

# FINDING JOY IN THE JOURNEY

## PHILIPPIANS 3:12-4:1

WE CAN FIND JOY IN THE JOURNEY ONLY WHEN WE UNDERSTAND  
THE  
NATURE, EXPECTATIONS AND THE DESTINATION OF THE JOURNEY

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# FINDING JOY IN THE JOURNEY

## PHILIPPIANS 3:12-4:1

It is important for us to keep in mind how the church at Philippi would have received this letter. Epaphroditus probably brought the letter home with him from Rome . The church all gathered together and the letter was read out loud. It probably took less time than one of my sermons to read the letter out loud in its entirety. It would be good for each of us to sit down at one session and read the book aloud. If you have the bible on tape or CD, I recommend you listen to the book in one sitting. Do this several times.

I think that you will see that Paul has some major themes running through the book. For Paul, life was all about bringing glory to God and bringing credibility to the gospel message. He has told the Philippians that they can do this by being unified in standing strong against the temptations and persecutions of the world and growing together in love and maturity as a church.

The last time we were together, Paul said that we can only do this as we link our lives to the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul said that his one desire in life was to know Jesus fully; to share in the fellowship of His sufferings and experience the power of His resurrection. Paul felt that knowing God was what he desired. He did not just want to know about God, he wanted to know God intimately.

So far this book of joy has left me more discouraged than joyful. As I examine my life, I have come to the conclusion that I am a long way from where God wants me to be. I look at how far I have to go and how much I have to grow, and I have become a little discouraged.

But thank God for this morning's passage. If I understand Paul correctly, he is saying that is the nature of the journey. The closer we get to God, the farther away we come to realize we are. If we don't understand the nature, the expectation, and the destination of the Christian journey, we can easily lose the joy we were meant to have and become discouraged.

I think that I am really good at thinking myself into a funk. Let me give you an example.

When I was in the military I used to play with some very competitive golfers. They were serious about winning. Since I tend to be weak-minded, they would always take advantage of me. One day, I was playing with a pretty expensive golf ball. We came to a hole that was surrounded by water. So I took out a less expensive ball and teed it up. One of my friends said, "You got to think positive John. If you're thinking water, you are going to hit it in the water." That made sense to me. So I took the cheaper ball off and put the expensive ball on the tee. I took a couple of practice swings, and now filled with confidence I stepped up to the ball.

After watching my practice swings, my friend said, "Upon further consideration, I think you ought to use the old ball."

My friends always used to mess with my mind. The worst I could do there is hit the ball in the water. But when Satan and the world mess with our minds, they can suck the joy right out of life.

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How is it then that we can find joy in the journey of life? The main idea of this morning's text answers that question. **WE CAN FIND JOY IN THE JOURNEY ONLY WHEN WE UNDERSTAND THE NATURE, EXPECTATIONS AND THE DESTINATION OF THE JOURNEY.** In other words, if we hold wrong beliefs about what the Christian life is supposed to be like, if we have wrong expectations of ourselves, others, and God, and if we have no idea what are goals are, then we pretty much guarantee lives filled with discouragement and despair. On the other hand a mature, healthy understanding of the Christian life will bring us joy.

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## **I. JOY MOVES FORWARD (VS 12-14)**

*The Nature Of Our Journey Is Designed To Be Moving Forward.  
We Lose Joy When We Focus On The Past.*

First of all, we must understand the orientation of the Christian walk. Joy moves forward as described in verses 12-14. In other words, **THE NATURE OF OUR JOURNEY IS DESIGNED TO BE MOVING FORWARD. WE LOSE JOY WHEN WE FOCUS ON THE PAST.**

### **A. ALREADY BUT NOT YET (12-13a)**

In order to understand the nature of the Christian journey, we must first understand our standing as Christians. Verse 12 and the first half of verse 13 remind us that in one sense, we are already, yet in another sense, we are not yet. We live in this strange state of *already but not yet*. Look what Paul says in the first half of verse 12, "*Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect.*" In the first sentence of verse 13 he says, "*Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.*"

