

“What Makes God Happy?”

Philippians 1:1-8

October 11, 2009

Have you ever wondered what makes God happy? What makes God happy?

I know that is kind of a strange question. It makes God come across as some kind of overgrown human being. Some days he's happy and upbeat, and other days he's down in the dumps. We could put it in more theologically precise terms. What is it that pleases God? What does God value? What brings God the glory and honor that he rightfully deserves? Those are all good ways of asking the question that I want us to think about. But for this morning let's just ask: What makes God happy?

We are so quick to think of what makes us happy. We have no trouble thinking about life in those terms. But what about God? What makes him happy? As he watches you and me day after day and he observes what goes on in our church, what brings a smile to his face? What makes God happy?

We are given some insights into that question in the opening section of the apostle Paul's New Testament letter to the Philippians. When Paul writes this letter, he is in prison in the city of Rome. Needless to say, that is not a happy place to be! Yet one of the noteworthy characteristics of this letter is the number of times Paul mentions *joy* or *rejoicing*. In this letter to the Philippians, Paul uses those two words fourteen times. Paul talks more about joy in this letter than in any of his other New Testament letters. That really is astounding. Paul is in prison, and he doesn't know if he is going to make it out alive. Yet he is filled with joy!

What is the secret of Paul's joy? It's safe to say that Paul has learned to look at his circumstances in a different way than most of us do. Paul has learned to look at his life and the world from God's perspective. He sees the things that are truly important. He knows what really counts. If we can see what makes Paul joyful while he sits in that Roman prison, we will have a good idea of what makes God happy too.

Before we look at what Paul says in these opening verses of Philippians, let's think about his relationship to the church that was in the Greek city of Philippi. Right at the start of our study there are two things that we should know about Paul and the Philippians. First, Paul had known this church for a long time. In the book of Acts chapter 16 we are told about Paul's first visit to the city, and we know that he walked into Philippi along with three of his co-workers—Timothy, Silas, and Luke¹—somewhere around the year A.D. 50. Paul visited the city a couple of other times (Acts 20:1-6) around the year 55. And then he writes this letter to them sometime between 60 and 62. So Paul has known and been in communication with the Christians in Philippi for over ten years. He knows these people. He's had plenty of time to know what kind of people that they are.

That leads us to the second thing that we should note about Paul's relationship to the Philippians. He has not just known them for a long time. He has developed a special relationship to this church.

⁷ It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart . . .

⁸ God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. (Phil. 1:7a, 8).

You and I can easily read those verses and say, “Well, that's just the way that apostles talked! What would you expect from a guy who's become known as Saint Paul!” But that won't do.

¹ Luke's presence comes from the use of “we” in Acts 16:11-13, 16.

This is not just glib religious talk. As we shall soon see, this church had earned a special place in Paul's heart.

Paul has known the Philippians for over ten years, and he has a special relationship with them. So now as he writes to them from his prison in Rome, what is he thankful for? What is it that is bringing him joy? What is it that makes Paul happy? What makes God happy?

God is happy to give grace to his people

The first thing that we should notice is something that is easy to miss because it is just under the surface of Paul's words. *God is happy to give grace to his people.* In verse 2, Paul says, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Again that sounds like the kind of thing that you would expect from Saint Paul. But look at how grace comes up again at the end of verse 7. He says that "all of you share in God's grace with me."

Paul never overlooks or neglects the most fundamental of Christian truths. The Philippians had become members of God's family not by earning God's love through their own good works but by the grace of God. The word *grace* refers to God's unearned love. It is a gift that God gives even though the people who receive don't deserve it.

In Acts 16 we read the famous story about Paul and the Philippian jailer. Paul and his co-worker Silas have been thrown into jail, but during the night an earthquake takes place. The damage to the jail that occurs during that earthquake gives the two of them a chance to escape. But they don't! The jailer is so amazed that they are still in the prison that he asks them, "What must I do to be saved?" That's the jailer's question. In other words, he is so impressed by what he sees in Paul and Silas that he wants to know about their God. He wants to know what he needs to do in order to know this God that Paul and Silas are so devoted to. Paul says to him, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). "Believe!" Paul doesn't say to him, "Well, in order to know God you need to go through all kinds of religious rituals and do all kinds of good works." Instead, Paul talks to the jailer about faith.

God is happy to give his love to people who don't deserve it. That describes all of us! Faith starts with an honest admission of how unworthy we are of God's attention and love, and then it continues with a request that Jesus will make us acceptable in God's sight. To say to God, "I'm not good enough for you, and I know it. I can't make myself right with you. So what I'm going to do instead, God, is to count on Jesus to make me right with you. Instead of relying on my own efforts, I'm going to believe in Jesus. I'm going to count on Jesus and his death upon the cross to take care of my sin."

When the Philippian jailer takes that step of faith in Acts 16 and when you and I approach God that way in faith, God gives us that love that we do not deserve. He welcomes us into his family. If you have never had that conversation with God, please do so. That is where a relationship with the living God starts. It doesn't start with coming to church and acting religious. It starts by entrusting your life and your existence to Jesus Christ. Please don't put it off. You don't want to miss the love that God freely offers to you! God is happy to give his grace to those who trust in his Son Jesus.

God is happy to see faithfulness in his people.

That's where it all starts. That is the first thing that makes God happy. Now let's look at a second thing that gives Paul joy and makes God happy. *God is happy to see faithfulness in his people.*

³ I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵ *because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, . . .* (Phil. 1:3-5 emphasis added)

What is Paul referring to when he writes those words? They come across to us as generic religious terminology. But Paul has something quite specific in mind.

