9 Philippians 2:17-30 …with a little help from my friends

1. Introduction

a. Paul's joy was not dependent on his circumstances, but on what God was doing in the midst of them. Although difficult, he could see God working in the midst of them. The gospel was being preached and believers were becoming more bold in their faith. God was being glorified and Jesus was being proclaimed.

b. Paul's main theme has been humility – lowliness of mind – serving and loving one another. Paul gives two examples of humility. First, the ultimate example of Jesus. He said, "…let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus: even though he was in very nature God, he humbled himself." The second example is Paul himself.

Philippians 2:17-18 *Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. [18] Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.*

a. Paul is speaking of his possible death, but he does so with an attitude of joy; and he includes the Philippians in his rejoicing. He speaks of the joy of dying so that they could have the joy of faith. Paul's source of joy was God and what God was doing in their midst. He is wanting the Philippians to enter into his joy by seeing joy from his perspective.

b. C.S.Lewis said that joy is the serious business of heaven. Yes, but it can be seriously challenged on earth and that challenge is often from other people.

c. Paul is showing us the joy that comes from God is supernatural. It transcends our circumstances and even in the face of death it reigns supreme. Joy is one of the greatest benefits we gain from our relationship with Jesus, and it enables us to see things from a heavenly perspective. Whatever situation you find yourself in, there is always a dimension of joy to be found. Jesus was the most joyful man who ever lived (Hebrews 1:9) and he wants to share his joy with you.

d. It might seem hard for us to follow those examples – they seem so out of reach. But sometimes we forget that the example of their lives is something that we are to follow. Paul said "Be imitators of me, just as I am also of Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:32). Now Paul turns to two further examples of much more ordinary people to illustrate his theme of humility. The first is Timothy.

2. Timothy

Philippians 2:19-24 *I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. [20] For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. [21] For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. [22] But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. [23] I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, [24] and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also.*

a. Timothy appears from time to time in Paul's writings: in our bibles we have two letters that Paul wrote to him. He was a young man who became a disciple and travelling companion to Paul. Paul met him on his first missionary journey which took him through Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey. He visited two towns, Lystra and Derbe, and it was in Lystra that he first met Timothy.

b. Timothy was the son of a Jewish mother and a Greek father. While Paul was visiting, Timothy was saved. When Paul embarks upon his second missionary journey he comes again to Lystra, and

this time he invites Timothy to join him on his travels. Paul, following Jewish tradition, placed great value on practical application. Hebrew understanding of education was pragmatic – until someone could actually do the task, they had not learned. When a student was fully trained he not only knew as much as his teacher about the subject, he could also follow the teacher's example and do what he did. Learning included observing and imitating the actions and attitudes of the teacher, as well as gaining practical experience.

i Paul saw Timothy was someone worth investing into; he knew the experience of travelling with him would broaden his spiritual experience. Over time this young man matures spiritually. It takes time to cultivate a mature love and a mature friendship.

c. What makes a good friend? Friendship with the right kind of people can increase our joy. They ease our burdens, share the load, they take the grind out of life. Good friends are in great demand.

i People who matter to us most are not the ones with trophies or wealth or beauty. Those who make the most impact upon our lives are those who have cared most for us in our lives.

d. In Timothy we will see four qualities of a good friend and mature friendship. These verses are a kind of mirror to look at our own lives and ask if there are things we can learn so that we can be this kind of friend to others.

3. Reliable

a. **A good friend is reliable**. Why does Paul plan to send Timothy to Philippi? Because he is reliable. Timothy was faithful to Paul, he knew he could count on him. He had a good track record.

b. Paul had sent him on errands before and he hadn't failed. He was sent from Athens to Thessaloniki (1 Thessalonians 3). He was sent from Ephesus to Corinth (1 Corinthians 4). He was sent from Ephesus to Macedonia (Acts 19). Now Paul is sending Timothy to go from Rome to Philippi, a journey of some 800 miles. It takes someone reliable to undertake that task.

c. v22 – Paul says "*He has served with me in the gospel.*" He is a fellow-worker, striving for the same goals. He continues, "*…I hope, therefore, to send him, once I know what's happening here.*" Note that "therefore" – he's saying that because Timothy has been so reliable, he has therefore become more valuable. He's valuable because he's reliable.

d. Paul really wanted to go to Philippi himself. That's what he would do if things went well for him. If not, the next best thing from Paul's perspective was to send Timothy. Paul's son in the faith who has become Paul's servant in the faith is now to become Paul's substitute as he is sent from Rome to Philippi.

e. There's a biblical principle here that's very easy to miss: ***faithfulness will open the door to more fruitfulness.*** The more faithful you are the more fruitful you will become. It's called a servant's reward – where you get to serve more. If you're servant-hearted you look forward to more ways to serve. You don't mind when you're asked to do more.

f. Jesus illustrates this in two parables. The two servants in Matthew 24. The servant who remains faithful and doing his master's bidding, even when the master is delayed, is given the reward of greater responsibility in his master's house (Matthew 24:45-47). Then Matthew 25, the parable of the talents: the servants who were faithful with what they were given were told, "Well done,

good and faithful servant. You were faithful over a few things. I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your Lord" (Matthew 25:14-30). The more reliable you are the more valuable you become, and your faithfulness will lead to more fruitfulness.

