10 Philippians 3:1-3 The promise of joy

1. Introduction

a. We start with a pivotal verse – everything that Paul has already said, and everything that he is about to say is dependent on and validated by this verse. The key to all that Paul is saying in this letter, undergirding every statement he makes. It is the principle theme of this letter, and one of the foundations of our life in Christ.

Philippians 3:1 *Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.*

b. Don't be fooled by that word "finally" – Paul has much more to say yet. He means that here's one final thing before I go on to my next subject. There's a further "finally" in the next chapter, but it doesn't come right at the end. It's a device Paul uses to wake us up before saying something we need to take note of. We really do need to take note of this: "Rejoice in the Lord."

2. Rejoice in the Lord

a. To put it another way "Always be joyful in the Lord." Rejoicing is being joyful. It is an outward expression of a deep inner possession. A joyful heart is always ready to burst forth in praise. What does the bible mean when it talks about joy? Joy is a common theme in the bible, but it's one of those words that's difficult to describe.

b. One of the first things to understand about biblical joy is that it is a fruit of the Spirit – therefore it's supernatural. Paul spells it out in his letter to the Galatians:

Galatians 5:22-23 *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, [23] gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.*

c. The kind of joy Paul says we should all have is something that the Holy Spirit grows in us as a fruit of his presence. It's not something we can manufacture or get from a YouTube – it's planted as a seed within us when we're born again, which, like any seed, given the right conditions will grow to maturity over time.

d. Biblical joy is not the same thing as happiness. Happiness describes the good feelings we get related to favourable circumstances – relationships, possessions, achievements etc. Happiness does not lead to true joy. False voices are deceiving many, promoting false narratives about how the human heart works and how people are fulfilled. The message marketed by advertising media, social commentators and influencers, and popular psychologists is this: *you must wholeheartedly pursue what you think will make you happy*.

e. Consequently, multitudes are constantly chasing their dreams and seeking to change their circumstances. They change jobs or occupations, move house or relocate, look for new relationships or friends, they even change their gender in the pursuit of being happy. But ultimately the feeling fades because the illusion of happiness, rooted in idealism, has faded.

f. So what is biblical joy, and how should we set about pursuing it? A quote from Blaise Pascal is a good starting point: "*There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person, and it can never be filled by any created thing. It can only be filled by God, made known through Jesus Christ.*"

This God-shaped vacuum in our heart was put there by God to be fulfilled by a deep relationship with him. But without that relationship, you can have the best of everything, but still lack a real deep sense of joy.

g. How do we define joy? Here's a definition from John Piper: "*Christian joy is a good feeling in the soul, produced by the Holy Spirit, as he causes us to see the beauty of Christ in the word and in the world.*" Joy is deeper than just a feeling; it has the power to impact upon the emotions. It's not just an idea, or something I can decide to experience. You don't have immediate control over your emotions – you can't just decide to feel something. Biblical joy can't immediately be produced by your own power.

h. Joy operates through the soul – it impacts upon the soul, the seat of the emotions and the will. The bible calls it your inner man; if your inner man is joyful, it is expressed in your outer man, in your eyes and on your lips with a smile.

i. We can't produce joy ourselves, so where does it come from? It comes from the Holy Spirit at work in us: "…for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). This is the work of the Holy Spirit within the believer to bring about godly character. The Holy Spirit produces joy within us as he causes us to see the beauty of Jesus. We see the beauty of Jesus most clearly in the Word. In John chapters 13-17, speaking of the Holy Spirit, Jesus says:

John 16:14 *He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.*

j. The Holy Spirit brings us revelation of the beauty of Jesus as we engage with him in the word and in prayer. Jesus promises to strengthen his people supernaturally with his joy, which enables them to have a vibrant heart that is able to overcome sin and the darkness of emotion of worldly living.

3. Transformed and empowered by joy

John 15:9–11 *As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. [10] If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. [11] These things I have spoken to you, that <u>my joy may be in you</u>, and that <u>your joy may be full</u>.*

a. Jesus is giving us a key to the source of fullness of joy, emphasising the truths that are essential in empowering us to receive his joy. These are the things that we need to take note of if we want to be filled with joy. "*These things*" Jesus says in v11 – we must take note of what these things are:

i It starts with recognising the **love the Father has for Jesus** – this is the reality of how God loves God, where it all begins.

ii Jesus extends that love in **affirming his love for us** – with the same intensity of love the Father has for him.

iii Then he says this is where you **need to abide** in that love – living in the constant knowledge of God's love. Jesus says you need to dwell in that place and don't move away from it.

iv Now here comes the divine exchange – if you **keep God's commandments**. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, then love your neighbour as yourself. And anything else God tells you to do in his word. The Spirit imparts a living understanding of God's love that

tenderises our hearts and has a great impact upon our lives. If you do that, says Jesus, then you will find yourself abiding in his love.