Let's keep this all in the context of the city of Philippi and Paul's letter. There was a group of Christians claiming that in order to be an authentic Christian, one had to keep all the Jewish laws and customs, especially circumcision. This group of people felt that they were perfect in keeping all the rules and regulations. By the way, today the Christian church has many denominations and individual believers who define themselves by keeping rules and regulations. Here is a good test. If we define our Christian walk by "don'ts" then we probably fall into this category. I don't do this or I don't do that. But Paul has already told us that no one kept the law as religiously as he did. In fact, he was perfect in keeping the law. But his goal was not in keeping the law. His goal was to know God through fully knowing Jesus. His assessment is that he is not there yet.

There was also another group who claimed to be perfect through knowledge. They were called the Gnostics. They believed that when you gained access to secret knowledge then you were perfect. Paul has also reminded us that he had the best intellectual and religious training possible. In fact, he was a Ph.D. in religious philosophy. Yet he says, he has not yet obtained what he is after. Knowledge about God is not the same as knowing God.

I don't know where you are in your Christian walk or how this book of Philippians has been affecting you, but this is certainly good news for me. When I get together with my pastor friends and with many Christians, I get the feeling that I am the only one struggling with sin in the room. I get the idea from them that they are very righteous and holy. Even though they don't say that, when I readily share my weaknesses and struggles, it's almost as if they gasp and put their hands over their mouths. Even though they say they sin, I never hear one mentioned. So I end up discouraged because I feel as if I must be defective because I struggle so much with my Christian walk.

I look at the lives of Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus and come to the conclusion that I am really a pathetic Christian. But now I hear the same sentiments coming from Paul here and from his struggle described in Romans chapter 7. And now I am able to breathe a sigh of relief.

The source of my relief is sandwiched between his two observations. In the second half of verse 12 he says, "*But I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.*" The words "I press on" are taken from the worlds of hunting and military operations. The phrase refers to tracking down and pursuing. In other words, a hunter will track down, pursue, and kill his prey. A military squad may track, pursue, and overtake an enemy. Paul is on a mission to know God personally, intimately, and fully. He is using all his energy to accomplish that goal. He is tracking, hunting, and hoping to overtake full knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Is that the way we approach life? Again, when I am honest with myself, I find myself tracking and pursuing all sorts of goals, and knowing God just seems to be one more goal on my list of several goals. Oftentimes knowing God is not even the first on my list of goals.

Let's define that goal a little more. Paul calls it, "taking hold of." Literally it means *seizing, grabbing, latching on to, holding on to with all one's might*. It can refer to a physical, emotional, spiritual, or intellectual bonding. I think Paul intends the full package. Paul wants to latch on to Jesus in every way.

Here is where I find a lot of encouragement. Paul is latching on to what Jesus has already latched on to. It won't slip from Paul's hands. It won't slip from our hands. Jesus has already latched on to a personal, intimate, passionate relationship with Paul. Paul was headed in the exact wrong direction when Jesus met him on the road to Damascus. Paul was headed there to arrest and kill Christians. But Jesus met Paul, stopped him, and latched on to him. Paul was in the grasp of God.

If you have given your life to Jesus Christ in faith, then He has already latched on to you. You are in His grasp. If you are not a believer yet, I want to remind you that Jesus is here waiting to latch on to you. Just cry out to Him, confess your sin, ask for forgiveness, believe in the crucified and risen Jesus, ask Him into your life, and you will be saved. Jesus is reaching down trying to latch on to all of us.

But now that Jesus has taken hold of me, I am already His child. I am already certain of my final destiny. I am already seated in heaven with Jesus. However, I am still earthbound and I still live in a body and mind that has been tainted, stained, and often saturated with sin. I will never fully be perfect, I will never be totally complete until I physically die and my perfected soul will be joined to my perfected resurrection body. When I see Jesus face to face in eternity, then and only then will I be complete. That's what the word perfect means. It means complete and fulfilled.

