

Surprised by Joy - Partnership

Philippians Chapter 1 Verses 3-11

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Good morning, everybody. Grace and peace to you. In the name of God, our father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, we welcome you to this time of worship. My name is David Woolverton, for those of you who may not know me yet. It's my joy to share with you the Word of God today as it comes to us in our current series. Our current series is something that we started last week. Pastor Matt launched it and shared a very important message joining history into current. We talked about slavery on that sermon block and how we can interpret Paul's words of the difference between being a slave for Christ and being a saint for Christ. I don't know about you, but those terms scare me. I don't know which one scares me more. The idea of turning my whole life in surrender to the Lord, or the concept of being a saint. That my life tells a story, and I want that story to be a good story. So, does it? Does it reflect the story of the person God called me to be, the God who created me? Being a saint or being a slave?

Today we're going to go a little bit further into the New Testament letter to the Philippians in this grander series that we're calling Surprised by Joy. Joy is a tough word. It's all throughout the Bible. The challenge for us is to differentiate between joy and happiness. They're two different words. If you're like me, way too many times, we equate the two, but they're very different. And for me to be able to wrap my head around these two words and how they're different, I kind of worked through a simple definition. So, for me, happiness is externally motivated. It's based on my circumstances. It's based on something that's going on or based on something that I'm receiving. Like if somebody gives me a gift, it may make me happy. Joy is the opposite. Joy is something that's internally motivated, and it happens despite of or because of our circumstances. It's irrelevant to the circumstances that we are living in. Joy is internal. So, for example, maybe you have a friend who gives you a wonderful, huge moose head and you don't know what to do with it. Right? This moose head doesn't really fit your decor. So, if you really couldn't wait for that moose head and you're excited about receiving it and you're jumping for joy, you're happy. But if you don't know what to do with it, are you happy? Are you overjoyed? Probably not. So, happiness can be dependent on the situation. But perhaps the person who gave you that moose head gave it to you with a sense of humor, and you haven't seen that friend for like a decade and a half. As soon as you got together, just being in that person's presence is making you come alive. The person and their *presence* is different than the person and their *present*. One may give you happiness, which can be fleeting. The other gives you joy.

So, keep that in mind as we go a little bit further, because what we're going to talk about today is going to shape some very important life application for us in our present culture. We're going to focus in on Chapter one of Philippians starting with verse 3-11. And as I share these words of the Apostle Paul, these words that are ancient, over 2000 years old, as we hear these words, I'm praying that hopefully something that I say may speak into your life. But regardless of what I say, I'm hoping that the Lord's words speak into your life. I invite you to open your mind, open your heart, and most especially open your life to receive whatever it is that the Lord is going to drop into your life and allow it to marinate inside of you, allow it to shape the character of who you are becoming in Christ. Because these are potent words.

Let's listen as God speaks to us from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians, Chapter one, starting in verse three. This is what Paul says - 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. I've got to interrupt myself as I'm reading through this because for those of you who have known me, you know that I love words. And there's a word in the section of scripture that just stood out for me. I have read this passage over and over; I have preached to this passage many times over the years. I have devotionally looked at the book of Philippians multiple times, in all my decades of being a follower of Jesus. And yet over the past two weeks, as I was prepping this message, this word stood out, perhaps for the first time. It's the word partnership. *Partnership*. It's a very interesting word. You know, one would think that the word partnership may evoke some emotions in you. Partnership is really something that we take for granted in our marriages and our families. We're partnering together. Sometimes we have a solid understanding of partnership in business. But many times, we fail to see that we have a partnership in the church too, and we're called to be partners with each other on a cause that is bigger than ourselves. I think that element to partnership is what Paul is talking about. So, what I did is I made a list of characteristics of a solid partnership, and the very first one that came to my mind was trust. Trust. For you to have a solid relationship, a solid partnership, you really have to begin with trust. Now, I've long taught this. I've been a consultant in churches, usually struggling with conflict, for about two decades. And I've taught this to clergy, to laypeople, and it only began to go into a different dimension of my own personal journey when I started to apply what I'm about to share with you to my personal devotional life as well.