4. Compatible

a. The second quality is **a good friend is compatible**. v20 Paul says, "*I have no-one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.*" Compatibility means sharing things in common and being able to work together. People gravitate toward others who like the same things, so there is either a compatibility of interest or of goal, we're wanting to get to the same place. A "kindred spirit," meaning that we have the same values and outlook on life.

   i Paul uses the phrase "*I have no-one like him*" or as some translations put it "*I have no-one like-minded.*" In Greek ***isopsychon*** – it's the only place it's used, and it literally means "equal-souled." Like the friendship between David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 18, where we're told that the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David. Timothy and Paul shared the same goal, to serve God and to serve his people.

b. Paul had many friends; in Rome, where Paul was when he wrote this letter there were hundreds of Christians, and he knew many of them. At the end of Romans, Paul mentions 27 personal friends, yet he says of Timothy, he's the only one who shares the same soul as I do, he's the only one who is completely compatible with me. He knows that Timothy shares his love and concern for the Philippian church, he carries the same desire to see them grow and mature in the faith.

Amos 3:3 *Can two walk together unless they agree?*

c. This verse sums up what Paul is saying. "Do two walk together without agreeing on the direction" [NLT]. Compatibility means complete agreement, not just about where we are going, but also how we are going to get there.

5. Thoughtful

a. Third, **a good friend is thoughtful**. V21 says "*For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.*" Paul is redirecting their thoughts back to 2:4 – "*Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but the interests of others.*" Timothy does care about you and your welfare, he's genuine, and so he is a good example to follow."

b. Who is Paul talking about in v21? Who is "*they*"? Paul is saying that they're all selfish, they only care for themselves. Is he meaning unbelievers, people who live a selfish lifestyle? From the context it seems he is referring to the people he spoke about in chapter 1 who were preaching the gospel out of rivalry to try and make things worse for Paul. He means those within the church who for one reason or another minister out of wrong motives, they are seeking their own glory, not that of Jesus.

c. Bernard of Clairvaux, an 11th Century French abbot made some interesting observations about how we function as humans, and described four stages of Christian maturity.

   i Stage 1: Love of self for self's sake.
   ii Stage 2: Love of God for self's sake.
   iii Stage 3: Love of God for God's sake.
   iv Stage 4: Love of self for God's sake.

d. Many Christians are stuck at Stage 2 – loving God because he makes me feel good. I will carry on loving God as long as he keeps blessing me. In other words, it's still about me; love of God for the sake of myself, and not for him and for his glory.

e. All of us live in one of two places. We either live in Philippians 1:21 or we live in Philippians 2:21. Philippians 1:21 says "*For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.*" Philippians 2:21 says "*For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.*"

6. Loyal

a. A good friend is loyal. V22, "*But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel.*" This is Timothy's proven worth, or his proven character. Greek ***dokimen*** means that something is valuable because it has gone through testing. Everything today is tested. The purpose of testing is to convince you that this product is reliable and will do what it is intended to do.

b. Although Paul met Timothy on his first missionary journey, he didn't invite him to join him at that time. When Paul came again on his second missionary journey he heard the testimony of the brethren regarding Timothy. It was on the strength of that endorsement that Paul invited Timothy to join the team. That was Paul's wisdom – waiting until Timothy had been tested and found to be worthy. He didn't rush to promote him, but waited until he was rooted and grounded and growing in the Lord.

c. Now, many years later, Paul describes Timothy with great affection as being like a son with a father in their service together. The testing of time has proven Timothy's loyalty and established his long-term reliability. Paul refers to Timothy in his writings more than any other person apart from Jesus. In these verses we have a profile of Timothy, endorsed by Paul as being one who is reliable, compatible, thoughtful and loyal – a true friend to Paul and a very worthy example for us to follow.

7. Epaphroditus

Philippians 2:25–30 *I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, [26] for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. [27] Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. [28] I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. [29] So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honour such men, [30] for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.*

a. Epaphroditus is the name of a dear friend of Paul. He is relatively unknown, in fact he's only mentioned twice: here in these verses and a passing mention again in chapter 4. So what do we know about him?

b. It seems he found salvation through Paul's ministry. He was a Gentile who came from Philippi. Epaphroditus means "beloved of Aphrodite." She was the Greek goddess of love and was associated with lust, beauty, pleasure and passion – the equivalent of the Roman goddess Venus. So Epaphroditus means someone who is favoured by or belongs to that pagan goddess.