- v And this leads to **Jesus' joy being released in us**, in its fullness that includes that supernatural dimension. That's where we go to for our source of joy, and this is the kind of joy that Paul found to be such a bedrock in his own life and ministry.

b. This is how the Holy Spirit produces joy in our hearts, by causing us to see the glory and beauty of Jesus. Paul doesn't just say "Rejoice" but "Rejoice *in the Lord*" – he is your source of joy. Jesus doesn't just flip a switch in your soul, and you find yourself rejoicing with no mental content whatsoever. It's the Spirit of wisdom and revelation at work in you opening the eyes of your heart to behold the beauty of Jesus.

c. So our ability to receive joy is the combination of the revelation of that love in our hearts and walking in obedience that results in us being filled with inexpressible joy. It's a process that takes time, it's a fruit that the Spirit grows in us, not something that somehow appears in an instant.

d. What is the antithesis of a joyful heart? It's a troubled heart. A troubled heart is a place where the cares of the world militate against the confidence that joy and peace can bring. Jesus has the antidote:

John 14:1, 27 *Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. [27]…peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you…*

e. Jesus tells us how to engage our troubled hearts to overcome fear, shame, bitterness, grief etc. Through truth and promise he equips us to overcome negative emotions that can trouble our hearts. He gives us tools to overcome so that we experience his peace and are filled with joy.

f. We will find our outlook on life will change as the joy of the Lord begins to impact our soul, giving us a vibrant heart in the face of pressure. Joy will permeate us with pleasure and delight at things that are good. Joy becomes the lens for what is good, lifting our gaze to what is to come.

g. King David encountered fullness of joy related to God's throne. God's throne is the centre of joy in the whole of the universe, those nearest to it are filled with joy as they experience the pleasures of God.

Psalm 16:11 *You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is <u>fullness of joy</u>; at your right hand are <u>pleasures forevermore</u>.*

Psalm 36:8 *They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the <u>river of your delights.</u>*

Psalm 46:4 *There is a river whose streams <u>make glad</u> the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.*

h. There are many more aspects of joy that we don't have time to explore this morning; here are some headings with suggested scriptures to study:

- i The pleasure of interacting with Jesus (Psalm 16:8, 36:8, John 3:29, 16:14)
- ii Confidence in Jesus' leadership (Romans 8:28, 1 Peter 3:4)
- iii Our hope of future glory (Romans 5:2, 8:18, 1 Corinthians 2:9)

iv Our eternal rewards in obedience to Jesus (Matthew 25:21, 1 Corinthians 3:14)

v God hearing and delighting in our prayer (Proverbs 15:8, John 16:24, 1 John 3:22)

vi Loving Jesus and helping others to love him (1 Thessalonians 2:16, 2 John 12, 3 John 4)

i. Paul goes on in v1 to say that "to write the same things to you is no trouble, and is safe for you." It's a good thing to be reminded about things we've been taught before. Over time we learn many biblical truths, we need the Holy Spirit to bring them to mind so we stay sharp and focused.

4. Canine conflict

Philippians 3:2-3 *Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. [3] For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.*

a. Paul continues with some strong words. He is writing to people who know his heart so he is very forthright. Calling someone a dog in our culture would be somewhat derogatory, but not much more than that – dogs are regarded generally in a favourable light. But in the culture that Paul is addressing here, dogs were viewed as unclean, filthy animals that were both vicious and dangerous scavengers.

b. He says we must look out for the dogs, the evildoers, whose hearts are set on robbing you of your joy by insisting on outward forms of religious observance that have no place in the body of Christ. The bible warns about false teachers like savage wolves, false prophets in sheep's clothing, peddling doctrines of demons. They were around in the time of Paul, and there are plenty more around in our own time.

c. Who is Paul referring to? He's speaking of a group of men who were stirring up trouble with their insistence on external ritual. They taught that it was necessary to observe the law of Moses, including the food restrictions, and especially the requirement of circumcision in order to be a real Christian.

d. They were placing great emphasis on rituals that were once of great value, but are no longer required. They are zealous, seeking to convert new believers to their views, to bring them back into the bondage of a restrictive legal system. The ritual of circumcision was high on their list of "must dos". Paul doesn't call them "teachers of circumcision" but "mutilators of the flesh" – mere flesh-cutters having no meaning at all.