So, I'd like to give away what God has given to me. I'm giving it to you. There are three words that help us advance our relationship, our partnership with anyone, whether it's our relationship with God, in our marriage, our friendships, our families or in our churches. Three words that help us advance those relationships. The first word is trust. The second word is risk. And the third word is growth. Trust, risk and growth. By the way, those of you who are in business, this translates very beautifully there, too. So, in order for you to take risks, you have to trust. And in order for you to grow, you have to take risks. So, if you're not growing, you're not taking risks. And if you're not taking risks, it's because you don't trust or have a solid basis of trust. So, if you're not growing, don't even ask what risks you're not taking. Go all the way to the very foundation of your trust. Do you trust yourself, your relationships, your partnerships? Do you trust the Lord who has created all of this? Trust is essential for that solid partnership. It's essential for marriages, for friendships, for businesses, for churches - which is what Paul is talking about. In order for us to have a solid partnership, we have to build that partnership on a foundation of solid trust. Otherwise, we will never take risks together and therefore we will never grow. When I applied this principle to my own personal devotional life and my relationship with God, then God has begun to take me on a journey of taking even greater risks. And at each juncture of taking a risk in order to grow in my own discipleship, God continually asks - do you trust me? Because that's the fundamental steppingstone. If I don't trust God, I'm not going to take the risk that eventually will help me to deepen my relationship with him. If I don't trust my partnerships, I won't take the risks that are going to expand what those partnerships are all about. You can't have a solid partnership without trust. Then there's a common purpose. In order for us to have a solid partnership, we have to wrap our minds around why we're together. And the *why* must be bigger than whatever the current *is*. We're together for a reason. We're in ministry together as a church for a reason, we have a common purpose. It's our mission and our vision, and that brings cohesion around everything that we are and everything that we do. That common purpose is important for a solid partnership.

So is *defined expectations*. Defined expectations. So, we bring into our marriages all of these expectations that we have from what we learned growing up. And then we get together, and in the first year, sometimes, that romance kind of begins to wane into reality. The infatuation moves into deeper levels of love and the

blindness come falling off, and we see each other for who we are. And the reality is, the things that you once thought were cute in your partner really irritate you now. And the expectations that you have that went, oh, you know, he's new, she's new - Yeah, he'll get this, or I'll change him or her over time. It doesn't happen. And so, those unspoken expectations are clashing. Well, for a solid partnership, we can't have it unspoken. We must define what those expectations are. You cannot hold somebody accountable to something that you haven't taught. So, for a solid partnership, we need to be explicit about what those expectations are. In addition to that, we have great two-way communication. Solid partnership is rooted in communicating with one another, and for good communication you must have a sender and a receiver. If you're sending and sending and sending, but somebody is not receiving - you don't have communication. In addition, a solid partnership has mutual agency and personal responsibility. Do you know what that term 'agency' means? I know we've kind of repackaged that word in modern culture today, but in the old days, it was basically somebody who would represent you in business dealings - that was an agent. Agency is really having a place of grounding in yourself, that you have the freedom and the personal power to make the decisions and choices for your life that you need to make. So, when you have agency, you have personal control over the decisions that you need to make. When you don't have agency, regardless of your desire to make those decisions, somebody else is telling you or making them for you. But when you have personal agency, your partnership in making the responsible decisions that you need to make for yourself and therefore, personal responsibility is about owning the consequences or ramifications of the choices that you make. So, a solid partnership is built around having mutual agency, that power and partnership to make decisions, and then taking responsibility for what you decide. Then, there's having a strong emotional bond. There is nothing, nothing more important in a solid partnership than caring for one another. Ideally, the more intimate the partnership, the more you want that care to transform into love and love is not just a feeling of happiness. It's an internal, focused emotion that's willing to give itself away for the best interest of the other.

