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This week at Magdalen Road we started our Autumn series in Paul's letter to the Philippians. We started things off with an overview and by considering the theme of Joy in the letter.

It's a letter that, despite Paul's difficult situation in prison, is dominated by joy. He uses 3 words in particular with the same root – joy, rejoice and glad (1v4, 1v18, 2v2, 2v17 & 2v18, 2v28, 2v29, 3v1, 4v1, 4v4 and 4v10).

We noted that broadly speaking there are 2 aspects that underpin Paul's joy and one important outcome of these...

1) Joy is about Christ.

Christ is mentioned 38x in this letter and at root Paul's joy comes from defining himself in terms of Christ. Paul has confidence because of Christ, boasts in Christ, considers everything a loss compared to knowing Christ, presses on towards the goal to which God has called him heavenward – in Christ. Fundamentally Paul's life is about Christ.

Often our life can be about the trimmings and we take joy in those things (which can be here today and gone tomorrow) meaning joy can be elusive or fleeting. If we grasped more of who Christ is and of all that we have in Him, joy would not be such a stranger to us.

Our daily battle is to believe that Jesus is better and that true joy is found in Him rather than in circumstances and trimmings.

2) Joy is in People

The second, perhaps more surprising place that Paul finds joy is in others. He is not so much the cold, angular and aloof theologian as he's often painted, but rather he rejoices over the Philippians progress in the gospel in his initial prayer. His joy will be complete (2v2) if they are more united and servant hearted, following the example of Christ.

Again, this is a challenge to us as we often thinking that looking after number 1 will bring us joy. In reality joy comes from putting Jesus first, others second and us at the end of the line...

With these 2 aspects in place the final outcome that follows is

Joy is not dependent upon circumstances

Paul is in prison, chained up and facing some opposition and yet he can have joy because Jesus is still better, and the Philippians are still progressing. When joy is found in our unchanging Christ joy is not dependent upon our circumstances.

This means, for example, 1v18 he can take joy in the progress of the gospel, even when it comes from the lips of competitors and opposition. It means he can say 1v21 because he can be content with whatever the Lord has for him or even it's ok that he's being poured out like a drink offering.

Our daily battle in the midst of messy lives is to believe that we were made for joy in Christ rather than joy in the trimmings. Joy in the trimmings are a dim shadow compared to the real joy of being in the relationship that we were made for.

Here are a few ideas of questions to help your group begin to process and apply some of this. As always, feel free to adapt as needed...

Read all of Philippians!

Any recurring themes / ideas / questions you have?

How do you define joy?

Where do people look for joy today?

Where do you look for joy?

*What does it mean that Paul 'defines himself' in terms of Christ?
(see 1v1, 1v13, 1v11, 1v19 or 3v3, 8, 10, 14 etc)*

How do you define yourself?

How can we help each other to see ourselves in these terms?

How can we believe (practically) that Jesus is better?

How does Paul find joy in the Philippians progress?

From 1v3-5 why does Paul pray joyfully for them?

How can his joy be made complete (2v2)?

Why does this matter so much to him?

How can we maintain unity and find joy in the progress of one another?

Do you think it's possible to have joy regardless of circumstances?