

Philippians 1—"I Will Rejoice"

I just finished reading for the second time a wonderful non-fiction book, *THE BOYS IN THE BOAT* about the University of Washington's 1936 eight oar crew team that won the gold medal in the 1936 Olympic Games held in Berlin. The true story is told with a focus on an indomitable member of the team named Joe Rantz. What is fresh on my mind is that this young man overcame incredible adversity at a young age to not only achieve great success, but happiness as well. In 1929, in the Great Depression, 14 year old Joe lived on a stump farm in the Washington wilderness. A stump farm was land that logging companies had cleared and just left nothing but stumps, and so Joe and his dad spent their hours prying up stumps with their bare hands. His mother died, and his father remarried a mean vindictive woman who took all her anger out on the stepchild, Joe. When Joe was approaching his 15th birthday he came home from school to find the family packing the car for a trip, so he asked his dad where they were going. Times were too hard, so they were moving to the city, but the evil stepmother refused to let Joe come with them, so the milk toast dad had to deliver the bad news, "Sorry Joe but you can't go, you'll have to stay here and make your own way from now on". Just try to picture yourself at 14 and your family takes you out and dumps you in the wilderness with nothing! Alone and afraid in the wilderness, Joe cried all night, but in the morning he decided that from that day on he would promise himself that he would never again allow his circumstances determine who he was or what he did. Joe hunted and fished for food, walked to school every day, and got a job with a family that could only pay him with dinner. He studied hard, worked hard, and through it all was a humble, happy person. He got a scholarship to the U. of Washington and made the crew team. He lived in the basement of the YMCA and worked the night shift as a janitor. For four years he got up early to study, went to class in the mornings, worked out hard on the crew team, and then worked all night for just room and board. During the summers he worked hard labor on the Grand Coulee River Dam, which was finished in 1941. Joe hung off a cliff breaking rocks all day long for 75 cents an hour, and was happy to do it. Joe Rantz went on to win a gold medal in the 1936 Olympics, got married, had a family, and a successful career. When I fall into despair lamenting my problems, I think I will remember Joe Rantz and how he was happy in spite of his problems.

The theme of the book of Philippians is rejoicing in the Lord. Joy and rejoicing is repeated more than 12 times in four chapters. One theologian defined Biblical joy as "the settled

conviction that God sovereignly controls the events of life for the believers good and God's glory." I looked back in my notes about the teaching of the great philosophers on happiness, and I think that from a worldly perspective Aristotle (a student of Plato) had a solid view on happiness. Aristotle said the pursuit of happiness is the central purpose of life, but what people do to find it is all important. He believed in no excesses, but a balance in all things. Fools practice an excess of sensual pleasure, or others the opposite, which is asceticism (strict self denial). Aristotle was not a fan of instant gratification through drugs, alcohol, or sex; but happiness to him was a life long pursuit of values and virtue. All this made him a pretty good guy that made a good productive citizen, but I doubt that he ever experienced the kind of Biblical joy that Paul had in the midst of even the worst circumstances.

Today, most people are chasing after happiness through material goods and worldly pleasures, but if they capture it, it is for a short time only. The reality is that physical pleasure and material happiness is fleeting. Everyone knows in the back of their minds that if we are healthy it will not last, and if we are wealthy, we cannot take it with us. We are all like the guy who was lectured by his doctor, "You must lose weight and exercise every day. Eat no sugar, no fat, limit your alcohol, no more sex, and take these five different prescriptions every day. There is no reason why you can't live a completely normal life as long as you don't try to enjoy it".

The Bible commands us to be joyful and to rejoice in all things. This is only possible if your circumstances do NOT determine your joy. The authors of the Bible had mastered the art of being joyful in all circumstances through a spiritual perspective. Their joy was determined by their relationship with Christ, and what He was doing in their life. When Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians his circumstances could hardly have been worse. He was in jail in Rome awaiting a possible execution. He had been four years in prison without a trial. The Philippians were legitimately concerned about Paul's well being and his future. Paul wrote to them to alleviate their fears and report on the great things God was doing in the midst of Paul's adverse circumstances. If it had been me, I probably would have whined on about the beatings, harsh conditions, and the bleak future, but Paul reported that his "circumstances had actually turned out for the greater progress of the Gospel".

The Greek City of Philippi

Philippi held a strategic location on the land bridge between Europe and Asia. It was named after Alexander the Great's father, King Philip. The Romans had built the main Roman highway connecting it to Rome called the Via Egnatia. The church there in Philippi was the first one planted by Paul on his second missionary journey recorded in Acts 16. Paul had left his trusted disciple Luke there, and the church grew and flourished. After Paul was arrested and taken to Rome, the church at Philippi generously supported Paul making it possible for him to live in rented quarters under house arrest instead of a dungeon.

