

A NUGGET OF JOYFUL THANKFULNESS

Philippians 1:1-11

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Years ago our son, Tim, invited Sherry and me to visit his outdoor school in California. Children from the cities would come to the school located in the High Sierras to learn about the outdoors. One of the things they did was to pan for gold, just like the 49ers who came to California during the gold rush of the 1800's. He invited us to try our hand at panning for gold just like the kids and we jumped right in, eagerly looking for that bright yellow mineral as we swirled the dirt and gravel around in our prospecting pans. We were hopeful that we would find a flake or two of gold, perhaps even a nugget. Unfortunately there was none to be had. However, the Scriptures tells us that the law, the guidance and instruction of the Lord, is more precious than gold (Psalm 19:10). So for the next eight weeks we're going to be panning for gold, not the kind that you can dig out of the ground, but the kind that you can dig out of God's Word. Specifically, we're going to be looking for **Nuggets of Joy**, a precious treasure that every Christian should be anxious to discover. And nowhere is there a richer deposit than in Paul's letter to the Philippians. It's only four chapters long but in those four chapters the word "joy" or one similar to it such as "rejoice" are mentioned 16 times.

Let's be honest. We live in rather distressing times. People are angry, easily upset and increasingly prone to violence. There's not a lot of joy and happiness in our world today. That's why God's people, like you and me, need to do a little spiritual digging so that we can uncover some nuggets of joy, reasons to rejoice and to share that rejoicing with others. So let's get started. Let's put on our Biblical boots, wade down into the stream of Scripture that issues forth from the Word of God and see if we can find some nuggets of pure joy in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Believe it or not, I think I have already found one. It's a nugget of **JOYOUS THANKFULNESS**. Perhaps you already discovered it during the Scripture reading this morning, but even if you have not, let's pick it up, take a look at it and examine it carefully. Writing to the Christians in the city of Philippi located in northern Greece, Paul said, *"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"* (Philippians 1:3-5). Who were these people and why was Paul expressing such joyful thankfulness for them? Let's see if we can find out.

The explanation of how Paul and his traveling companions met these people is found in the sixteenth chapter of the book of Acts in the New Testament. The first person he met was Lydia. On one Sabbath morning Paul, Timothy and Silas went down to the river just outside of the city. There he met a group of people, both Jews and Gentiles, who had gathered for prayer. One of them was Lydia, a well-to-do cloth merchant. Although she was not Jewish, she believed in God. Listening to Paul's message about Christ, both she and all of her household professed faith in Christ and were baptized. Then she invited Paul and his companions to stay at her home. She said, *"If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house."*

Then there was the slave girl. She had been following Paul around the city day after day shouting at the top of her voice, *“These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.”* She was a fortune teller and she made a lot of money for the people who owned her. Finally, Paul had had enough of this kind of harassment. He turned to her and spoke to the evil spirit that had taken possession of her life, *“In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to come out of her.”* She was immediately freed of the demonic spirit, but was now of no further use to her employers. Her fortune telling days were over. Angry that she could no longer supply them with easy money, her owners stirred up the crowd and brought trumped up charges against Paul and Silas. As a result they were thrown into prison.

That’s when we meet the jailer and his family. He had been told to guard these men carefully with the probable warning that he would lose his life if they escaped. That night, beaten and shackled in chains in the deepest part of the prison, Paul and Silas were of all things praying and singing, sharing Christ with the other prisoners, many of whom were paying close attention to what they had to say. Then about midnight something miraculous happened. An earthquake shook the building. The prison gates were thrown open and the prisoners were released from their confinement. Believing that everyone had escaped, the jailer was about to commit suicide when Paul cried out, *“Don’t harm yourself! We are all here.”* Bringing them up out of their prison cell, the jailer asked, *“Sirs, what must I do to be saved.”* Paul replied, *“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”* That very night the entire family was baptized.