¹⁵ Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; ¹⁶ for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. (Phil. 4:15-16)

In some ways this letter to the Philippians is nothing more than a long thank-you note. Over all the years that Paul has been involved with the church in Philippi, they have time and again sent him financial gifts so that he can continue to devote himself fulltime to telling others about Jesus Christ. That's what Paul is talking about in Philippians 4 and in chapter 1 too. No other church has done what the Philippians have done. Over the ten years they've known Paul, they have sent him aid or money "more than once." In fact their latest gift has just recently arrived in Rome. "I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent" (Phil. 4:18b). This man, Epaphroditus, had traveled from Philippi to Rome to bring Paul the latest gift from the Philippians. The Christians in Philippi are faithful to Paul even when he is in prison, and Paul is so grateful for their consistent demonstration of love.

I wonder if that sense of gratitude is the reason why Paul says something quite exceptional in the very first sentence of his letter. In verse 1 Paul writes "to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, *together with the overseers and deacons*" (emphasis added). This is the only one of Paul's letters where he mentions church leaders in his greeting. It's a small point, but it's intriguing. Why does Paul draw special attention to the "overseers and deacons" in Philippi? Could it be that he knows that those leaders of the church have been instrumental in continuing to support his ministry over the years? I don't know, but it might be. Perhaps he wants them to know how grateful he is for what they have continued to do for him over the years.

To see people who love God and serve God consistently over a long period of time brings joy to Paul's heart. It makes God happy too! Here are people who have been so touched by God's gift of grace that they can't help but want to serve him for the rest of their lives.

As I thought this week about Paul's experience with the Philippians, I couldn't help but spend a little time thinking about my experience here in our church. I've been around here for a few years, and I have seen some of you go through extraordinary trials and tragedies. Some of you have gone through sudden and heart-wrenching loss of loved ones. Some of you have suffered through a divorce or through some other kind of extreme setback in your family life. Some of you have bravely faced chronic health problems. Some of you have told me of deep hurts that you received from people who called themselves Christians. And I have witnessed so many of you simply struggling through the daily grind of life which can gradually wear you down over the years. And you have had your ups and downs. There have been times when you have wondered out loud whether God really loves you or not. I've heard you say that. Your walk with God has not always been along a smooth path. But the overall direction of your life has been straight ahead. You haven't wandered away. You have been faithful to God! So many of you have been an inspiration to me, and I know that God is happy too.

God is happy to see faithfulness in his people!

God is happy to persevere with his people.

Let's consider a third thing that makes God happy. God is happy to give grace to his people. God is happy to see faithfulness in his people. And *God is happy to persevere with his people.*

[I always pray] 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. (Phil. 1:6)

Usually we read that verse and apply it to ourselves as individuals. It is true that God keeps working in our lives as individual believers in Christ. God doesn't give up on his children. But in this verse Paul is talking about the community of believers in Philippi. God had begun a good work in the church in Philippi, and Paul is promising that God is going to keep on working among his church in that city. "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

Sometimes I really need to be reminded of that. Do you? I look at what is happening in our world and I think about things going on in the name of God, and I shake my head in bewilderment. I wonder what God is doing. This summer we've seen two denominations in our country officially endorse the practice of homosexual behavior. We should admit that there have been mistakes made in the past by Christians when it comes to this subject. Sometimes we have given the impression that God can forgive people who are guilty of heterosexual sin but not those who are guilty of homosexual sin. They are somehow in a different category. But that's wrong. But to endorse homosexual behavior as something that is good in the sight of God goes against the teaching of the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles and Jesus himself. I think about the decisions that those denominations have made this year, and I do wonder what God is doing in his church.

But then I think of Paul sitting in a Roman prison. Before he had been sent to Rome, he had already spent two years in prison in the city of Caesarea (Acts 24:27). Why? How did that fit into God's plan? Why does God allow someone who is so effective in spreading the gospel to cool his heels for two years in prison? What was God thinking?

Our questions about what God is doing in his church are nothing new. We should remember that. The church of Jesus Christ has gone through terrible times before. That's part of the reason why I enjoy studying the history of the church. It's humbling to learn about the mistakes that Christians have made over the centuries, but it is also inspiring to see that God's church continues to move forward. Today the church in the Western world may be decaying and crumbling, but in China and in much of the southern hemisphere the church of Jesus Christ is growing like it never has before. God is carrying on his work, and he will continue to do so until the day of Christ Jesus.

When our Lord Jesus comes again to this earth, we will then see with absolute clarity how God has completed his purposes for his people. The church has always faced challenges. There has never been a time when the church could sit back and announce that it has arrived. God calls us to face the challenges of our day, and God promises that he will be with us through those challenges. God is happy to persevere with his people. "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

Conclusion

As Paul thinks of all these things, he's filled with joy. He knows that they make God happy too. But let's also notice that these considerations motivate Paul to pray too. "I thank my God every time I remember you." There is that element of thanksgiving. Paul continues, "In all my prayers for all of you I always pray with joy." Paul gives thanks, but he also presents his requests to God.

That's a good note for us to conclude on. We know what makes God happy, so let's pray that we will make him happy. If you have never told God that you want to believe in Jesus as your Savior, please do so right now. Pray that you will be faithful to God in the trials that you are now facing. Pray that God will continue his good work in our church and in the church around the world. Let's pray that we will make God happy.

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