

The Joy of Living the Jesus-Way

Philippians



PART 6: LEARNING TO COUNT, LEARNING TO READ

By David Fields

Philippians 3:1-14

“We are born out of the laughter of the Trinity.”
- 13th C German theologian, Meister Eckhardt

I. Made For Joy

“Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord!”

- Philippians 3:1 In the end “rejoice” is not a command to feel a certain way, but to find your hope, your security, your whole self once again in the Lord himself. He is your hope. He is your security. He is your life and light and salvation.

“Rejoice” is a command. An imperative. We might wonder: how can you command someone to have a feeling of joy? Because “rejoicing” isn’t an emotional state. It’s a decision. It’s an action. It’s a *disposition*. A choice.

Joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness is dependent on happy happenings. Being happy is great. But happy can change as quickly as the weather in Calgary.

Joy is a deeper thing; a different thing. Yes, it includes some elements of positive emotion, but it’s not limited to that. Joy is something you can cultivate. Joy is something you can choose. Rejoicing is how.

1. Rejoice in the Lord

Rejoicing is rooted in what God has done and is still doing. Psalm 33:11: “Rejoice in the Lord and be glad”; Psalm 33:1: “sing joyfully to the Lord.”

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And, in my experience, while rejoicing isn't a command to feel a certain way, something happens to us emotionally. As we rehearse the fact of God's love for us, that he's acted in history for us, there is a deep current of peace, of security, steady and strong, like a deep breath of fresh air, a warm spring breeze after a cold winter, that sense of wholeness.

When we look to God, we realize that His face was already turned towards me the whole time. Our beholding him, is really just recognizing he's beholding us in love. He's looking at you in love.

2. A Safeguard

The positive command: "Rejoice in the Lord!" that is a safeguard. Why? Because that's what your life is for. But that kind of joy has threats. So the safeguard also includes this warning:

² Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. ³ For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—
⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

- Philippians 3:2-4

Paul has been "dogged" for about a decade by a group of Jewish folks who believe Jesus to be the long-awaited Messiah – God's rescuer – but they've also insisted that non-Jewish folks must practice this Jewish boundary marker of male circumcision.

They basically are saying, you cannot simply be a Gentile Christian, they must be converted to Judaism. So, scholars, for short, have called them the "Judaizers."

Paul's letter to the Galatians was largely to undo all the trouble caused by this "Jesus-plus-circumcision" crowd, which to Paul, amounts to a false-gospel. For Paul it is "Jesus plus something equals nothing."

To the Galatians, who are being pressured to be circumcised, Paul urges them: "Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you allow yourselves to be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all." (Galatians 5:2). Why? Because it's saying, "What Jesus accomplished was not really enough for us to be made right with God." It's faith in Jesus, plus something else.

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So, a few verses later: ⁶ *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*” (Galatians 5:6).

Why call them dogs? In the ancient world dogs would run wild through the city, biting, fighting, tearing apart whatever is in their path.

First, this distortion of the gospel was tearing apart other communities. To say, “Jesus plus circumcision” says: “Jesus, what he’s done, sure – but you need more.” No: Jesus plus something equals nothing.

But second, Jesus brings ‘peace’ between Jews and Gentiles. They are now “one” in Christ. And circumcision was a clear “boundary marker” between Jews and Gentiles under the first covenant.

So, for Paul, this is also about belonging. This group is saying: “You need to jump through this hoop to prove you are in, that you belong.” And that’s why he reminds this church of truth of their identity and belonging:

³ *For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—* ⁴ *though I myself have reasons for such confidence”. - Philippians 3:3-4*

Paul is saying: “You already belong because Jesus did everything necessary to make you his forever. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

The only way we can know real joy is to take the focus off me and put it back on Christ. That’s why “rejoicing in the Lord” protects us.

