

Sunday, December 9, 2018—Philippians 1-4

Christmas celebrates Jesus and the difference He made when He came that night in Bethlehem. One of the overarching emotions of this season's celebration is joy. The angels proclaimed it. The shepherds experienced it. Contemporary believers live with it.

Like no other congregation, the Philippian church filled Paul with this same feeling. More than a simple emotion, joy was the assurance God was at work and that all was well. His joy moved him to pray “that your love will keep on growing in knowledge and every kind of discernment, so that you may approve the things that are superior and may be pure and blameless in the day of Christ” (1:9-10).

Joy is powerful. Paul was in prison (1:13), yet he wrote to the Philippians because of how much they meant to him. He knew the power of living for Christ (1:21) and wanted them to grow in unity, love for one another, and purpose for Christ, even in the face of suffering (1:27-30). He prayed they would adopt the mind of Christ (2:5-11) and truly thrive.

Joy grows in community, and this community helps guard against false teachers and threats to truth and unity (3:2-6). Paul wanted the Philippians to reach the point he himself experienced—everything was considered loss compared to Christ (3:7-8). He wanted to know Christ and fellowship with Him, even in suffering, so he would keep maturing.

Joy is a choice. Paul commanded the Philippians to rejoice always (4:4). Paul promised the peace of God would guard those who chose to find joy in Him. Praise God for the joy He continues to give in Christ.

Saturday, December 8, 2018—Ephesians 4-6

During the Christmas season, people find themselves focused on one thing. Kids are laser-focused on Christmas Day and the gifts they'll receive.

Adults can't stop thinking about shopping lists or party demands. That focus often makes them miss so many other important things.

When Paul wrote the Ephesians, he was in prison (4:1). He had every conceivable reason to lament his situation. Most would understand if he were distracted by the difficult conditions or his lack of freedom. Instead, Paul focused on the growth in holiness of his Ephesian friends.

Because of what Christ had done in and for them (chapters 1-3), Paul wanted them to grow in unity. "But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into him who is the head—Christ" (4:15). They were no longer the dead-in-sin people they once had been. Jesus had brought them to life and given them the power to love one another sacrificially.

Paul knew the only way they could live this way consistently was to allow the Holy Spirit to fill them (5:18), leading them to walk in the light and renounce old, empty ways. Instead of giving themselves over to wine, for instance, they could surrender to the Holy Spirit. This submission to Him paved the way toward submitting to one another in the church, marriage, family, and work (5:19-6:9).

This filling was vital because only then would they have the strength to fight spiritual battles (6:10-20), the real battlefield for the believer. Ask God for a fresh filling of the Spirit and power in prayer.

Friday, December 7, 2018—Ephesians 1-3

Christmas prompts people to make lists. Some make long lists for shopping and party preparations. Some make lists for gifts they will give or hope to receive. All of the list makers have certain outcomes for which they hope, and they know making preparations helps bring the hope to reality.

Paul told the Ephesians God had made plans long ago for their lives in Christ. He had predestined them "to be holy and blameless in love before him"

(1:4). He made plans for their adoption as sons (1:5) and already had an inheritance waiting for them (1:11). His planning also provided the Holy Spirit as a seal and a down payment (1:13-14). God was promising to bring great fullness to the relationship He began in them.

All the more remarkable was the fact they had been dead in their sin (2:1). God made these plans for people whose sin made them unworthy and rebellious, but God made them alive in Christ (2:5). They were God's workmanship, created to do good works (2:10), so God gave them Jesus so they could become who He made them to be.

The Ephesians were especially blessed, Paul said, because previous generations had only heard of Jesus. Now, the mystery of Jesus had been fully revealed, and God's multi-faceted wisdom was now evident to the spiritual authorities (3:10). They had full access to God through Christ.

Paul's conclusion from all this was worship. Join Him in giving praise to God for His great wisdom, grace, and power.

Thursday, December 6, 2018—Acts 26-28

Paul stood trial because of the hope he found in Jesus Christ (26:6). He had persecuted many Christians for the same hope until God arrested him and reset his heart. He then wondered, "Why do any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?" (26:7). The resurrection of Jesus was the hope for all, and the more Paul considered it the more he wanted everyone to believe it and see its veracity.

