

## Grateful Joy

1 of 12 in *Journey Into Joy* (A Series in Philippians)

January 7, 2024

Philippians 1:1-8

Good morning, and Happy New Year!

Today we begin a new sermon series called *Journey Into Joy*. Over the next 12 weeks, we'll be making our way through the entire New Testament letter of Philippians.

We'll do so with a particular focus on the theme of *joy*, which is prominent in Philippians. It also connects with Cornerstone's 2024 Ministry Theme, which is:

### Making space for JOY and FLOURISHING

- In our lives
- In our church
- In our community
- In the world

Many of you will recognize that this was our theme for 2023 as well. After months of prayerful discernment, our leadership sensed God saying that he is not yet done with the theme of joy and flourishing when it comes to what he's doing at Cornerstone.

As we continue to emerge from the deep impacts of a years-long global pandemic, which is definitely not an overnight process, we're reminded of the words that Nehemiah and Ezra spoke to the people of God as they emerged from a much longer and exceedingly more arduous exile in a foreign land:

"Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."<sup>1</sup>

It is the joy of the Lord that gives us strength in challenging times, like the ones we've all been through in recent years, and continue to emerge from, both as a church as well as personally. This is the heart of the reason why God is asking us to continue focusing on the biblical theme of joy, along with its very close counterpart, flourishing. Because the joy of the Lord is our strength.

Last year, we learned that biblical joy is profoundly *relational*. Joy finds its source in our relationship with Jesus— it is the joy *of the Lord* after all, and it comes from walking closely with him. It very quickly extends from there into our relationships with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. As theologian Miroslav Volf puts it:

Joy is best experienced in community. Joy loves company.<sup>2</sup>

Biblical joy is always attentive to and grateful for God's goodness, but what makes it unique is that it doesn't depend upon our circumstances always remaining favourable. We're called to rejoice even in the midst of hardship, and this is possible because nothing can ever separate us from Jesus and his love— and he is the primary source of our joy. But at the very same time, biblical joy remains emotionally honest— it allows space for you to lament life's sufferings and the world's injustices. It will also compel you to *act*— to spread joy to others by serving them sacrificially, as Jesus served us.

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<sup>1</sup> Nehemiah 8:10b (NIV)

<sup>2</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, p. 132.

In the Bible, joy is inseparably related to the theme of flourishing. Flourishing is a translation of the Hebrew word *shalom*, which has to do with what happens when people and things exist in a state of right relationship.

Indeed, Jesus calls his church— including you and me— to be agents who bring his *shalom* to the world around us, so that there might be as much flourishing now as possible, even as we await the day of Jesus' return, when we, along with the whole of creation, will finally and forever flourish together in perfect, interrelated harmony.

All of Cornerstone's ministry objectives and initiatives for 2024 are connected to these twin themes of joy and flourishing. And we're convinced that God is going to use the year ahead to prepare Cornerstone for an exciting new era of even greater kingdom impact as a local church.

With that in mind, let's begin our *Journey Into Joy*. Please turn in your Bible to Philippians chapter 1. Today I'll be working from the NIV, the New International Version of the Bible. I invite you to follow along, as I read Philippians 1:1-8:

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God every time I remember you. 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.

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

If God is calling us deeper into his joy— which is our strength— how do we begin the journey?

Professor Brené Brown has shown in her research that it's not joy that makes us grateful. Rather, it's gratitude that makes us joyful. So on our journey into joy, we must begin as the apostle Paul does in Philippians.

We must begin with *gratitude*— and not just gratitude in general, although that's a good thing. In the passage we just read, Paul shows us **three focal points for growth in grateful joy**. In the time that remains, we're going to unpack those points, and then we'll tie things together by celebrating the Lord's Supper. The first focal point for growth in grateful joy is to:

### **1. Actively partner together in gospel mission.**

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<sup>3</sup> Philippians 1:1-8 (NIV)

What does Paul say to the members of the Philippian church starting in verse 3?

I thank my God every time I remember you. 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...<sup>4</sup>

Bible scholar N.T. Wright explains that, “Of all the churches Paul had founded, the church of Philippi was the one that gave Paul the most joy.”<sup>5</sup> Why was that?

In their book on joy, Marcus Warner and Jim Wilder explain that:

Joy is the positive energy that comes from sharing a relational connection.<sup>6</sup>

And our text makes it clear that Paul shared a very special relational connection with the Philippian Christians. In particular, their joyfully affectionate connection came from the long-time partnership they shared in gospel mission— a partnership in the work of spreading the good news about Jesus to the world around them.

