

I Shall Rejoice!

Psalm 96:1-13; Philippians 1:12-26

August 15, 1999

“I shall rejoice. For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

“I shall rejoice.” Think with me about how remarkable this is. These are at the same time some of the bravest and some of the most joyful words in the whole Bible. While sitting in prison for his faith, Paul declared, “I shall rejoice.” While awaiting trial for the gospel, Paul declared, “I shall rejoice.” While lesser ministers of faith insufficient to warrant arrest stayed on the outside and ridiculed him, Paul declared, “I shall rejoice.” While the Christians at Philippi and perhaps elsewhere agonized over him and feared for themselves, Paul declared, “I shall rejoice.” Indeed, while anticipating his own execution for the sake of Jesus Christ, Paul declared, “I shall rejoice.” How can this be? What can this mean? What can we learn from this? What can we receive from this? In short, How can we rejoice, too?

To begin to understand Paul’s declaration and his determination to rejoice, we have to look behind the words. Was Paul by nature just a happy sort of fellow? There is no evidence for this, and even if there were, that would be besides the point. We are not talking only about happiness here, we are talking about deep and abiding joy and rejoicing. Was Paul simply an optimist, always believing things would work out well, despite any evidence to the contrary? There is no evidence for this, either. Was Paul simply and profoundly out of touch with reality? Quite the contrary, he had a clear and unflinchingly realistic anticipation of his own execution. So, all of these possible reasons are set aside. We are back to the basic questions: How could Paul rejoice? How can we rejoice?

Take a step back and consider this: the fundamental dynamic of the Christian faith is that the grace of God elicits our gratitude. The overwhelming goodness of God toward us calls forth a response from us. And this response, this grace-inspired gratitude, includes both rejoicing and thanksgiving. I do not see how we could possibly have either one without the other. We exult in and appreciate the gifts of God, and at the same time we know the one to whom our gratitude is due, so we give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Christian life is one of joy and rejoicing, praising God and giving thanks to God.

We see this already in Psalm 96, a wonderful hymn of praise and worship which we read a few minutes ago. This psalm, as many of the psalms, focuses on the power and grace of God evident in creation. It lifts up the works of God and calls upon all people and all nations to make the appropriate responses of praise, song, worship, and rejoicing. The people of God have sung and prayed this psalm together for 3,000 years now, and we are grateful for the privilege of adding our voices to all those which have gone before us in this praise.

As wonderful as that is, the gospel of Jesus Christ carries this a step farther. In Jesus Christ we see the power and grace of God not only for creation and providence but also for salvation from sin and for redemption unto eternal life. In Jesus Christ we learn not only that God made us but also that God calls us his very own. In Jesus Christ we learn not only that God sustains our every breath but also that God reclaims us for himself, that God does battle with and defeats the powers of evil which try to snatch us away, that God can and does claim the victory over sin, death, and evil. In Jesus Christ, we learn the confident cry: If God is for us, who is against us?

Well, it would appear that many are against us. There are hard things in life. There are terrible things in life. There are sad and overwhelming things that come to all of us. Indeed, there are things in the world that would seek to crush and defeat us. But through it all, we hold fast to this: to Christ belongs the victory. Jesus Christ has defeated the powers of sin, death, and evil, and he has done so for us and on our account. And because he won that victory for us and for our benefit, we have good reason for rejoicing.

Paul's situation was even more specific. He was convinced that his particular suffering would honor Christ. "I shall rejoice. For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." It was not at all clear to Paul that he would be delivered from death, but he had good hope that he might be delivered through death. It was not at all clear to him that he would be delivered from trial, but he had good hope that he might be delivered through the trial. For Paul, the final enemies were not the soldiers, the guards, the state, the government, the judges, or even the executioners. The final enemies were sin, death, and evil, which Jesus Christ had already conquered. It would be good to escape death at the hands of the executioners, but it would be even better to face them without betraying the faith, without denying Christ, without turning away, without fear. It would be good to honor Christ not only in the heart, not only in the soul, not only in the mind, not only with words on one's lips, but also and especially with the full

reality of one's body and life. What a calling! What a privilege! Here is the basis of Paul's joy. Here is the foundation. This is what he was standing on. Does it mean anything to us? Can we relate to it at all?

One way to get at this is to ask, What is the consequence of Paul's joy? What is the direction it points? What is the result, the outcome? To what does it lead? For one thing, his great joy leads to great thanksgiving. We have already seen in the opening verses of the letter that Paul writes, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy." Salvation leads to joy, and joy overflows into thanksgiving. So, Paul's joy was not pointless, ill-formed, or diffuse. Instead, Paul's joy was quite specific, pointed, and purposeful. Does our faith and Christian life include such joy as to lead to constant thanksgiving? Would you like for them to do so?

Second, it was Paul's brave prayer that his joy would lead to his courage, courage to face the judge and the executioner, courage to bear the burden of death as had his master before him. We might imagine that joy would lead to light-heartedness or forgetfulness. We might speculate that joy would lead to some kind of escapism. But Paul would have nothing of this. It was his brave prayer, or, as he said, his "eager expectation and hope," that he would not be ashamed but would have good, full courage. This is a powerful, substantial, life-altering joy if it can lead to this courage, if it is worth dying for, if it can convince Paul and even us that a relationship with Jesus Christ is more important than life itself. Is this kind of joy something you would like to have in your life?