The next morning, after being fed and having their wounds bandaged and treated, Paul and Silas were released. Not knowing that Paul and his companions were Roman citizens, the magistrates of the city were terribly embarrassed. Roman citizens were never to be mistreated, especially without a proper trial. Consequently the magistrates personally escorted them out of the city, anxious to be rid of these trouble makers who had caused such an uproar. However, before they left, Paul went to the home of Lydia and met with all of those who had professed faith in Christ. Lydia and her household were there, the jailer and his family, maybe some of the prisoners from the jail and perhaps even the slave girl. He wanted to encourage all of them, because he knew that they too would be facing a lot of challenges, perhaps even persecution in the days to come.

Now that we have been introduced to these individuals that Paul met in Philippi, what did he want to say to them in his letter? As was so often the case, he was once again in prison, this time in Rome, awaiting his trial before the emperor’s court. First of all, he wanted to greet them, especially the elders, the leaders of the church and the deacons who were responsible for caring for the members of the church. He wanted them to know that this letter was from him and Timothy (verses 1 and 2). Second, he wanted them to know that he was filled with joy when he reflected upon their partnership with him in the proclamation of the Gospel. Even though they were separated by many miles, they were nevertheless a team working together to spread the Good News of God’s salvation in Christ Jesus. He was confident that what had begun so long ago when he first visited with them would continue to prosper and grow under their able leadership (verses 3-6). Third, he wanted them to know that they were like a treasured memory tucked away in his heart. He thought about them often and longed for them with the affection that arises when we are brothers and sisters in Christ (verses 7-8). Fourth, he wanted to pray for them. He wanted their love to grow and not just for one another. He wanted them to pursue the kind of love that can best be described as a passionate quest for knowledge and spiritual discernment. Paul knew that when a person is motivated by this kind of love that individual will strive to live a pure and blameless life. That individual will be

empowered to turn away from the things of this world and begin to live a life that is filled with the “fruit of righteousness” (verses 9-11).

So what is the nugget of joy that we should be looking for in this passage of Scripture? The one that immediately comes to mind is a nugget of **JOYFUL THANKFULNESS**. Paul was really thankful for those fellow Christians in Philippi. He wanted them to be assured of his affectionate concern for each and every one of them. As we will discover later in his letter, the Christians in Philippi had supported him financially when he was in need and they had even sent one of their own, Epaphroditus, to visit him. Paul couldn't help but be possessed by a spirit of joyful thankfulness as he reflected upon all that they meant to him.

Now, let me ask you a question. Are there some people in your life for whom you are truly thankful, people with whom you bonded in a special way that even now fills your heart with an inner warmth? Think about it for just a moment. How about your parents or a special relative? How about the first person who gave you a job when you were a teenager? How about that individual that came to your assistance when you were in a difficult situation? How about that person who led you to the Lord? I could go on and on. There are countless possibilities. Let me share one of them with you. When I was 13 years old, I was invited to join a local Boy Scout troop. At first it was just fun and games. I had a great time. Then a new scoutmaster arrived. His name was Howard Lamore. He was from the old school of Scouting. He was all about the basics—hiking, camping and advancement. At first, I wasn't too thrilled about this new approach to Scouting, but once I began to get the hang of it, I was hooked. I learned how to live outdoors and developed the skills that are necessary to be a leader. In a word, I grew up. I would not be what I am today if it hadn't been for Howard Lamore. I still have fond memories of those years I spent in Scouting. However, I never called or stopped by his home and personally expressed my appreciation and when I decided it was time to contact him, it was too late. He had died. How I wish I had not waited so long to tell him, “Thanks Howard. Thanks for being there to guide me during those formative years of my life.”

How about you? Are there some people in your life that deserve to receive a nugget of joyful thankfulness? I bet there are and probably more than one. So here's what I want to ask you to do. First, make a list of these individuals. It will probably be composed of at least two or three individuals who had a life changing impact upon your life. Then contact them. Write a letter, give them a call and if at all possible, go to see them personally. Let them know that you are truly thankful for everything that they meant and did for you.

So to sum things up, let's go mining, not for gold, but for something much more valuable. Let's start looking for nuggets of **JOYFUL THANKFULNESS**. When we find them, we will discover that not only our lives, but the lives of those upon which we bestow them, will be blessed beyond measure!