Wherever he preached, Paul told his listeners they needed to repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds (26:20). The surrender to Jesus would produce obvious changes in action and attitude. When he shared this with Agrippa, Paul's speech was persuasive, and his record was clean. He would have been released if he had not appealed to Caesar (26:32). (That,

however, would have made him susceptible to the Jews trying to kill him, so God protected him through discomfort.)

After a difficult journey by boat, a snake bit Paul, and the people assumed he was a murderer and then a god (28:4-6). He began healing many, so the people of the island honored him and gave them all what they needed to keep sailing. They finally arrived in Rome, and Paul was given a place to live by himself, guarded by a soldier (28:16).

People may not be sure how to assess your life as God works. You yourself may wonder because difficulty and discomfort do not always mean disobedience. Pray for endurance. Remember the hope of the resurrection.

Wednesday, December 5, 2018—Acts 23-25

If you had the opportunity to stand before a powerful official, what would you tell him or her? If you had the opportunity to have several gospel conversations with this person, what details would you share?

Paul had told his friends he would face hardships when he arrived in Jerusalem. He was right. He was imprisoned, and a plot surfaced calling for his assassination, so the Roman officials protected him, due to his Roman citizenship, and eventually transported him to Caesarea. While he was there, he had the opportunity to tell his story to some of the most powerful men of his day—Felix, Festus, and King Agrippa.

In one of the early discussions, Luke said Paul talked of “righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come” (24:25). Those three subjects are an excellent summary of gospel living. Faith in Jesus provides righteousness before God which begins and sustains the relationship. Self-control comes through the power of the abiding Spirit and allows the believer to avoid the sin and corruption in the world caused by evil desires. The coming judgment is the hope of the faithful because Jesus will return and make right all that has gone wrong.

This discussion terrified Felix (24:25). The gospel is good news for those who believe but bad news for those under judgment. The gospel is compelling, however, and Felix told Paul he'd hear more from him. Sharing the gospel brings glory to God and stirs the hearer to consider where he stands before God. Pray for gospel opportunities today.

Tuesday, December 4, 2018—Acts 20:3-22:30

Those who have fallen asleep during a sermon will feel special connection with Eutychus, who literally fell . . . asleep. While Paul was preaching late into the night, Eutychus became drowsy while sitting in the window. Falling asleep, he fell two stories (20:9). Paul revived him, and they all went back upstairs to have a meal and hear more preaching.

Paul knew he would never see them again, so he warned them to guard themselves doctrinally. Men would rise up as false teachers, and they needed to be ready. Paul also knew affliction awaited him in Jerusalem (20:22-23), yet he pressed forward. "But I consider my life of no value to myself; my purpose is to finish my course and the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of God's grace" (20:24).

Along the journey toward Jerusalem, Agabus, a prophet, came and said Paul would face difficulty in Jerusalem. The Jews would bind him and hand him over to the Gentiles (21:11). Luke and the others begged him not to go, but Paul said he was ready for the Lord's will to be done.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, he reported all God had done among the Gentiles (21:19). Despite Paul's testimony of God's work in his life and his observing the Law, the Jews began a riot, saying he was teaching people to abandon the Law. They called for his death (22:22).

Pray for a life of sound doctrine, faithful obedience, and endurance through whatever hardships may come.

Monday, December 3, 2018—Romans 12-16

Paul made much of the grace of Jesus throughout the first 11 chapters of Romans. He revealed the righteousness, grace, and mercy of God. He brought peace with God to man through His justifying work on the cross and allowed believers to live without condemnation and in righteously powerful freedom. With the latter chapters, Paul turns his attention to the response each disciple should have.

With faith in Christ, believers become a part of the Body of Christ (12:5), the worldwide collection of disciples. They also then should seek a local church with whom to worship, minister, disciple, fellowship, and evangelize. Paul said each one is a member of a body, so each one has a responsibility of service to keep the body healthy and functional.

Responsibility extends beyond the local church. Believers are to respect the governing authorities (13:1), seeing them as agents of God to protect the innocent and punish the guilty. Paul then returned his attention to the work of the believers and their willingness to bear with believers whose faith was weaker than others (14:1, 15:1). Just as the government protected the vulnerable, the church needed to be a safe place to express belief, wrestle with truth, and grow in Christ without fear of condemnation.

Peace was to be a hallmark of the individual believer and the community of saints. “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you believe so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (15:13). Pray for peace and hope to fill you and overflow.