people whenever he thinks about them. It wasn't because of anything in the Philippians. It was because of what God was doing in their lives. They were participating in the gospel. They had received God's grace. In **verse 7** Paul says to them, "*For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me.*" Paul found joy as he thought about these people because he knew that God was working in and through them.

Conclusion

Looking through God's eyes of grace enables us to see God as Father, Jesus as Lord, and people as valuable: three realities we often miss. When we look at life from the perspective of God's grace it helps us see them, and that produces joy.

Think of the incredible joy we experience through our physical sight: the rich variety of colors; the intricacy of shapes, patterns, and textures; the majesty of light and shadow. Imagine all of that taken away, if you one day awoke to find your sight gone.



John Newton said, "Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see." The experience of God's grace opens an entirely different dimension of life to our eyes that can amaze us and stir our soul far more than earthly images. Have you experienced the grace of God? Do you look at life through His eyes?