Greetings and Salutations—Phil. 1:1-2

Greek letters usually began with a greeting to the recipient from the sender along with the author's kind regards and hope for their well-being. Paul followed the custom, but modified it in order to bring Christian theology to bear on the issues and problems of his audience. Paul's opening remarks are not meaningless pleasantries, but a presentation of the Gospel. Paul began his letter by identifying himself and his disciple Timothy as "bondservants of Jesus Christ". Paul considered himself sold into servant-hood to the Lord, and living in submission to God's will. He was Christ's slave because Christ's goals were his goals, and it was his responsibility to fulfill the command of his Master even if it meant prison or execution. The letter was addressed to "all the saints". Today we think of a saint as someone set apart by a lifetime of good works and even a doer of miracles, but in the New Testament all saved believers in Christ were addressed as saints. They were saints by position (not merit) since the righteousness of Christ was imputed to them based on the atoning work of Christ on the cross. Therefore, the entire church at Philippi was being addressed as saints. Paul also included the leaders as being the overseers (elders) and deacons (servers).

Paul's greeting in verse 2 is much more than the customary niceties, but an important reminder of just what Christ has done for them in blessing them all with the grace and peace that can only come from God. By the "grace of God", Jesus was sacrificed on the cross and atoned for their sins, and we who were formerly estranged from God were reconciled and now have peace.

Paul's Thanksgiving and Prayer for the Church

In Phil.1:3-11, Paul gives thanks to God for the church and offers up a prayer for the church's continued well being. Remember that Paul is in jail facing execution, but he has genuine

rejoicing over the Church in Philippi. Paul lays out the reasons for his spiritual joy for the church beginning with his remembrance of his initially coming to Philippi and seeing them converted and undergoing their life changing experience in Christ. In v.4, Paul encourages them by telling them of his constant offering up prayer for the church, and thanking God for their participation as partners with him in spreading the gospel. Paul shares with them his great confidence in their continual spiritual growth all the way until Christ comes. You can see the intimate relationship between Paul and the church in verse 7 where Paul writes, "I have you in my heart" and he longs to be with them. The phrase "the affection of Jesus Christ" conveys a deep spiritual connection that can only come from their common bond linked together by Christ. In Paul's prayer request for them in verse 9, he prays that their love for Christ and one another would continue to increase through the "real knowledge", or better translated true knowledge. The Greek word for knowledge is gnosis but here it is epignosis, and it conveys a knowledge of absolute truth that the world cannot know except through the abiding relationship with Christ. Along with that knowledge, the Spirit of God would give special "discernment" or application of that truth. Some people believe you can grow and mature spiritually simply by force of will, but Paul was saying it also requires an infusion of the Word of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

God uses Adverse Circumstances to Bring About Good, Phil. 1:12-30

The church was worried about Paul's circumstances, but Paul revealed to them that circumstances should not rob us of our joy. God is able providentially to bring great progress of the Gospel through any circumstance. We read verse 12 and see Paul's perspective on his adverse circumstances. Paul had a spiritual perspective, and was able to see through God's providence that wonderful things were happening because of his imprisonment. The big picture was that his circumstances had "turned out for the greater progress of the Gospel". I remember Paul's purpose statement in Acts 20:24 where he said something like "My life has no account except to the ministry which I received to testify of the gospel of grace". Two surprising and wonderful things had happened to progress the gospel of Jesus Christ. First, Paul had the opportunity to witness to the elite Praetorian Guards. Political prisoners in Rome were guarded by Caesar's own elite special forces, and prisoners under house arrest like Paul had 3 shifts of 3 guards 24 hours a day. Thus Paul had a captive audience that he would never have had otherwise, and many of them were believing in Christ. What had appeared as a disaster was in God's providence a great opportunity. In addition to that, Paul was also

having a great ministry to the church there in Rome. Paul had written to them earlier in the Book of Romans, and told them that he longed to come to Rome in order to minister to the church there, but he never dreamed he would come to them as a prisoner in chains. Secondly, Phil. 1:14, Paul wrote that because of his encouragement, the church members were becoming much bolder about preaching the gospel and sharing their faith. Before Paul got there the Christians in Rome felt like a tiny minority that needed to hide, but now seeing Paul's courage and his boldness in sharing his faith, the church in Rome was progressing and growing. Paul repeatedly rejoiced in all that God was doing. Just as Christ's suffering enabled God's redemptive work for mankind's salvation, Paul saw his troubles as an evil through which God brought the progress of the gospel.

Who or What Robs You of Your Joy?

One measure of spiritual maturity is what it takes to rob you of your joy in Christ. Paul's adverse circumstances actually increased his joy. What might have appeared as a disaster to most of us (arrest, prison, shipwreck, beatings, etc.) actually became opportunities for Paul. We all have problems and issues and have to deal with irritating people, and if we don't watch ourselves they will rob us of our joy in Christ.

Paul gave us a good prescription for keeping our joy. All believers have the Spirit of God indwelling them and working within us to keep our mind straight on the truth. In Romans 8:6, he wrote, "the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace...those who are following the flesh cannot please God...however you (believers) are not in the flesh but in the Spirit". Then in Gal.5:22 he wrote, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness...". We need to always remember that we are new people with a new Master. We are freed from sin and freed from the fear of death, and the life we now live, we live for the Lord.

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