But until that day, I must continue to struggle in a world infested by sin, in a body and mind tainted by sin, and in an environment dominated by sin. In the eyes of God, as He looks at me through the blood of Jesus Christ, I am already perfect. My eternal destiny is set. My missions on earth are set. God will complete all the good works He started in and through me. My salvation is a done deal. It has been granted by grace through faith. I cannot earn it or add to it in any way. I am already and forever a child of God.

On the other hand, I am not yet face to face with Jesus in heaven. I need to continue to press on towards completing the good works God has already prepared for me in advance. I must press on towards being better each day. I must continue to press on towards holiness. I must continue to press on through a sinful world in a sinful body. I will not experience perfection until I am face to face with Jesus in eternity. I must learn to accept and live with the fact that I am already but not yet. By the way, I am not clever enough to come up with the words "already but not yet." I can't recall who coined the phrase, but it certainly is not original with me.

## **B. WELL SPENT ENERGY (13b-14a)**

If I realize that, then I can focus my energies on productive endeavors. The second half of verse 13 and the first half of verse 14 describe energy well spent. I find that I can easily get stuck in the past in two ways. I find myself fretting over mistakes I have made. I find myself continuing to experience guilt and regrets for past sins that I have already confessed a hundred times and God has already forgiven once. When I think about that, I come to understand that is a lack of faith in God. It doubts His love and it doubts His promise. The Bible says that if we confess our sins, Jesus is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. There is nothing we can do about our past. Paul had persecuted, arrested, harassed, and killed Christians. There was nothing he could do about that now. He must forget about the past. Jesus forgave him and told him to move on. When we start to dwell on our past failures, mistakes, and sins, we must give them to God, forget them, and move on. They must not stop us from pursuing our goal of knowing God fully.

But I can also get stuck in the past by focusing on my successes. Sometimes, I can look at my educational life and say, "I have accomplished more than I could ever have imagined. I have reached the top of my profession. I don't need to study or learn anymore." There are some people who say, "I have served the Lord faithfully for many years. Now I think I'll relax and let others take over." Many people feel they have gone to church all their lives, and sat in innumerable Sunday School classes. They feel as if they have a good handle of Christianity.

Let me put it gently. You're not to the point where you can just rest on all your past accomplishments. I am no where near being all that God has called me to be. I think I can safely say that all of us here this morning have a long way to go. We need to forget about past successes and failures.

We must have an attitude of being forward focused. In the last phrase of verse 13 and the first phrase in verse 14 Paul mixes two metaphors. "Straining toward what is ahead," is an athletic metaphor. It describes an athlete running with all her might. Every muscle flexes as she runs towards the finish line. Her eyes are focused straight ahead. Every leg stride, every arm pump, every ounce of her energy and attention is focused on the finish line.

The second phrase is the same military and hunting metaphor. The hunter is stalking his prey. The military is hunting, and stalking and overtaking the enemy. Their attention and energy are focused on accomplishing the mission. They are focused on the goal.

I want us to just pause and think about this. Whoever controls our time seems to control our lives. If we want to experience the joy that Jesus promises in life, then we need to spend our time and energy pursuing knowing and serving God. We must be using every ounce of energy, like the runner, on the finish line. We hunt down opportunities to become more like Jesus in love, humility, sacrifice, and service.

### **C. THE FINAL DESTINATION (14b)**

In order to focus our energies in the right direction, the second half of verse 14 reminds us of the final destination. Again, the prize is to know Jesus and to share life with Him. The goal is to know Jesus, to fellowship with Him in His sufferings and to experience the power of His resurrection. Jesus invites us to work with Him in building up His church in love and unity. Jesus invites us to work with Him in bringing salvation to a lost and hurting world. The prize is to walk through this life becoming more like Jesus, right into eternity where we will see Him face to face and He will complete the good work He has started in each one of us. The Italians have this great saying, especially when people tend to get stuck somewhere in life. They say, "*Avanti! Sempre Avanti!*" which means "Forward! Always move Forward!" The grave is no legitimate marker for believers. We are headed through the grave to eternity in heaven with our Lord Jesus Christ. We must consistently move forward. **THE NATURE OF OUR JOURNEY IS DESIGNED TO BE MOVING FORWARD. WE LOSE JOY WHEN WE FOCUS ON THE PAST.**