e. These evil-workers, producing no fruit are opposed to salvation by faith through the grace of God. But their religious works were evil in God's sight, taking pride in their own achievements and trusting in their good deeds to make them right before God. This nullifies what Jesus did for us on the cross.

f. Many today advocate we need to do something extra to gain God's favour. Usually it is an emphasis on one aspect of observance necessary to complete our salvation – eg. dietary requirements or what you should wear and so on. They are imposing another layer of man-made laws and traditions they consider to be righteous to gain God's favour. They reject righteousness imputed by God's decree by grace and through the believer's faith. This is the enemy of true spirituality, it destroys the spirit of rejoicing, and makes it into dead religion.

Romans 3:21–24 *But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it – [22] the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: [23] for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, [24] and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,*

g. Paul urges us to steer clear of any teaching that says otherwise. While we honour the Hebraic roots of our faith, we are no longer required to follow the outward observances of the Mosaic Covenant. Hebrews teaches us that the Old Covenant has now been made obsolete by the new and better promises of the New Covenant in the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 8:6–13). So now we can enter in by the new and living way that Jesus opened up for us.

Romans 2:29 *But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.*

h. Now Paul gives us three marks in direct contrast to the three marks of evil – the dogs, the evil-doers and the flesh-mutilators. We worship by the Spirit of God, we glory in Christ Jesus and we put no confidence in the flesh.

Philippians 3:3 *For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.*

5. Worship by the Spirit of God

a. The Holy Spirit's ministry is to glorify Jesus. Jesus said to the woman at the well, "God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). Worship is not just about singing, but is also an inner sense of awe, gratitude and love for God.

b. The false teachers made worship an outward ritual, appealing to the pride of man, thinking we have something of worth to impress God with. But our worship is prompted by the indwelling Spirit revealing Jesus to us, and our hearts respond. He works submission in our hearts so we bow before God, caught up in love and praise and giving glory to him for his great salvation.

c. Worship begins with a longing to glorify God – but if worship is genuine, it must not be ritualistic or any appeasement to the pride of man. Worship is not generated by our own desires or ceremonies, or liturgy or structure of any sort – it is our response to that which is initiated by the Holy Spirit within.

1 Corinthians 12:3 *Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit.*

d. In our worship, the fear of God, expressed in his holiness and sovereignty, keeps us at a reverent distance in awe and wonder. But pulling in the other direction is the love of God which draws us in with his grace and mercy. Our worship lies in the tension of understanding these two forces that the Holy Spirit reveals to us in our hearts.

6. We glory in Christ Jesus

a. It's not about what we do, but what we are in him. The pressure of this age is to get us to glory in something else – something we have done, some great achievement or attainment, something that marks us out from the ordinary. If we glory in something that is distinctively ours giving us a privileged status over others, we are glorifying ourselves and detracting from the glory of Jesus.

b. Anything and everything we have in this life that is of any worth is ours because of Jesus. He is the first and the last, the beginning and the end and everything in between.

Revelation 5:11–14 *Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, [12] saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!" [13] And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!" [14] And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped.*

7. We put no confidence in the flesh

a. Finally we put no confidence in the flesh. We are taught from babyhood that the way to accomplish our aims and desires is to develop our self-confidence. But the bible says self-confidence is not intended to be our strength, but confidence in God. Facing life feeling weak, ineffectual, and unable, so that it drives us back upon the one who is totally able, our total strength. That is how God intended us to live.

b. This doesn't mean that we become passive and do nothing except trust God, or that we stop using the abilities God gives us. God expects us to use our brains and our gifts and natural abilities for his glory. But everything must be submitted to God. Even in the things of the Spirit we are not perfect – Paul says we see in part, we prophesy in part, we see though a mirror dimly (1 Corinthians 13:12).

8. Conclusion

a. Joy is a subject that we find all over the bible. But sometimes we struggle to grasp the biblical view of joy because of the way it is defined and described in Western culture today. In particular, we often confuse joy with happiness. In the Beatitudes, sometimes translators adopt the modern vernacular and tell us Jesus said *happy* rather than *blessed*. As a result, it conveys a certain superficiality. Years ago, Charles Schulz coined the phrase "Happiness is a warm puppy," and it became a maxim that articulated a sentimental, warm-and-fuzzy idea of happiness.

b. The difference is that joy is a permanent possession while happiness is fleeting. Joy stays, happiness comes and goes. Biblical joy is a precious commodity and its reality in our lives is measured by the extent that we seek after it and pursue its presence.

1 Peter 1:8 *Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory,*