Not only *had* the Philippian Christians been Paul’s partners in gospel mission—they *remained* his partners to the present day— actively and sacrificially so. You see, when Paul wrote Philippians, he did so from a Roman prison cell, most likely in the city of Ephesus on the western shores of modern-day Turkey. And part of his reason for writing this letter was to thank the Philippians for sending him a recent financial gift to help meet his needs while he was in prison.

You see, when people were incarcerated in Paul’s world, their captors normally didn’t provide them with food. Prisoners had to rely on outside support from friends. The fact the Philippian Christians— although themselves located in northern Greece some 400 kilometers away— would raise money, and send one of their own people, Epaphroditus, on the long and dangerous journey to deliver this cash gift— speaks volumes about the close bond they shared with Paul.

No wonder Paul said to them, “I thank my God every time I remember you. 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.”

The original Greek word for “partnership” in our text is *koinonia*, which often gets translated as “fellowship” or “community”. But Paul’s use of the word in this passage is much more dynamic, much more active, than our typical understanding of those words.

*Koinonia* is about more than catching up with your friends as you sip coffee in the church lobby on a Sunday morning. It’s about more than having good conversation over Bible study, as important as that is. It’s about more than enjoying a potluck with your small group, as wonderful as that can be. (And for the record, I *love* my small group’s potlucks!)

*Koinonia*— the kind of joy-producing *partnership* that Paul enjoyed with the Philippians— is about actively and sacrificially sharing together in God’s mission to restore this world through Jesus Christ. It’s

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<sup>4</sup> Philippians 1:3-5 (NIV)

<sup>5</sup> N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters – Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon*, p. 84.

<sup>6</sup> Marcus Warner and Jim Wilder, *Rare Leadership for the Workplace: 4 Uncommon Habits that Improve Focus, Engagement and Productivity*, p. 31.

not unlike the deep and lifelong life-long bond formed between soldiers who have faced combat action together. *Koinonia* is the result of rolling up our sleeves and contributing our combined effort, energy, time, talent and treasure— even our blood, sweat and tears when necessary— to a cause infinitely greater than ourselves: *the cause of Christ*.

Therefore, if God is calling us on a journey into joy this year, it means that he's calling us into greater levels of active partnership with each other in gospel mission.

This relates closely to one of Cornerstone's ministry priorities for 2024 which has to do with integrating our many newcomers more fully into the life and mission of the church, as well as encouraging everyone in the congregation to engage all the more in what God is doing here at Cornerstone.

How might God be calling you to more actively connect with and partner with others in the mission that God has given us as a local church? Depending on where you are in your own journey, here are a few options just for starters:

- **Discover Cornerstone** [www.cornerstonechurch.ca/thehub](http://www.cornerstonechurch.ca/thehub) is our newcomers' class. If you're newer to this church, this is a fantastic opportunity for you to meet the staff and to learn what Cornerstone is all about, as well as how you can connect further with the life and mission of this church. The next Discover Cornerstone class is scheduled for Sunday, January 21<sup>st</sup>. We'll feed you lunch! You can sign up at The Hub.
- **Group Launch** [www.cornerstonechurch.ca/thehub](http://www.cornerstonechurch.ca/thehub) is a special event that will get you connected with a small group here at Cornerstone. Being part of a small group can help make you feel more at home in a large church like Cornerstone. The next Group Launch will take place on Sunday, January 28<sup>th</sup>. We'll feed you lunch! Sign up for Group Launch can also be found at The Hub.
- **Serve in a Ministry** [www.cornerstonechurch.ca/serve](http://www.cornerstonechurch.ca/serve) Serving in one of Cornerstone's ministries can be an incredible way to experience the joy of deepening relationships as you partner with others to carry out the mission God has given this church. To find out about opportunities to serve at Cornerstone, check out our Serve page.
- **Giving** [www.cornerstonechurch.ca/give](http://www.cornerstonechurch.ca/give) What was true of the Philippian church and the apostle Paul is true of us. Joyful partnership and the generous giving of financial support go hand in hand. We're incredibly thankful to God for all of you who partner with Cornerstone through your tithes and offerings. Because of God's grace and your faithfulness, we not only met our budget in 2023 but ended up with a very healthy surplus, and we hope that news brings you joy, even as we rejoice in your ongoing partnership in giving. Maybe you're new to giving and are ready to partner with Cornerstone through your financial support. You can learn more about how to do so by visiting our Give page.

In light of his grateful joy at the Philippians partnership in gospel mission, Paul would go on to say:

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. <sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Philippians 1:7-8 (NIV)

If such grateful joy can abide for Paul, even as he sits in a prison cell, then we can experience the same kind of grateful joy that will strengthen us in both good times and hard, as we share in God's grace with each other by actively partnering together in gospel mission.