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## II. JOY IN MATURITY (VS 15-16)

### *Joy Comes Through A Mature, Realistic Expectation Of The Journey.*

I hope you have noticed in the first section how it was connected through the repetition of a few key words. The phrases "I press on" and "to take hold of" became the theme of the first section. The second section is going to be connected to the first section by the word *perfect*. In verse 12 Paul said he wasn't perfect. In verse 15 the word *mature* is literally the same word, *perfect*. The theme in verses 15-16 is that there is joy in maturity. In other words **JOY COMES THROUGH A MATURE, REALISTIC EXPECTATION OF THE JOURNEY**. Immature believers seldom find joy in life. The sad thing is that it doesn't matter how long we have been Christians and it doesn't matter how religious or intellectual we appear to be. Maturity is more an attitude than it is a stage.

### **A. A MATURE VIEW OF OURSELVES (15a)**

The first half of verse 15 informs us that we must first have a mature view of ourselves. Paul starts out verse 15 by saying, "All of us who are mature should take such a view of things." The word mature is the same word he used for perfect in verse 12. Again, I think Paul does this to emphasize the already but not yet concept. Being a complete Christian in this life means that we acknowledge our situation. As long as we are in this life, we will always need to grow in knowledge, wisdom, and behavior. As long as we are this side of the grave, we must accept the fact that I don't have all the answers and my thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors must be changing, growing, and becoming more Christ-like.

Some people think they have achieved a level of spirituality. Legalistic Christians, New Age religions, and many Eastern religions feel that we can achieve a perfect state in this life. Take note of some mature attitudes that will bring peace to the church and allow us to stand firm together in Christ.

The first attitude is that I don't know all the answers. I am not God and I am not of any extraordinary intellect. In fact, if I got 70% on a theology test in heaven, I should be most happy. And here is where the problem comes in. I don't know which theological positions that I am presently holding falls into the 30% that are incorrect. I am always suspicious when people try to talk so intellectually about spiritual things. I must affirm that although I know some things about God and His promises, there is much more that I am not certain of, and even more that I don't know.

Secondly, I can never point to good works as anything to be commended for. Why? Because if I want credit for all the good things I have done, then it would only be fitting that God put out for public viewing all my evil thoughts and behaviors. It would only be fitting that God publish what I have failed to do as well. I know that there are many of you out there that are really good people. And you wouldn't mind God publicly displaying all your good works and bad works. However, I'm not in your category. I don't need God to give me public praise for any good works I have done. And I certainly don't want Him to display publicly my evil thoughts, words, and behaviors. I have much room to grow.

I think Paul is saying that we reach a level of maturity in the Christian life when we can acknowledge and embrace that we have a long way to go both in our intellectual understanding of Christianity, our application of this knowledge to our everyday lives, and a very long way to grow in our thought lives and conduct.

## **B. A MATURE VIEW OF OTHERS (15b)**

I think it's important for us to have a mature outlook of ourselves because as the second half of verse 15 points out, that will allow us to have a mature outlook of others. Since our knowledge is limited, and since we all have some defective ideas, the proper way to talk about these things is through dialogue, not debate. An attitude of debate says that I know this to be true and your view cannot possibly be true. I must view my Christian brothers and sisters as Spirit-filled and Spirit-guided children of God. A church like ours, which is multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, socially mixed, and interdenominational, gives us the best opportunity to get at solid theology. If we are willing to dialogue, then we can learn a lot about different perspectives. But if we debate, then we can learn nothing. We can only divide the church. We must pray for one another and be humble enough to let God speak to others and us.