Third, on the basis of his joy, Paul arrived at a greater than ever commitment to the ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is remarkable indeed. We might imagine that he would be ready to retire. We might imagine that he would say that enough was enough, that he had preached his share of sermons, that he had started more than his quota of new churches, that he had already written what would become the majority of the New Testament, and that he was sufficiently joyful in all his accomplishments to stop where he was. And indeed, the prospects of leaving this life and living with Jesus loom very large and even attractive for a moment. Paul's honesty here is startling and disarming. But quickly, as Paul thinks about it, he is determined to continue his ministry to the congregation at Philippi. He seeks for them to know and share the joy he already has. He wants them to grow in the faith. He yearns for them to glory in Jesus Christ. He wants them to be ready for the massed onslaught of the soldiers, the guards, the judges, and the executioners. Can he help make us ready yet today?

It should be clear to all by now that Paul's faith, joy, and letter are signs of his mature Christianity. These are not the writings of a new convert. These are not the poetry of the newly forgiven. This was not the first time he had faced severe and

even life-threatening suffering. It is one thing to be forgiven, converted, and justified. But that is not the goal or the end of the Christian life. That is only the beginning. The purpose of justification is to initiate sanctification. The conversion away from sin and toward God is meant to begin a movement of life toward God. We are forgiven in order that we might be made holy. And this is the proper aim, goal, and pursuit of human life. The pursuit of happiness may well turn to dust. But the pursuit of holiness is what God intends for each of us, what God desires for each of us, and what God has provided for for each of us.

The beginning is important. It is not possible for us to become holy without forgiveness. It is not possible for us to journey toward God until we have been pointed in the right direction. No efforts of the self can overcome our self-centeredness; that can be done only by the power of God working over us to reclaim us as God's own. And yet, the beginning is only the beginning. To stop there would be fatal. We are to move, learn, grow, mature, rejoice, give thanks, bear witness, and, yes, even suffer when called upon to do so. Part of what we do here at church is help people make good beginnings. But part of what we do here at church is also to help people make a good journey, to live a lifetime of growing in the faith.

So, how does the mature faith, joy, thanksgiving, courage, and ministry of Paul speak to us yet today? As was the gospel of Jesus Christ for Paul, so is it for us, too. We, too, have been delivered from the powers of sin, death, and evil by the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. We, too, face the challenges of a hostile world. So should the journey from the beginning to the end of the Christian life have some of the same shape and components for us.

As the gospel led to joy and joy led to thanksgiving for Paul, so can it do the same for us. When we have heard and known and believed and received the gospel of Jesus Christ, we can do no other than rejoice and give thanks. As surely as God's grace elicits our gratitude, lives without joy or thanksgiving are sure indicators of never having heard the gospel. There is no room in the Christian life for sourness, dourness, contempt, or ingratitude. Those are incompatible with what we are about. I invite and urge us all, instead, to great joy and thanksgiving, to great rejoicing and gratitude, to deep and overflowing hearts of good will and deeds of generosity.

Moreover, as Paul built upon his determination to rejoice and moved up to a brave prayer for courage, so can we seek and find courage for the living of our lives, for keeping the faith, for facing the ridicule of the unbelieving world, for standing up to the onslaughts of those who know nothing of joy, thanksgiving, or generosity. It has been said that we live in a secular world, where the great events of history, the first cry of a new baby, the movement of the galaxies, and the workings of subatomic particles are all explained without any reference to God. At some levels, and to the extent that such explanations are attempted, that is true. But in other

ways, we live not in a secular world but in a pagan world. It is not so much the case that people do not worship as it is that they worship many, many things and powers, forces and vitalities, movements and ideologies, people and ideas. It is a wild and dangerous world in which we live, where alien faiths compete vigorously for the heart, soul, mind, and strength of humanity, one person at a time. God grant us the courage to stand and thereby to engage the battle.

Finally, just as joy led Paul into ever greater ministry, so may joy lead us not only to thanksgiving and courage but also to an ever greater and mutual ministry. As we grow in grace and joy, we are not led away from the church into any individual or private ecstasy. Instead, we are led ever more surely and firmly into the full life and mission of the church, participating in its worship, study, mission, fellowship, offerings, service, work, care, and mutual commitment to each other. As Paul writes, "Convinced of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith." The gospel naturally leads pastor and congregation ever closer and closer together. He had already written of and to them, "I hold you in my heart." Now, he wants even more. He wants it because the gospel of Jesus Christ provides for it. He wants it for the Philippians and himself. So, it is right for us to want, seek, expect, work toward, and yearn for it for this church and this pastor, too. The gospel of Jesus Christ provides for that something more, that ever increasing closeness, that mutual Christian love which challenges even the power of death, and we dare not neglect, ridicule, belittle, or scorn that wonderful gift.

Once again, I take Paul's words as my own and add my concurring voice to his, for his determination to rejoice is meant to be our own. "I shall rejoice. For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored."

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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