

A Reason to Live and a Reason to Die

Essay 4 in the series “Ode to Joy”

Paul’s letter to the Philippians is filled with joy, and if we are looking for the foundation to his joy, in Philippians 1:19-26 we hit the mother lode. It begins with Paul saying, “I rejoice over and over. I continually decide for joy,” because he’s convinced that everything that’s happened to him – all the years in prison, now under house arrest in Rome, an impending trial before the maniacal Nero, all of this will turn out for his deliverance or salvation. The word here is “sōtēria,” often rendered “salvation” but with layers of rich every-day meaning. All the bad stuff that happens to Paul, he’s convinced will work out for the best – his deliverance, his salvation. The only thing he worries about is that under these desperate circumstances, when he’s led in before Caesar, surrounded by all the power, pomp and pageantry of Rome, Caesar on his throne with life-and-death power in his hands, he’ll embarrass himself, that in that crucial moment his courage might fail him. He’s not actually worried about life and death.

His only concern is that he’ll have the courage to exalt Christ, to exalt Christ “in his body, whether by life or by death,” that his faith will be evident to all. Everything, for Paul, comes down to advancing the gospel. Now, we don’t get that. After centuries of sectarian squabbling, of doctrinal wrangling, of appealing primarily to people’s fear, we can’t quite imagine how Paul sees reality: a world lit by resurrection and open to the Spirit of God, an enchanted and enchanting world, where grace reigns, where somehow in all things, in absolutely all things, God is working for our good, a world already filled with eternity, where our lives expand and fill to the measure of all the fullness of God, where nothing can separate us from the amazing love of God in Christ.

Let me run over that again! Paul sees a world lit by resurrection. It’s open to the Spirit of God. It’s enchanted and enchanting. Grace reigns. Somehow in absolutely all things God works for our good. All around us already lies eternity. Our lives expand and fill to the measure of all the fullness of God. And nothing can separate us from the amazing love of God in Christ. What’s not to like?

So Paul’s only concern is that when he’s led in before Caesar he’ll have the courage to exalt Christ “in his body, whether by life or death.” And from his perspective it won’t matter much whether Caesar’s verdict is life or death, because in the astonishing twenty-first verse, he gives us as clearly, as simply as possible, in as few words as possible, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” That’s it. That’s what it all comes down to. If he stays alive, he’ll get a lot done. But as for life or death, he’s torn between the two. He desires to depart and be with Christ which is better by far.

Elsewhere Paul will speak of death as sleep (1 Corinthians 15:51-52; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-16), but here in this text Paul is confident that he dies and he’s immediately with Christ. In a dimension where space and time do not work as they do here, “What does it matter?” Paul wants to depart and be with Christ. But he grants that others may still need him, the Philippians may still need him, so he’s actually convinced that this time he’ll live. And then he turns back to joy. All this will happen for the Philippians’

progress and joy in the faith, so that their joy in Christ Jesus will overflow. Our text begins and ends with joy.

Paul is one of those invincible people who have found a reason to live, a why to live. You've heard the saying, "He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how." Nietzsche said that. Never mind. Deeply troubled people get some things right. Where I first came across this great saying was in Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. Viktor Frankl, esteemed Viennese psychiatrist, spent three years at Auschwitz and other Nazi prisons, his wife and his parents having died in the camps. Frankl spent his time trying to figure out how it was that some survived. And it came down, he concluded, to this – that those who had a why to live could bear with almost any how. Paul has found a reason to live which is foundational to the joy that can get you through your darkest days, your hardest challenges, your toughest dilemmas, your deepest disappointments.

But note here that if it were just up to Paul and the choice were life or death, he's hands down in favor of dying. Hands down in favor of dying! And this is in no way suicidal. It's the opposite of suicidal. It's for the joy Paul knows to be in death. For us, most of us, too many of us, death is something to be deeply feared. The writer of Hebrews (in 2:15) tells of how Jesus freed those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. Fear of death is the human dilemma! In the end it may be the one dilemma! For us, this deep primal dread determines almost everything we do. So much that we do we do out of our fear of death, this death anxiety, this fear of personal extinction, or even more this fear of what might happen to us in life after death, as a dark force inside us has led us to see it.

So we gaze at death through Dark Eyes and we see: separation from all that we love, our plans and dreams coming to an end, a dark vision of becoming nothing or worse. And we are overwhelmed with helplessness. And this fear is so horrifying that it seldom remains conscious; we can't handle it, so it's repressed and worked out in some other way like all our very deepest fears. And so this fear thrashes around in the dark recesses of our souls, driving us this way and that – sometimes to places we do not want to go, to do things we don't want to do.

Not Paul. Paul sees it in a very different way. Certain of resurrection and so convinced of God's love that he knows to die is to be with Christ, Paul could get up from a stoning that left him looking dead and walk back into the city. Later he could head for Jerusalem knowing that many there were out to kill him, saying only (in Acts 21:13), "I am ready not only to be bound, but to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." In our text, he could say, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." He writes in 2 Corinthians 4:17 of an eternal glory that far outweighs our light and momentary troubles here. It's this that C.S. Lewis captures so brilliantly in a sermon called "The Weight of Glory": "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

Not Paul. Paul can write his “Ode to Joy,” even in the worst of circumstances (it has nothing to do with circumstances), because he’s absolutely convinced that out there beyond the thin veil of death is an eternal glory that far outweighs anything and everything we experience here. To this joy we are called. For this joy we were born.

We are called to the place we’ve always longed for, to the place we’ve always sung about, to the place to which not only Scripture but all great world literature points because (as Scripture says) God has set eternity in our hearts, to the place that satisfies all those desires which nothing in this world can. But that means joy now, radiant, unshakeable joy now, in a world lit by resurrection and open to the Spirit of God, an enchanted and enchanting world where grace reigns, where somehow in absolutely all things God works for our good, a world in which our lives expand and fill to the measure of all the fullness of God.

– Dale Pauls