## **C. A MATURE VIEW OF LIFE (16)**

I really like verse 16 because it makes everything practical. It gives us a mature outlook on life. You see there are many Christians who defend Christianity intellectually, philosophically, and theologically. They argue to maintain the integrity of the Scriptures. The problem is that, by the way they act, it is evident that they are not interested the least bit in living out the gospel. Paul's command is plain and simple. We are to live out the truths we have learned. We can argue all day about what it means to feed the poor. But it doesn't mean a thing until we go ahead and feed a poor person. We can argue all day about what racial reconciliation is all about. It doesn't mean a thing until we get

involved with people from different ethnic backgrounds and treat them as equals. We can argue all day about what prayer is but it doesn't mean a thing until we pray. Gaining knowledge, talking philosophically, theologically, and religiously doesn't mean a thing. God is looking for changed lives. If I have not yet acknowledged that I don't know much, if I have not yet acknowledged that my thoughts, my attitudes, and my behaviors have a long way to go, if I have not acknowledged that your interpretation of the Scripture may be as good or better than mine, if I am not consistently growing in knowledge, wisdom, and behavior, then I am an immature Christian and I cannot experience the joy in life that God has for me. **JOY COMES THROUGH A MATURE, REALISTIC EXPECTATION OF THE JOURNEY.**

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### **III. JOY IN OUR CITIZENSHIP ( VS 17-4:1)**

#### *Joy Comes Through Knowing The Destination Of Our Journey.*

As we learn to forget the past success and failures in our lives, and face forward in life, we will start to experience joy in the journey. When we learn to embrace that we have a long way to go and are more gracious with others as we journey through life, we will experience even more joy. Finally, as we learn to embrace the fact that this world is not our home, we can experience even more joy in our citizenship as described in verse 17 of chapter 3 through verse 1 of chapter 4. You see **JOY COMES THROUGH KNOWING THE DESTINATION OF OUR JOURNEY.** As we said earlier, our final destination is not earth. The grave is not our final destination. Our final destination is beyond the grave. Our final destination is heaven.

#### **A. CHOOSING THE RIGHT GUIDE IS IMPORTANT (17)**

And if we are to get there safely, choosing the right guide is important as verse 17 clearly states. Paul told us in chapter 2 that we are to follow and imitate the example of Jesus. Paul is saying that his preaching, teaching, and writings have been inspired by the risen Lord Jesus. And as he and others follow the teachings of Jesus, we should take note and try to live after the pattern that Paul and other faithful servants have laid down. To be sure, I will never be a Paul, Timothy, Epaphroditus, Mother Teresa, Father Damien, or Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. However, they have lived lives that demonstrate the love and concern of Jesus. Their lives demonstrate to me the love, sacrifice, service, and humility that it takes to imitate Christ. When we look to these people, we can easily see that we have a long way to go. When we read the stories written by Henri Nouwen, we see how shallow our knowledge is concerning the heart of God. We can

see people who are following the pattern of Christ by their humility, their love, their sacrifice, and their service. Their thoughts, behaviors, and their attitudes will be saturated with grace and mercy and manifest the fruit of the Holy Spirit which are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. We must pick the right guides because there are plenty of religious people out there who sound like they know a lot and go around doing all sorts of showy things.

## **B. FOLLOWING THE WRONG GUIDE (18)**

We need to pay attention because, as verse 18 points out, following the wrong guide can be disastrous. Paul seems to have warned the Philippians before, but he wants to warn them again. The Judaizers, the legalists, the Gnostics, and even some miracle workers were dangerous to the health and unity of the church. Remember, all these people would call themselves Christians. The legalists would emphasize keeping the rules. The Gnostics would emphasize looking for the secret meanings and focus on knowledge. The Gnostics believed the body was bad so one group of Gnostics became ascetics. They beat, punished, and denied themselves any bodily pleasures. Other Gnostics said that since the body was evil they would just fornicate and abuse their body in any sensual way they could think of. The miracle workers would emphasize the Spiritual gifts like speaking in tongues, healing, miracles, and prophecy.

The problem with all these false teachings is that they are focused on earthly values, not heavenly values. The world values power, whether it is physical power, monetary power, or spiritual power. People would look up to these people and easily be led astray. Even today, I have friends and people who encourage me to go see this faith healer or to attend a conference that promises health and wealth if we are faithful to God. I don't need to go anywhere to see anyone. I need to faithfully live my life in Christ right here. I don't need my fillings in my teeth to turn to Gold. I don't need to be slain in the Spirit. I need God to perfect humility in my life. I need God to perfect love in my life. I need God to perfect sacrifice and service into my life. I don't need any more of the world's crazy ideas put in my head and then mixed together with Christianity. I want to know Jesus. I want to fellowship with Him in His sufferings and experience the power of His resurrection.