The second focal point for growth in grateful joy that we learn from Paul is to:

## **2. Regularly thank God for each other in prayer.**

Going back to our text, let's look again at the part where Paul says to the Philippian Christians:

I thank my God every time I remember you. 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... <sup>8</sup>

Commenting on these verses, New Testament scholar Gordon Fee draws attention to just how much Paul thanks God for his friends in Christ— every time he remembers them, he utters words of thanks to God in prayer.

Indeed, if you pay attention to the content of Paul's thanksgivings throughout his letters, you'll notice that he rarely thanks God for *things*, but he often thanks God for *people*. Indeed, our passage makes it clear that such thanksgivings were part of Paul's *regular* prayer life.

When you pray, do you ever take time to intentionally thank God for the brothers and sisters in Christ that you do life with in small group, for example, or that you serve with in church ministry? Do you ever take time to intentionally thank God for Cornerstone's leadership—for the staff, the board, and other leadership groups in the church?

When you regularly thank God for others, your affection for those people will grow, and in the process, not only will your relationships with them be strengthened, but your joy will increase, and that joy will be sustaining for you, like it was for Paul, when life and ministry get hard.

But as we learn to regularly thank God for each other in prayer, there's something else that's very important to take notice of in our passage. It's Paul's repetition of the phrase "all of you". Let me show you excerpts of the text with that phrase highlighted in caps:

To ALL GOD'S HOLY PEOPLE in Christ Jesus at Philippi...

In all my prayers for ALL OF YOU, I always pray with joy...

It is right for me to feel this way about ALL OF YOU, since I have you in my heart... ALL OF YOU share in God's grace with me... I long for ALL OF YOU with the affection of Christ Jesus. <sup>9</sup>

When you see a phrase like that repeated in a biblical text, you can be sure that it's there for a reason. In this case, Paul's repetition of the phrase "all of you" points to a theme that Paul comes up again and again throughout the letter of Philippians—the theme of *unity*.

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<sup>8</sup> Philippians 1:3-5 (NIV)

<sup>9</sup> Philippians 1:1b, 4, 7a, 7c, 8a (NIV)

Later in this series, we'll be talking about two women in the Philippian church named Eudodia and Syntyche. It's likely that each of them had some kind of leadership role in the church, and they weren't getting along. They had beef with each other. Paul was concerned that there may be some posturing between them that could lead to some real divisions in the church.

This is why Paul is very careful to repeat that he thanks God for ALL of his Philippian brothers and sisters— not just those on one side or the other. He doesn't just thank God for the people that he personally gets along with and likes the best. He thanks God for ALL of them because he knows that the integrity and effectiveness of a church's mission depends on its unity.

As you get into the habit of regularly thanking God for your brothers and sisters in prayer, yes, thank God for those you're especially close with. Thank God for those you especially appreciate. But also, learn the discipline of thanking God for ALL of the brothers and sisters at Cornerstone who are partnered with you in carrying out the mission God has for us as a church. Doing so will transform your heart and attitude toward others. Doing so will strengthen the unity of the church. Doing so will deepen in you and in others the joy of the Lord that will sustain us in both good times and hard.

Let's move on to the third focal point for growth in grateful joy, which is to:

### **3. Confidently trust that God will finish what he started.**

Returning to our text once again, in verse 6 Paul speaks of:

... 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.<sup>10</sup>

Paul is saying this to encourage the Philippian Christians, because he knew that he wasn't the only one facing hardship in following Jesus. Yes, Paul was confined to a Roman prison for sharing the gospel of Jesus, but the Philippian Christians also faced the dangers of persecution, including social ostracization and even imprisonment, by the Roman authorities.

That's because Philippi was a leading city in the Roman Empire, and its citizens were known for their zealous support, and even worship of, the Roman Emperor, Caesar. Their declaration was *Caesar is Lord!* The Philippian Christians, however, lived by the declaration that Jesus is Lord, which got them into hot water sometimes with the Rome-loving public and authorities. Nonetheless, in chapter 2, Paul will go on to declare boldly that one day, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, the glory of God the Father.<sup>11</sup>

On top of persecution from non-Christians, the Philippians also faced some internal problems in the church—namely that of emerging disunity and division, as was mentioned earlier.

Such external and internal pressures can be a joy-killer.

