



Sermon Growth Guide

November 1, 2020

Give Thanks – For Grace

Philippians 1:1-11

Key Verse: Philippians 1:3

“I thank my God every time I remember you.”

Big Idea: God gives us gifts; it is right to thank God.

Foundations

This week we move from our fall series on *The Beautiful Story* to our November series on *Giving Thanks*, a series walking us through the letter to the church in Philippi.

Philippians is sometimes called “The Joy Letter.” The word “joy” appears five times, and the verb “to rejoice” shows up nine times. Joy is the prevailing atmosphere of Philippians. But Philippians, the Joy Letter, was written by Paul while he sat in prison.

Paul wrote this letter in 61 A.D. on house arrest awaiting trial. What did Paul have to be joyful about? Well, in verse 7 of this week’s passage Paul rejoices that he is a partaker in the very salvation-bringing grace of God. Thank you, God!

Even in times of challenge and disappointment (in fact, especially in times of challenge and disappointment) it is critical for the Christian to find the root of gratitude. What do you have to give thanks for today? Could you make a small list?

Philippians 1:1-11 is a theological full course dinner. Open and close your time of further study and application in prayer. Ask the Spirit of God to guide and guard your time in His Word, granting you clear vision of why Paul’s heart was fixed on gratitude while his hands were fixed in chains. God gives us gifts; it is right to thank God.

Understanding God’s Word

What do we learn in verses 3–8? Why does Paul pray with joy? What does it mean to long for a brother or sister in Christ with “the affection of Christ Jesus”?

Read verses 9–11 carefully. What is Paul’s prayer? What is the “so that” beginning in verse 10? What ought the believer be filled with in verse 11?

Applying God’s Word

Spend five minutes recalling what you are grateful for. Celebrate the gratitude of those in your group.

Pray verses 9–11 out loud as a prayer for one another in your group. What action step can you take this week to partner with God in being “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ”?

Witnessing God’s Word

Paul opens his letter with the greeting, “grace and peace.” What a privilege we have to walk as God’s representatives of His grace and peace. How can you extend the grace and peace of heaven to someone this week who doesn’t yet grasp the grace and peace of God?

Pray that each of you be filled with God’s Spirit this week to extend His grace and peace to the yet-believing world right around you.

It took 17 years and five presidents to establish Thanksgiving as a holiday. Sarah Josepha Hale was a Christian poet, novelist and a strong advocate for Thanksgiving. We had Independence Day, but no national day to give thanks to God. She wrote to five presidents and campaigned for 17 years before Abraham Lincoln finally declared a national “Day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens” in 1863. That was only 240 years after the first Thanksgiving, and it only took a generation longer to get Congress to enact it! They say things move slowly in church. When you believe in something that much, well, sometimes it takes more than a minute to get it done, and she wanted Thanksgiving! She must have loved turkey, I guess, or football. No, she knew it would be a blessing to all of us to learn to give thanks. Sarah Hale lost her husband to pneumonia when she was 34. She raised their five children alone and wore only black her whole life. Sometimes those acquainted with sorrow know the true value of gratitude.

Give thanks. Is there anything you can give thanks for today? Anything at all? God has given gifts to us; we can give thanks to God. Could you start a small list? We might just find that gratitude is a way forward, a way out, a way up and over the challenges of our times. Philippians is sometimes called “The Joy Letter.” The word “joy” appears five times, and the verb “to rejoice” shows up nine times. Joy is the prevailing atmosphere of Philippians. But Philippians, the Joy Letter, was written by Paul while he was in prison. “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” (Philippians 1:1-2). That’s

the salutation. Grace and peace to you. Then how does the body of the letter open? “I give thanks.” “I thank my God every time I remember you” (Philippians 1:3). Paul opens a few letters that way. “When I think of you, I give thanks. You are on my list.” See that? You make me give thanks to God. “In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ...” (Philippians 1:4). What we find in the Scriptures is a clear, binding association between gratitude and joy. I give thanks. I 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” (Philippians 1:5-6). He begins with thanks and moves to joy—in prison.

Paul wrote this letter in 61 A.D. on house arrest awaiting trial. What did Paul have to be joyful about? His list might be a little short. His career as a Pharisee ended abruptly. In his career of ministry for Christ, Paul traveled from town to town supporting his own work through labor as a tentmaker. As he planted small house churches here and there he was chased by false teachers who would confuse these little groups as soon as he left. He was arrested, beaten, shipwrecked, stoned, snake bit, thrown in prison, then sent to Rome to go before an unjust, horrid emperor named Nero, who would eventually take his head. That’s the life of Paul. Count your blessings. Count them one by one. Paul’s list could be short, by some measures. And he writes, from prison, the joy letter.