c. One of the first lessons we learn from these verses is that many of God's servants go un-noticed, serving behind the scenes. They are often unknown, but they have given their lives to serve the Lord – so they are important to God. Epaphroditus falls into that category. We don't really know much about him – whether he was a younger man or an older man, and as far as we know he didn't have an official position in the church – he wasn't an elder or deacon – but he was a friend and a servant to Paul, and clearly someone that Paul could trust to be a faithful messenger.

   i Paul was in Rome under house arrest as he wrote this letter. When the Philippians heard that Paul was being held prisoner in Rome they wanted to show their gratitude and support for him with a gift – Epaphroditus was the one who volunteered to make the journey to Rome to deliver that gift to Paul and encourage him with news from Philippi.

   ii Paul gives us five descriptions of Epaphroditus that will build a picture of the kind of servant heart that God is looking for.

8. Brother

a. First and foremost, Paul looks upon Epaphroditus as his **brothe**r. In the ancient world, the Greeks thought they were better than anyone else, so they divided the whole world into two classes: Greek and barbarian. Barbarian meant you were inferior and uncivilised. The Romans had a divide between citizens and slaves, and if you weren't subjugated you soon would be. That was their mentality, to divide by ethnicity or class so that they felt superior.

b. Into this Greco-Roman culture comes the church which treats everyone who is saved as equals. It makes no difference what your background, skin-colour, gender or anything else is – if you are in Christ you are my brother or sister. Sometimes you're closer to your spiritual family than your physical family.

c. But this also applies where we're not getting along with another Christian whatever. Maybe they see things differently to us doctrinally, or they have different priorities, or perhaps it's just a personality clash. If they are in Christ, they are your brother. Remember this thought: I have to spend eternity with this person. That's a great incentive to see them through God's eyes as your brother right now in this life.

9. Fellow-worker

a. The second descriptive quality is **fellow-worker**. Epaphroditus volunteered to travel from Philippi to Rome, some 800 miles, a six-week journey. This would have been an arduous and risky undertaking; he was also carrying money and supplies to give to Paul. He was willing to endure hardship for the sake of Jesus and to be a blessing to his friend.

b. Paul affirms him as his fellow-worker –he has put his back into it to work alongside him. He's not a spiritual hitch-hiker. Spiritual hitch-hikers live on the faith of others, hitching a ride on the blessing others have toiled for. But he's a giver, not a taker, working hard for the kingdom.

10. Soldier

a. Epaphroditus is described as a **soldier**. The Christian life is a battle and we are like soldiers. What's the greatest comfort a soldier can have? It's to have other soldiers who will stand with you. Paul knew better than most the advance of the gospel came in the face of fierce opposition. Wherever he went he got into trouble, and often ended up being beaten or stoned.

b. Trouble came because Paul preached boldly in the name of Jesus, and people didn't like his message. He was in enemy territory seeking to take ground and consequently he was a target for the enemy. That's why Paul recognised the value of having a fellow soldier like Epaphroditus fighting alongside him.

11. Messenger

a. Fourthly, he is a **messenger**. Epaphroditus was the one sent out on the 6-week, 800-mile journey to be their messenger and to serve Paul. He was specifically chosen because not only was he reliable and capable, but in many ways he was part of the message. He was known personally to Paul and would have been uniquely able to convey the love and friendship that the Philippian church wanted Paul to receive.

12. Minister to need

a. The final description that Paul uses is that Epaphroditus **ministered to my need**. Paul's not just throwing that in because he was the beneficiary of Epaphroditus's journey. He uses a very specific term to describe it: ***leitourgos*** – we derive our word liturgy from it, and it speaks about a sacred duty. That elevates it from the mundane to the fulfilling of a holy task.

Colossians 3:23 *Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men…*

b. We can take the most ordinary of tasks, and if our attitude is to do it to the best of our ability because we are doing it as for the Lord, God adds a further dimension of blessing to it.

13. Conclusion

a. Epaphroditus nearly didn't make it. On the way or when he got to Rome he got sick and nearly died. This was a serious sickness, but by the grace of God he recovered, and he must have remained in Rome with Paul for some time, because news of his sickness got back to Philippi. When he finds out that they know about his sickness, he's distressed because they're distressed.

b. Paul sees the solution – to send Epaphroditus back to Philippi. In typical generosity of spirit, he sees the benefit to the church of seeing their brother again and the joy that it will bring both to Epaphroditus and to the church. The knowledge of that joy that will bring joy to Paul's heart.

c. Paul's final exhortation is that such men should be honoured. It's always good to learn from the heroes of the faith, but there is an equal wealth that we can gain from becoming acquainted with the nameless, faceless heroes that abound in scripture. There is no such thing as an ordinary saint, or an ordinary Christian – we are all extraordinary because we have an extraordinary God. Honouring these men – and there are some women too that are in this category – means that we let them tell the story of their journey of faith, and from it we receive the encouragements, and sometimes the rebukes, and the strengthening of faith that their stories tell.

Romans 8:18 *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.*