And finally, for today's purposes, a solid partnership is built around an unwavering commitment to one another. Especially in churches. I've done ministry, full time for 34 years now. I've been in churches, I've helped coach clergy, I've helped consult with churches. It's amazing to me that there is a breakdown, even in churches that have a common purpose, or at least, a stated common purpose. They just don't connect with a commitment for long term. In today's culture, statistically greater than one out of every two marriages is ending in divorce. That's the statistics. In church statistics, we faced COVID and now, coming out of COVID, we are faced with what has been called the 'great seismic church shift'. Where there are people who have been long time members of churches that are just going somewhere else. Well, that's not uncommon. It's been happening for a long time and rightly so. I mean, sometimes you've got to search for what it is that you're wanting in a solid partnership. But here's the deal. We see this in Scripture, Old and New Testament alike, and we see it in our current culture as a pandemic that is bigger than COVID. What we're doing culturally is we're not just shopping churches, we're shopping God. And what we're doing as a culture is we're beginning to say, if God doesn't perform the way I want God to perform, I'm going to go find another God. We've taken the consumerism of our culture and we've now applied it to our relationship with the One who created us. And if God can't perform, well, we're just going to go somewhere else or to something else.

So, hold on to all of that. That's a big picture of what solid partnerships are all about. And what I want to suggest is that is exactly what Paul is referring to, about solid partnerships when it comes to looking at our partnerships in church. Why do I say that? Before I leave this slide, look at the slide - for those of you who are online, look at this... Every single one of those characteristics can be applied to your relationship with the Lord. Do you trust God? Do you have a sense that you are a part of a purpose that is bigger, a mission that is bigger than your current situation? Do you have defined expectations? Certainly, when you look at

the scripture, in the Old and New Testaments, God is laying out the expectations of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. So, from God's standpoint, that's pretty clear. Are we layering *our* expectations on to God? Are we saying - this is what I need God, in this moment, I need this. The power of the songs that Tim was leading, those songs were actually prayers; the composers of the songs, the lyricists, whether they realized it or not, were composing prayers and the prayers were crying out some expectations to the Lord. And they were also doing great two-way communication. Prayer - in our relationship with the Lord. Are we doing all the talking? Are we listening at all? Where is our prayer life? God, I need you to do this. God, do this. God, do that. I want this. I need this, Lord. Is there a sender and a receiver? Or is it all sending? Mutual agency and personal responsibility. Do we have that sense of partnership? God has clearly told us we have the ability; we have the freewill to make the choices that we make. Are we willing to live with the consequences? Or do we want the freedom to make the decisions and then say to God, can you get me out of this trouble that I got myself into?

Repeatedly, we read in the scriptures of Apostle Paul, of the Apostle John, in the New Testament, the scriptures are saying everything is rooted in love. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love I am but a CLANGING cymbal, a noise. Love transforms. Do I have an unwavering commitment? Am I willing to go to the end degree with this God who has given everything for me? Even if I lose everything, as Tim just sang to us. Yet, You are my hope. Hmm. Interesting. When we look at it that way, notice what Paul is saying. He's saying, in effect, that our partnership is in the gospel. It's in the gospel. The gospel is the good news. And what Paul is saying to the believers, this early group of believers and in this young church, is that everything that I'm doing, Paul says, everything that I'm proclaiming, you're in the story, too. You're partnering with me in that good news of the gospel. In addition, look at the words that he's using in just these few verses. He says, I thank my God every time in all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy from the first day until now. Do you see the expansive nature of what Paul is saying? Huge. Again, another set of words. Notice, Paul says, I thank my God, I always pray with joy. I really believe that God announced to us on the cross and ever since then, that he has a passionate love for each and every one of us. And when we establish that love connection with the Lord, there's nothing, *nothing*, that God will not do to help us find joy. And so, while we're looking for happiness, which is a fleeting thing. God is going after joy and God is actually trying to surprise us with joy each and every day. We just may not be looking for it.

But each and every day, this God who loves us passionately is sending us gifts. Sometimes those gifts or a message that's embedded in a song, a chorus of a song. So sometimes it's in a spontaneous note that somebody sent you in the mail, a card that says, Hey, I'm thinking about you. Sometimes it's in a gift that you receive in the mail, that you weren't expecting. Making a connection with a special friend from years ago. Maybe it's a phone call that somebody picks up and the caller says, you know what, the Lord laid you on my heart today, and I just wanted to see how you're doing. We often miss those little nuggets of joy that God is dropping into our path. Perhaps because we're looking for happiness rather than for something more.