And Paul is only saying, in a fresh way, what the Bible has always said. Listen to what God says in Jeremiah 9:

²³ *This is what the Lord says: “Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches,* ²⁴ *but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the Lord.” - Jeremiah 9:23-24*

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2. Knowing Christ

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There is a big difference between knowing about Jesus and *knowing* Jesus.

Jesus does not simply invite us to a perspective, a philosophy, a way of life. He calls us to himself. "Come to me," says Jesus, "Come to **me**, all who are wearied and burdened and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)

What is the rest? It's himself. Relationship with him. It's *knowing* him: something like the way a young child knows her mommy; the one who holds her, feeds her, sings her to sleep, gave birth to her, has seen every moment of her life, knows this person is "for her" in every way. Like that.

As Jesus prays in John 17:3: "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

Jesus tells us, the essence of eternal life isn't so much a place, but a person. A kind of relating to God himself, in God's world remade. It's a relationship.

So Paul can say: "I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord..."

This isn't just knowing facts. This is, as Paul says, being "found in him."

Darrell Johnson puts it well:

"Wherever else I am, I want to be found in Christ. Where else would we want to be found? At home. At work. At school. In a hospital. In the car. In the bus. In a restaurant. In a coffee shop. In the shopping centre. At a movie theatre. At a hockey rink. Or a soccer pitch. Day or night, I want to be found in Christ. He is our home. He is not only our life, he is where we live. This is where the tradition of signing your name "In Christ" comes from. Of reminding ourselves where our true home is. I may be writing a letter from Vancouver [or Kamloops] but I'm "in Christ."

As one commentator puts it: "Paul now shifts from being the subject of his own story to being part of a story in which Christ is now the subject." - Stephen Fowl.

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Again, Johnson is so helpful: “I am not the subject of my own story. Christ Jesus is. I did not create me. He did. I did not save me. He did. I did not find myself. Christ finds me. And then in Christ, I finally find myself.”

– Darrell Johnson

III. Learning to Read

An “Unreliable Narrator” tells the story from a skewed perspective. We are ‘unreliable narrators’ to ourselves.

1. A Reliable Narrator

Good News! We have a reliable narrator. Someone whose strong, true voice can speak into our lives, transform us.

That’s what Paul is showing in this text when he says:

¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”

Paul *wants* to know Christ...meaning, he wants his life to now be shaped entirely by Jesus’ voice – the reliable narrator. And along the same ‘lines’ as Jesus’ life takes.

And Paul’s desire to “know Christ” is about letting his life be taken up, drawn along the same lines, as Jesus’ own life. In chapter 2:5 he tells us to “have the same attitude among yourselves” – the same pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting as Jesus.

2. Pressing On

Paul has learned to count in an entirely new way. He’s also learning to read his life differently. And he’s not turning back from it. As he goes on:

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. – Philippians 3:12-14

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Discussion

Open Up

Sometimes we have an experience or a change of perspective that cause us to reevaluate a previously held value, or belief, or way of living. Have you ever had an experience or change-of-mind like that? Describe what it was like to experience that shift.

Dig In

Read Philippians 3:1-11

1. What do you think the phrases “rejoice in the Lord” and “boasting in Christ Jesus” have in common (vv.1-4)?
2. Why do you think Paul used such strong language to describe false teachers (Vs. 2)?
3. I once read that there are people in most Christian denominations that truly believe that they in some way contribute to their salvation.
 - a. Why might people today make the same error as the false teachers in this passage – making salvation dependent on our own record or performance?
 - b. How can we keep ourselves from taking that same wrong turn?
4. According to verses 7-8, how did Paul come to reevaluate his heritage, privileges and attainments?
5. We can distinguish the difference as simply knowing *about* Christ and truly knowing him in the sense of having a *personal experience* of Christ. If you have had a similar experience of coming to have a personal knowledge of Christ, describe what it felt like? What changed?
6. What is Paul modelling for us in verses 12 -14?

Prayer

Take time as a group to pray for one another, especially for areas of your lives where following Jesus might be costly.