

# Perspective

## Essay 3 in the series “Ode to Joy”

Paul writes his Philippian letter with joy, and that’s amazing. Times were hard for Paul. He’d been arrested in Jerusalem some years earlier, and he’d been caught up in the Roman penal system ever since. When he realized that there would be no justice for him in Palestine, he appealed to Caesar as was his right as a Roman citizen. In due time he was transported on a prison ship to Rome narrowly escaping death by ship wreck. In Rome he was kept under house arrest, but chained to a Roman soldier day and night to prevent his escape. This lasted two years. And it is sometime during this time that Paul writes the Philippian letter. And he does it with joy as we see in Philippians 1:12-18.

Paul is doing great. He wants his friends in Philippi to know that what has happened to him has really served to advance the gospel. He says, in effect: “I have these guards, a new one every four hours, chained to me, and now they all know the gospel. The whole palace guard, the Praetorian Guard, the Emperor’s own elite troops, all know I am in chains for Christ. How else would I have ever broken into the Praetorian Guard? How would I have ever got a hearing from them – except for these chains?” Paul is absolutely convinced that in all things God works for his good. Some doors shut, others open. What looks like a setback opens the way to fantastic new possibilities.

But something else is also going on. Out in the streets of Rome inspired perhaps by Paul’s example brothers (maybe sisters) in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. Even in these dangerous times when Nero sits on the throne – increasingly demented, paranoid, murderous Nero – other believers are fearlessly proclaiming the word of God. Great! Well, except for this. Some are doing it lovingly, out of good will, supportive of Paul. Others, however, are preaching Christ out of envy and rivalry, out of selfish ambition, for their own partisan purposes, even trying to stir up trouble for Paul while he’s in chains. It’s hard to picture exactly who these people were. Maybe they’re doing what they do just to promote themselves, perhaps to increase their standing at Paul’s expense. Maybe on some matter or other they disagree with Paul and now they’re using his house arrest as opportunity to promote their viewpoints, to advance their own influence and prestige.

Now notice Paul’s response. In verse 18 – “But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.” Paul keeps his perspective. In the midst of the chaos, Paul keeps his perspective. He keeps his eyes on the prize, on the big picture. Either way Christ is preached. And the world will learn that the living God is the Savior of all people (1 Timothy 4:10); that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself not counting people’s sins against them (2 Corinthians 5:19); that in God we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28); and that we can be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:19). People everywhere will recognize their oneness with God and with one another. They’ll sense the diving flow all around them and in them. They’ll experience joy, unshakable joy, radiant, unshakable joy. That’s the big picture.

As for the rest, what does it matter? As for all the rest, what does it matter? And I could end here.

But we might miss a lot of everyday application. Beginning with this – finding one’s joy which is your birthright is a matter of keeping one’s perspective. Sometimes when I’m troubled or frustrated or worried, the best thing I can do is step outside at night and look up at the nighttime sky and start thinking “Light-years!” Almost everything I see is light-years away from me – at distances I can’t even fathom. I’ve read that astronomers have recently discovered the most Earth-like worlds yet known out there, a pair of planets that appear capable of supporting life. They’re in the northern constellation Lyra. NASA’s Kepler spacecraft picked them up. I’m not packing yet. They’re 1200 light-years away. But all of this gives me perspective that maybe, just maybe, my little grievances are just that – little.

And often in the dramas of our personal lives we do best to let things unfold in their own way. Or as a wise person once said, “When it starts to rain, let it.” There is a kind of way things naturally unfold in life. When we go against it, we sometimes damage ourselves. We stress ourselves out. We raise our blood pressure. We get angry. We rail against God. We drive ourselves to sex and drink and drugs. And we lose our ordinary joy, the joy we were born to have. It’s highly stressful to fight against everything and everyone in your life that doesn’t fit your idea of what should be happening. You use up tremendous energy. If you can let go, if you can say with Paul, “But what does it matter?”, energy you once used to force things to happen, often unsuccessfully, can be rechanneled to more important things. Let it go. Write it off. And recover your joy.

It is all a matter of perspective. What does it matter? If someone is critical of me, what does it matter? If someone disagrees with me, what does it matter? If someone’s narcissism is out of control, what does it matter? If I don’t get my way on this or that, what does it matter? If I don’t get credit for this or that, what does it matter? Time and time again, what does it matter?

So slowly I am learning some things. I am learning to trust God, and thereby to accept people and situations and circumstances as they occur. I am learning to trust that whatever relationships God has given me in this moment are precisely the ones I need and that need me at this moment in my life. I am learning to trust that whatever resources God has given me are sufficient to see me through whatever I’m facing. I am learning to quit insisting on my way and my point of view, and to relinquish my need to control others. I am learning that when others disappoint me, when they do not love me in the ways I most want to be loved, they may still be loving me in the best way they know how – they have their own way, their own journey. I am learning that things are always coming together and falling apart, and then coming together again and falling apart again, but that often it’s their falling apart that makes way for whatever is new and better. And I am learning that I don’t have to swing at every pitch – that there are some apparent problems I don’t have to fix, that I would do better to simply let unfold in their own way.

Sometimes we get thinking, “If only, if only things could go my way, if God would just give this, this one thing, I’d be O.K.” And then we begin to think, “When, when is God going to come through on this?” When maybe all along God is thinking, “How long, how long until you see that there’s a far bigger perspective here? A far bigger story?”

So we are called to be trustworthy even if others are not, to be kind even if others are rude and insensitive, to do our best even if others seek to tear down all that we are doing. It was never between us and them away. It was always between us and God. And when we finally see this, and fully see this, we will also see that the others are beautiful too and that we have every reason to experience the joy we were born to have.

Do you see then the big picture? That most of what preoccupies us, most of what obsesses us, most of what robs us of our joy, falls in the category of “But what does it matter?” What does it really matter? Shrug it off. Let it go. If we can just stop and look and see, we are on our way back to finding our birthright, our oneness with God and with one another, our sense of divine flow all around and in us, our being filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. We are on our way back to joy.

– Dale Pauls