

## Seeing God in everything by Rev John A. Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> September 2017 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading **Philippians 1:1-26**

### What's the secret of happiness?

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

(American Declaration of Independence, 1776)

We all want to be happy, and the pursuit of happiness was considered so important to the leaders of the 13 colonies that signed the American Declaration of Independence that it is ranked with the right to life and liberty. But can you find happiness by pursuing it? And what is the secret of happiness?

I looked online and found a few answers.

This from the Daily Mail:

Live life in the slow lane, says Buddhist monk HAEMIN SUNIM: Savour supermarket queues, take three days to make decisions and listen more than you talk<sup>1</sup>.

A website of popular science, called *How stuff works* had this to say:

One of the early conclusions researchers in the field of happiness arrived at contradicted a longstanding assumption: that **money** translates to happiness. In the 1970s, economist George Easterlin found that while income in the United States grew following World War II, reported happiness in the country didn't keep pace. Easterlin found that this applied to other developed nations as well... Instead, researchers have found that humans experience happiness through involved relationships that bestow on us a sense of belonging, and activities and lifestyles that engage them. In fact, some psychologists are confident that what makes people happy can be narrowed down to three categories: **genetics**, choices and the circumstances of one's life [source: **Rowe**].<sup>2</sup>

*The Secret of Happiness* is the title of a book by Billy Graham about the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. A summary on the website *Good Reads* says this:

We haven't learned the secret Jesus taught in the Beatitudes – that true, lasting happiness simply isn't to be found by seeking it directly. Happiness is a by-product, a bonus that comes when we seek what is really important. And the things that will bring us the satisfaction we long for are not necessarily what the world considers meaningful.<sup>3</sup>

### The Letter to the Philippians and the secret of happiness

Today we begin a series of 5 sermons on Paul's letter to the Philippians, which is running parallel to a study on the same letter in our house groups. I've read Philippians through several times in preparing for this sermon, and one thing that really stands out for me is that Paul seems to have found the secret of happiness. I'm not going to tell you today how he did this – you'll have to wait for a later sermon to

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-4258372/The-secret-happiness-Live-life-slow-lane.html#ixzz4ssnEtjtj> 25 Feb 2017

<sup>2</sup> <http://science.howstuffworks.com/life/secret-to-happiness.htm>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2331988.The\\_Secret\\_of\\_Happiness](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2331988.The_Secret_of_Happiness)

find this out – but I think we'll find as we look at today's verses from chapter 1 that it's got a lot to do with Paul's attitude.

It certainly hasn't got much to do with his circumstances: Paul is writing to the church in Philippi, in northern Greece, from a prison cell probably in Rome. He is under the threat of death and, as we can see from some of today's verses, he is really uncertain whether he will be executed or released. That kind of uncertainty is pretty much guaranteed to make most people feel extremely *unhappy*. How would you feel in those circumstances? And yet as we read through the letter, we find Paul's joy breaking out every few paragraphs. The letter to the Philippians has the word *rejoice* 9 times – more than any other New Testament book – while *joy* comes 5 times – all in 4 short chapters, which represent 4 pages in this bible. Paul writes of his own joy and encourages his readers to rejoice also.

Let's see what gems we can find in these first 26 verses.

### **The example of the Christians of Philippi**

Verses 3-11 show us one thing that Paul is happy about.

<sup>3</sup> I thank my God every time I remember you, <sup>4</sup> constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, <sup>5</sup> because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. <sup>6</sup> I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup> It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel.

The thought of the Christians in Philippi is enough to bring a smile to Paul's lips. He rejoices at the way they have grown in their faith and the way they have put their faith into practice by sharing in Paul's work of spreading the good news of Jesus. They have kept in touch with Paul, and have even supported his work financially, as we see later in the letter. In fact, the thing that has sparked this letter is the arrival of one member of the church, Epaphroditus, who has brought a gift from Philippi to Paul, risking his own life in the process.

The church at Philippi reminds me of one of the 10 churches who supported George and myself as mission partners with the Church Mission Society (CMS) when we were in Uganda. We had to visit each of these churches before we went out to Uganda and on our return journeys, and CMS tried to group them in clusters to make this easier. But they did ask us to be linked with a lone church up in Yorkshire, who were keen to have a link and gave £4000 faithfully every year to CMS. St Andrew's Kildwick had a congregation no bigger than ours here, and it was a pleasure visiting them and sharing our mission plans.

I wonder if thinking about us warms the hearts of other people? Are our lives so full of practical Christian goodness that people can't help thanking God for us? Who do you thank God for?

### **The consequences of Paul's imprisonment**

The second thing that brings Paul joy, and which he wants to share with the Philippians in verses 12-26, is the amazing way God has worked through Paul's imprisonment to cause the good news of Jesus to be spread even further.

- a) (12-13) News spread throughout the palace guard: for many years Paul wanted to get to Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire; but now through his imprisonment the gospel has infiltrated the palace guard, and the emperor's own household! (see 4:22)
- b) (14-18) Far from making the Christians in Rome afraid of talking about their faith, Paul's example has actually encouraged them. Even though Paul sees that some of the brethren are sharing the

faith with wrong motives (there seems to be some rivalry between them and Paul), the important thing for him is that the gospel is being shared.

Putting this all together, Paul is able to see behind the outward circumstances, e.g. him being deprived of his freedom and under threat of death, to the ways God has worked through it all.

All too often the way we feel depends on our outward circumstances, and if the chips are down and life is tough, we feel despair, and are tempted to stop trusting God. But Paul sees things another way. His experience of God over many years has taught him that God can always find a way to bring blessing out of even the most hopeless situations. Once you start seeing the world this way, there's always room for hope, and for thanksgiving. And Paul expresses this in verses 18c-20:

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, <sup>19</sup> for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will result in my deliverance. <sup>20</sup> It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death.

The last gem that we must look at before I close is that amazing little statement in verse 21:

<sup>21</sup> For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.

It pretty much sums up Paul's attitude to life, it could be described as his personal mission statement. Whatever happens to him, Paul will win, because of his relationship with Christ. Is that your attitude to life? Would you like it to be?

### Questions for reflection

- 1) What do you make of the statement "Happiness is a by-product, a bonus that comes when we seek what is really important"? What do you consider to be the 2 most important things in your life?
- 2) Who are the people in your life who make you happy? How often do you thank God for them?
- 3) Can you think of examples in your own experience of God bringing good out of bad situations?
- 4) If you were to write a personal mission statement, what would it be? What do you think of Paul's personal mission statement (Philippians 1:21)?

Acknowledgement: All Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches in the USA, and are used by permission. All rights reserved.

### The Letter of Paul to the Philippians – introductory notes

Paul wrote this letter to the church in Philippi in Macedonia (northern Greece) from prison, probably in Rome. This would date it to the period 60-63 AD, about 15 years after he started the church in Philippi (Acts 16:12-40). Paul's purpose in writing the letter was to encourage the church in their discipleship, to urge them to deal with conflict between them, to warn them not to listen to false teachers, to tell them his news and to thank them for a gift they had sent him.

### The sermon series:

17 September	Seeing God in everything	15 October	A Christian attitude to life
24 September	The example of Christ	22 October	For richer, for poorer
8 October	Knowing Christ		