But as New Testament professor Brian Tabb reminds us, true "Christian joy is the great pleasure and happiness we feel— *whether or not* the sun is shining, *whether or not* our team is winning, *whether or*

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<sup>10</sup> Philippians 1:6 (NIV)

<sup>11</sup> See Philippians 2:9-11

*not we are healthy or hurting*—because [Jesus] our redeemer lives, because we belong to him, and because he is making all things new.<sup>12</sup>

Paul reframes our present challenges in light of the awesome “day of Christ Jesus”— that day when Jesus returns again to earth and brings to completion the work of creation’s redemption he’s begun, and that includes the work of redemption he’s begun in you and me.

Yes, you are a work in progress, as am I. But we can be confident that God will finish the work he started in each of us personally, as well as the work he’s started in Cornerstone as a local church. That doesn’t mean there won’t be problems along the way, but take heart, because there are more chapters to come in the story. God isn’t done with us yet, and knowing this, we can be *thankful* and *rejoice* even in the midst of our present challenges.

Earlier this week I was praying with a prayer app called Lectio 365. Many of you know and use Lectio 365. If you’re looking for a helpful prayer app, I would recommend it. Wednesday, during morning prayer, I came across two quotes that I feel the Lord wanted me to include in this sermon— quotes that speak to the fact that we can confidently trust that God will finish the work he has started in your life, my life, and in our life together as a church.

The first quote comes from C.S. Lewis, who likens God’s work in us to that of an expert builder who is in the process of rebuilding a house:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you know those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.<sup>13</sup>

God isn’t done with his renovations yet. But he will finish what he started!

The second quote comes from the American writer N.D. Wilson, who speaks of God as a great artist, and of us as his masterpieces. Wilson writes:

And to an infinite artist, a Creator in love with his craft, there is no unimportant corner, there is no thrown-away image, no tattered thread in the novel left untied.<sup>14</sup>

With those quotes in mind, think of the unfinished parts in you, the loose ends not only of your story, and also the story of others you know. Think of the unfinished parts and loose ends of Cornerstone as a community of faith on mission for Jesus.

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<sup>12</sup> Brian Tabb, [Rejoice Even Though: Facing the Challenges to Joy](#).

<sup>13</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 160 (as quoted in Lectio 365 morning prayer for January 3, 2024).

<sup>14</sup> N.D. Wilson, *Notes from the Tilt-A-Whirl: Wide-Eyed Wonder in God’s Spoken World*, p. 108 (as quoted in Lectio 365 morning prayer for January 3, 2024).

As we learn to trust Jesus with our own unfinished parts and the loose ends of our stories, as well those of others, may we become a safe people who invite others to bring their whole selves— joy and tears— strengths and weaknesses— into the presence of the God who can be trusted finish what he started in them, and in us.

Because our lives are not determined by our present struggles but by our future destiny in Christ. And one day Jesus will come again, and at that time, in the words of the great Christian mystic Julian or Norwich, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” God will finish what he started, and with this promise in view, we can *give thanks* and *rejoice* in all circumstances, and in doing so, find the strength we need today to move into the future God has for us.

Indeed, today Paul has shown us three focal points for growing in grateful joy:

1. Actively partner together in gospel mission.
2. Regularly thank God for each other in prayer.
3. Confidently trust that God will finish what he started.

And now, let’s prepare our hearts to celebrate the Lord’s Supper in the joy of the Lord.

## **COMMUNION**

As we get ready to meet Jesus at his Table today, we’re reminded that joy is profoundly relational. The word communion literally means “union together.” It is a celebration first and foremost of our union with Jesus—of our relationship with him. At the same time, it speaks of the of the relationship we share with each other because of our mutual union with Jesus. Like spokes in a wheel are related to each other through their common connection to the hub, those of us who follow Jesus are one body, one family, through the union we share with him. And as we heard in today’s sermon, that applies to “all of us” who follow Jesus. Jesus invites “all of us” who follow him to his table, and calls us to join together in loving, united partnership to carry out his mission to the world.

Whatever our circumstances in life, nothing can separate us from the love God has for us in Jesus, and the proof of that love is made concrete in the bread and the cup.

The Lord’s Supper points ahead to the banquet we will one day share with Jesus and with each other in the new heavens and the new earth when he comes again to finish what he started, and set the whole world right, once and for all. The Lord’s Supper, therefore, is a meal that anticipates that great day, when our joy will be made complete, forever.

In the New Testament, the book of Hebrews tells us that for the JOY set before him, Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (see Hebrews 12:2).

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus took bread...

- Instructions on screen
- Ushers will invite you row by row to line up to receive the Lord’s Supper at one of the stations across the front of the worship hall
- For those with limited mobility, we would be happy to serve you in your seat. Simply raise your hand, and a mobile serve will come and serve you where you’re seated.