But the story continues. I thank my God; I always pray with joy. Why? Because Paul says I'm confident of this, that that the One who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. I just love this verse. I've quoted this verse as an encouragement to myself. But there are two very critical things here for us to understand. Number one, again, I'm a lover of words, that phrase will carry it on to completion in English. In Greek it is one word and it's one verb. The verb is the Greek word *Epi Teleioó*. The verb means *to complete or bring to an end*. When you attach *epi*, which is a prefix to any verb, it intensifies the verb. Utter completion, or perfection. So what Paul is saying to this group of believers, this

young church, is that everything that I just said about our partnership and the gospel and what God is doing, everything that goes into partnership, all of that – I am confident in because I trust that the God who began that good work in you will make you perfect. How many of you, by a show of hands, how many of you feel perfect? None of us, right? So, the second thing that's embedded in that verb and embedded in this verse, is that “you” that Paul is using here, is plural. It's not singular. Paul's confidence is in that God who calls us into partnership with himself for a purpose that is greater than our life is going to perfect us as the church, for the sake of our witness in the world today. Paul is confident of this. Why? Because he trusts. He trusts that the God who created the church will, in fact, make it perfect. He will make a perfect.

In theological language, we call that the process of sanctification, the process of being made holy. So what Paul is saying, in this thread throughout the entire letter of Philippians, he's saying Jesus's love sanctifies. Jesus's love, in us, the church purifies. Jesus's love makes us perfect. John Wesley, the founder of the movement called Methodism calls that Sanctifying grace or being made perfect in love. Paul continues in verse seven. He writes, 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. Do you hear the partnership? Do you feel the love that's underneath all what Paul is talking about? And then he says, 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 the perfection, pure and blameless for the days of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God. That's Wesley's perfected in love concept. Being perfected. Why is this important? Because love is a partnership word.

You can't have love without a partnership. You can't have love unless you're giving something of yourself away to another. And why is that important? Because today we are living in a culture of individualism, not partnership. God is asking us as the Church of Jesus Christ, just as he was asking Paul to equip the believers in Philippi, back then - he's asking us to live differently than the world. So, for those of us who are followers of Jesus, we have to move from *me to we*. And that's hard. It's going against the stream; it's going against the grain. But this is so essential for us. We are the Church of Jesus Christ. We are empowered in partnership with the Gospel of Jesus Christ to live differently so that our lives tell the story, a testimony to a purpose that is greater than us. Do you see how Paul is connecting all of that? And if we don't, then the church has fallen asleep underneath the same consumerism that the rest of culture is embedded in. How will we be different than the world? It starts with moving from *me to we*. We, like Paul's you, is plural. It's the church.

So, to recap, characteristics of a solid partnership; Trust, common purpose, defined expectations, great two-way communication, mutual agency and personal responsibility, a strong emotional bond and unwavering commitment. Why not take this opportunity this week to look at this list, whether in terms of your relationship with the Lord, your relationship with a spouse or family member, your relationship with friends, your relationships regarding business, or - within Paul's context, your connections with other believers within the church. And ask yourself, what do I need to work on for my *me* to emerge into my *we*? What do I need to focus in on? Because my *we* needs to be more important than my *me*. Maybe the Lord has something in mind for you? I know that the Lord has something in mind for us.

Let's pray. God, we thank you for your word. It's a challenging word, but it's a word about partnership rooted in love. Father, we want to be your partners in the Gospel. It may feel uncomfortable for us, it may be a challenge to us. But ultimately, Lord, working on our own terms, being individuals - it just hasn't

worked. In fact, on our own, we've screwed things up more often than not. Give us a passion, Lord, for the way. Connect us to the greater purpose and the greater plan. Give us a heart for others that is bigger than ourselves and allow the love of Jesus to reside inside of us, to compel us to love others, whether we think they deserve it or not. Thank you for the transforming gift of that love that has changed us. And thank you for loving us first. As we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.