## **C. FOLLOWING THE RIGHT GUIDE (20-4:1)**

That only comes as we follow the right guide as described in verse 17 of chapter 3 through verse 1 of chapter 4. I don't want you to miss this. Even though I have mentioned this several times I want to emphasize the power of this language. The majority of people who lived in Philippi were retired Roman military. Philippi was a

royal Roman colony. Many of the retired military won their citizenship through distinguished military careers. Here Paul says, "Our citizenship is in heaven." Do you realize the power of that statement? He is saying, "You may think your Roman citizenship is valuable. And it is in an earthly sort of way. But it means nothing in the kingdom of God . Value the fact that you are a citizen of heaven." Now people all over the world wanted a Roman citizenship. But not many wanted to be identified with Jesus the crucified. In fact, most people looked down on Christians. Paul says, "Embrace the fact you are a citizen of heaven. Your Roman citizenship ends at the grave. It is worthless. Your heavenly citizenship carries you into eternity."

And because we are citizens of heaven, we should quit chasing after the things of this world. We must embrace the fact that our hope is not in our own abilities. We wait for Jesus to return and complete the good work He started in each one of us. He will transform us physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. We must live waiting for eternity and we must quit focusing our energies on worldly things. We think continuing to climb the corporate ladder is a worthy goal. We think making more money is a worthy goal. We chase after promotions, careers, and all sorts of things, but Paul appeals to us one more time in the context of his letter to the Philippians.

Remember, he wants us to stand together as a church, as the body of Christ. We are to stand firm against the threats from the world, society, and Satan. We are to stand together in order to fight off the threats from the outside. And we are to stand firm in love and unity by being humble and sacrificially serving one another. Paul appeals to them as beloved friends. We are one another's joy and crown. We must humbly realize that our final destination is heaven. We will all be living there together for an eternity and so our lives as individuals and as the church should reflect that. We are headed to heaven and our brothers and sisters are headed there. We are to humbly journey there together. We need to be clear that our destination is not this world. The grave is the end of all that is in this world. Our destination is heaven. That's important because **JOY COMES THROUGH KNOWING THE DESTINATION OF OUR JOURNEY.**

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## IV. EPILOGUE

I think if there is one message that comes through loud and clear to me this morning it's this. If I am to find joy in this life, I must learn to embrace the "already but not yet" concept for my life and for others. Again, we must learn to move on in grace. Joy

comes as we humbly embrace this concept. **WE CAN FIND JOY IN THE JOURNEY ONLY WHEN WE UNDERSTAND THE NATURE, EXPECTATIONS AND THE DESTINATION OF THE JOURNEY.**

In his book *The Discipline Of Grace*, Jerry Bridges describes this attitude of how we should approach life in grace. He says:

*"If God's blessings were dependent on our performance, they would be meager indeed. Even our best works are shot through with sin – with varying degrees of impure motives and lots of imperfect performance. We are always, to some degree, looking out for ourselves, guarding our flanks, protecting our egos. It is because we do not realize the utter depravity of the principle of sin that remains in us and stains everything we do, that we entertain any notion of earning God's blessings through our obedience. And it is because we do not fully grasp the fact that Jesus paid the penalty for all our sins that we despair of God's blessing when we have failed to live up to even our own desires to live a life that is pleasing to God.*

*Here is an important spiritual principle that sums up what I've said thus far:*

*Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God's grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the need of God's grace.*

*Every day of our Christian experience should be a day of relating to God on the basis of His grace alone. We are not only saved by grace, but we also live by grace every day. This grace comes through Christ."*

When we learn to live out that truth in all humility, it is then that we can find joy in this journey we call life.

*"Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God's grace. And your best days are Never so good that you are beyond the need of God's grace."*