

To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi

Essay 1 in the series “Ode to Joy”

This week we begin a series of essays drawn from Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. This series flows naturally from our reflections on the Beatitudes. Paul, now late in life and under house arrest in Rome, stormy, passionate, controversial Paul, has found his joy. And now in this letter to a church he’s really close to, to a church he trusts and that evidently loves him, he reveals his inner life more than perhaps in any other of his writings. He’s discovered the secret of being content in any and every situation. He’s found that state called beatitude.

At first I wasn’t sure of the right title for this series. For a while, I thought it was “The Secret of Being Content.” But there was another phrase that kept haunting me, no, not haunting me, more like inspiring me. It comes from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, from that great choral finale, the “Ode to Joy,” written by the German poet, playwright and historian Friedrich Schiller in 1785, but best known from Beethoven’s Ninth, and for us as the basic melody for the hymn, “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee.” And so I go with “Ode to Joy” because in essence that’s what Paul is doing in this letter to the Philippians. Philippians is an ode to joy, joy in the Lord. But that’s getting perhaps a bit ahead of ourselves for now.

So I take a step back and set up the background and context of this book. It begins: Paul and Timothy, Timothy perhaps the actual hand that writes the book, servants of Christ Jesus, simply servants, no need for Paul to pull apostolic rank here, not with these people. To all the saints, those set apart by their faith in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers (or bishops) and deacons, the collective leadership of the church, but still just part of the whole, not above it. Grace – the normal Greek greeting – and peace – the normal Hebrew greeting, shalom – now deepened and intensified because it comes from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul loved this church. This church loved Paul. The church had been established by Paul back in AD 49 on his second great mission tour (all this recorded in Acts 16). Paul, Silas and others had arrived there from Troas. The city was named for Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, but in Paul’s day it was a specified Roman colony, settled in large numbers by Roman army veterans. There seems to have been no synagogue there, so on the Sabbath Paul and his entourage went outside the city gate down to the river hoping to find there a place of prayer, and there they found a woman named Lydia, a businesswoman, a dealer in purple cloth from Thyatira, already a worshiper of God. She listened to Paul that day. Her heart opened, and she and the members of her household were baptized.

Ever since then, the church in Philippi had kept in close contact with Paul, often sending him financial aid. And now in the early 60s learning that he is under house arrest in Rome, they’ve sent one of their number, Epaphroditus, with more support. Unfortunately Epaphroditus had become very ill and almost died. And as soon as he recovered Paul sent him back to Philippi presumably carrying this letter with him.

The purpose of the letter is primarily to assure the Philippians that Paul is fine. And the leitmotif of the letter is joy, joy when he prays (1:4-5), joy though others act out of selfish ambition (1:15-18), joy under house arrest knowing that whatever happens will turn out for his deliverance (1:19), joy even though his life is being poured out like a drink offering (2:17). So to the Philippians he writes, "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (3:1; 4:4). So whereas once I would have read this book looking for clues to this doctrine or that doctrine – to the intermediate state of the dead, to the deity of Christ, to matters of church government, whatever – now I read it for the joy.

Here is a man who has found his joy. He's found the state called beatitude. And there is, I believe, a developmental flow to Paul. From stormy controversialist he becomes one who warns against foolish arguments, quarreling about words. And one of the delights of reading Paul is tracking his inner life, tracing the transformation that occurs in him by the grace of God. And so he finds his joy. But, no, that's not quite right either. Because the truth is that the joy was always there in Paul from early in his ministry.

Consider, for instance, his first days in Philippi (now back in Acts 16) – how he and Silas had ended up in jail one night. They'd healed a slave girl, freed her of an evil spirit by which she had foretold people's fortunes, and thereby cut into her owners' hope of making more money off her. The owners had complained to the magistrates, and Paul and Silas are stripped, severely flogged, and thrown into the back cell of the city jail with their feet fastened in stocks.

So night falls, and there Paul and Silas are in jail, in a strange city, languishing. Languishing? No. The other prisoners hear in the dark from the back of the prison talking and then – is it singing? It's around midnight. It's been dark for hours now. And Paul and Silas are praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners are listening, more astonished than annoyed. Here are men – in darkness you could feel, their legs locked in stocks, beaten, battered, caked in blood, singing! Just what is it that has Paul and Silas in prison at midnight singing?

Then, just then, the earth heaves, the prison shakes, the doors fly open and everyone's chains fall off. The jailer wakes and sees that the doors are open and he's horrified. He's probably a crusty old ex-soldier and he knows what happens to jailers whose prisoners escape. He looks into the darkness and at first sees nothing. And he draws his sword to end his own life. But from deep in the prison a voice rings out, Paul's, "Don't do it. We're all here, just singing." They're all there! It says a lot for the moral authority of Paul and Silas that their fellow prisoners stayed too. In any case, the jailer can't believe it. He falls trembling before them and asks, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And he and his family were baptized.

It's an extraordinary story, with layers of meaning and insight. But what matters most, I think, is this: Where does one find the faith, the jazz, the chutzpah, to sing songs in the cold and dark of a prison at midnight? Is there any way you can imagine yourself doing

this? I for one am thrown off by a lot less than this. So here are Paul and Silas in a strange town. They know almost no one, certainly no one with connections. They've just been caned – beaten with rods. They're thrown into jail, into an inner cell: dark, dank, musty, with the smell of body odor and urine. Their feet are fastened in stocks. And at midnight they're praying and singing hymns to God. Where do they find the inner strength? Where do they find the strength to sing songs in the pitch blackness of a prison at midnight?

Where do we find this strength? It all comes down to seeing the world as Paul and Silas saw it – a world lit by resurrection and open to the spirit of God, an enchanted and enchanting world surrounded by grace, filled already with eternity, their own lives now filled to the measure of all the fullness of God, deeply aware of how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, the divine flow all around them and within them, even when persecuted, even in jail around midnight.

So Paul ends up in prison often. He's flogged severely, exposed to death again and again. Three times he's shipwrecked; once he spent a whole night and a day in the open sea. Five times he receives in synagogue the forty lashes minus one. You'd think he'd quit going. Three times he's caned. At Lystra he's stoned, dragged outside the city and left for dead. And he gets up – remember! – and walks back into the city. Over the next two or three years he went back to Lystra at least two more times.

Paul lives radiantly. Because of what he now knows. He knows that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Romans 8:18). He knows that grace reigns (Romans 5:12ff.), that in the end, mercy triumphs over judgment, wildly extravagant, heart-changing mercy. He knows that a new age has begun, that mountains can be moved wherever and whenever grace is lived out. And he knows – he knows this as a fact – that somehow in all things, in absolutely all things, God works for the good of those who love him, that somehow – whether it's clear to us or not – our lives are working out as they should. He knows that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:31-39), not trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or a little deprivation, or danger.

So Paul could live joyfully, radiantly joyfully, radiantly, unshakably joyfully. And in his letter to the Philippians he tells us over and over how and why. And there are moments in this letter that one can almost hear Paul shout out as the male voice does in “Ode to Joy”, “Freude,” in German – in English, “Joy.”

To this we are called. Away from the strange, haunting sadness that afflicts so many. Away from the anguish that has entered the modern soul. Back to enchanted time and space, a world surrounded by grace and eternity, the divine flow all around us and in us, our own lives emptied of self and now filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Back to what Paul and Silas had that night – the faith to sing songs in the pitch blackness of a prison at midnight. Back to what Paul reveals in his Ode to Joy – his letter to the Philippians.

– Dale Pauls