How do you react to the bitterness of life? Life, every life, has some



sweetness and some bitterness, doesn't it? How did Paul find joy from a prison cell? How did he handle the bitterness of life? Paul says in verse 7, "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" (Philippians 1:7). Now, what he's talking about is defending his regard for the Philippians. It is right that I hold you in such regard. But there's another level to this, a level where Paul is defending the basis for his language. He has to defend the words he is using, not just about how he feels about the Philippians, but about himself. Look at these words so far. "Grace." "Peace." "I thank God," gratitude. "Joy." "Confident," he's confident. Now he says, as though the people around him in the house prison have started looking at him weird, "It is right for me to feel this way." No, these are not empty words, pretend words, a show of peace and joy when really my heart is in turmoil. No, I have a basis.

How did Paul handle the bitterness, process the disappointment? He didn't swallow it. One temptation is to swallow your bitterness and disappointment. Just push it down in there deep and smile. This is one of the pitfalls of talking about joy in the church. People want to move up to the front of the class, we want to do whatever the thing is, we want to succeed at church, so pastor says be happy, I swallow my pain and smile. Paul doesn't swallow it. Actually, Paul is pretty open with how hard things are. In fact, later in this chapter he is open that it gets so hard sometimes, he finds himself dreaming of

moving on to heaven: "I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body" (Philippians 1:23-24). What's he saying there? He's saying sometimes I think about dying. That's real. God doesn't want you to swallow the bitterness. Did you know there is a whole family of Psalms called the Psalms of Lament? God gave them to us as a gift, to help us put language, words, around the disappointment and pain we feel. Don't swallow it.

Don't wallow in it either. That's the temptation in the other direction. Self-pity. Oswald Chambers said, "Self-pity is of the devil, and if I wallow in it I cannot be used by God for His purpose in the world. [Self-pity] removes God from the throne of our lives, replacing Him with our own self-interests. It causes us to open our mouths only to complain, and we simply become spiritual sponges— always absorbing, never giving, and never being satisfied. And there is nothing lovely or generous about our lives." Wallowing in our bitterness forms a dark vortex of self-pity. I wanted, I didn't get. I expected, it didn't come. I desired, I was rejected. Around, around it spins and sucks us down.

Don't swallow the bitterness. Don't wallow in the bitterness. Allow. See what I did there? Don't swallow. Don't wallow. Allow. Allow God to see where it hurts. Allow the feeling to be what the feeling is. You have to feel to heal. You can't swallow it and ignore it; and you can't wallow in it like a pig in the muck— that won't get you anywhere. Allow it before the Lord. And allow the



Lord to do whatever the Lord wants to do with it. Allow God to touch it, to look at it, to lay healing hands on it, or to share it—to share the pain with you. Allow God to do what God will do. “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:9-11).

You see, what Paul knew was that the root of joy is a true relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus plus riches and wealth and success; take away Jesus, I have nothing. Jesus plus imprisonment and disappointment and injustice; let me keep Jesus, and I still have everything. Is there some key here to unlock the joy promised in Jesus Christ? Jesus Christ is the key. Paul may mention joy 14 times, but he mentions Jesus 51 times. In a total of 104 verses in this letter, Jesus shows up 51 times. Paul’s connection to Jesus makes him happy, even in the worst of situations.

Ann Voskamp grew up on a farm in Canada. One day when she was young, her little sister Aimee chased a cat out onto the road, and was hit by a truck and killed, only 3 years old. Ann’s mother saw it happen. It ripped their world to shreds. Dad stopped going to church. Mom fell in and out of psychological health. Ann herself was cut to the core and could not escape the vortex of anguished grief. Even after she opened her heart to Jesus at age 16, the pain still cut. One day her friend dared her to write down 1,000 things that she saw as gifts from God, to look at her life as a gift from God, one little piece at a time. She had to look hard at first, but if she allowed small things and

large things, she could find a few: “I give thanks,” Ann said, “I give thanks for the red in the sunrise. For the curl of hair on my daughter’s head. For the fall colors. For the friendship, the husband ... the warm biscuits.” She started a list. I give thanks. I give thanks. It began to train her mind, her eyes, her spirit to see the gifts of God coming at her constantly. I give thanks. It began to lift her heart. She didn’t swallow her pain; she didn’t wallow in it. She allowed God to move in and bring her help. She wrote a book about it called *One Thousand Gifts*. It sold a million copies. That’s a thousand thousands. Sometimes those acquainted with grief know best the true meaning of gratitude. Ann said, “As long as thanks is possible, then joy is always possible.”

Thanks is possible as long as the grace of God moves toward us, and the grace of God always moves toward us. How did Paul speak of joy? How did he claim such things as peace, confidence, hope, joy? Because of grace. “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:2). What is grace? It’s God’s loving move toward you when you are stuck and lost and sucked down. It’s God’s good favor moving toward you when you only see frustration and pain. It’s God’s Son Jesus taking on flesh and dying for you when you didn’t think you were worthy to live. What’s grace? It is the goodness of God. It never fails. “Pastor Tim, I’m not starting a list. My life doesn’t have a thing to give thanks for. Not a thing!” Hmmm. Look again. Before you God has lowered a ladder. Each rung is a gift directly from him. The first one is grace. Step on it. Try it. It just may turn your head up.

