

Be Glad and Rejoice

Psalm 98:1-9; Philippians 2:17-3:1a

August 29, 1999

“Even if I am to be poured as a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.... Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord.” We must be clear about what is going on here. Paul is talking about his death: “I am glad.” He is talking about his impending death by means of execution at the hands of the Roman Empire: “I am glad and rejoice with you all.” He is talking about his being executed not for any crime but solely for his faith in Jesus Christ: “I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.” This is not what we would expect from someone on death row or even simply awaiting trial.

There are three possibilities to account for this. The first is that Paul is stark raving mad. Maybe he has completely lost touch with reality. Maybe he has no comprehension of the reality and finality of death. Maybe he has cracked under the pressure of prison, so that his responses are exactly the opposite of what we would expect. However, there is no evidence for any of this. He has been well educated in both philosophy and religion, he has led a full and productive life, he has traveled across the Empire, he has maintained an extensive correspondence across the Empire, and his correspondence exhibits not only intelligence but also lucidity. Despite the shocking and jarring character of today’s reading, there is no evidence that he is mad.

If he is not mad, a second possibility to account for his professed gladness and rejoicing is that Paul is lying. Maybe he is not glad or rejoicing at all. Maybe he is just pretending. Maybe he is just putting on a good front. Maybe it is his intent to deceive the Philippians and so us in turn. Maybe it is his devious plan to misinform and mislead. However, there is no evidence for any of this, either. What he professes here is perfectly coherent with what he professes in the rest of this letter and in all the rest of his writings. His faith is not different in the proximity of death from what it has been in most of his adult life. Moreover, there is nothing he stands to gain by lying. It will not help him escape. It will not make him wealthy. It will not put him ahead in life. In fact, it may even anger his captors and make his situation worse. So, despite the magnitude of his claims about gladness and rejoicing, there is no evidence that he is lying.

Now, if he is not mad, and if he is not lying, there is a third possibility to account for his gladness and rejoicing. The third possibility is that Paul has

encountered something, or more particularly that he has met someone, who is so amazing, so divine, so captivating, so life giving, so enthralling, so loving, so commanding, so everything good and wonderful that he is more dear than life itself. Can you imagine? This is the one possibility left. If Paul is not mad, and if Paul is not lying, the third possibility is that he is telling the truth. Maybe he is glad and rejoicing even in the very face of death. Maybe he is glad and rejoicing even in the prospects of execution. And if he is, it is only because he has met someone not only larger than life but also larger than death, he has met someone in whom he believes with every fiber of his being, he has met someone who loves him to the end and whom he loves with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind, and with all his strength. Paul is telling the truth when he shares his remarkable capacity to rejoice in the face of all things, because he has met his Savior. And his Savior's name is Jesus Christ. Would he be of interest to you?

You see, Jesus Christ had also been persecuted for his faith. Jesus Christ had also been arrested for no crime at all. Jesus Christ had also been falsely convicted. Jesus Christ had also been executed for his faith in God Almighty. The casual observer might have thought at first that the persecution, arrest, conviction, and execution of Jesus Christ demonstrated the errors of his ways, the failure of his faith, and the end of everything he stood for. But such a casual observer would have been wrong. The persecution of Jesus Christ did not prove that he was wrong but that he was right, for so had they treated the prophets of God who came before him. The arrest of Jesus Christ did not prove that he was wrong but that he was right, for he stood against the wrong headed religious establishment of the day. The conviction of Jesus Christ did not prove that he was wrong but that he was right, for he lived by a higher righteousness than the law and order of the Roman Empire. And the crucifixion of Jesus Christ did not prove that he was wrong but that he was right, for under these horrible and most extreme circumstances the Empire could not break him, and so instead he broke the power not only of the Empire but also and even more of sin, death, and evil. He won the day and the universe.

This is why Paul is able to be glad and rejoice. It is not simply that his life was to some extent following the pattern of that of Jesus. It is that because his life was to some extent following the pattern of that of Jesus, it was confirming the truth and validity and power of the gospel. Can you see what I am saying? The casual observer would have thought that the decline and demise of Jesus Christ would have disproved his preaching and teaching, but the casual observer would have been wrong. The same sort of casual observer would have thought that the decline and demise of Paul would have disproved his preaching and teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but that casual observer would have been wrong, too. Why? Because that is the way the gospel works.

If Paul had recanted, if Paul had denied Jesus Christ, if Paul had abandoned the faith and forsaken the gospel, he would have saved his neck and gotten out alive, but he also would have proven that his faith was a sham, and not only that but also that all of his teachings were false, that he had no Savior, and that the one whom he had encountered had not ever quite, all the way, deep down, convinced him, or converted him, or reclaimed him as his own. As good and even as important as it would have been for the Philippians to have seen him alive again and to have heard him preach and teach again, and to have learned and grown more, it would not have been worth that price. That price would have destroyed their faith and perhaps the whole Christian faith.

If Paul had never had faith sufficiently like that of Christ's to be persecuted himself, he would not have been a real believer, let alone a teacher, preacher, and evangelist. If Paul had never had faith sufficiently like Christ's to be arrested himself, he would not have been preaching the gospel that had been delivered to him. If Paul had never had faith sufficiently like Christ's to risk suffering a similar false conviction, he would not have had a message convincing to his hearers. If Paul had never had faith sufficiently like Christ's to make him similarly brave in the face of death, he would have had no faith worth the name at all. And the only way to know and test any of this is in the face of death.

It all comes down to this. Paul had a legitimate concern that his persecution, arrest, and possible conviction and execution would not only scare the Philippians but also would scandalize them. He was concerned not only that they would be sad for him and fear for their own lives, but also, and much more importantly, that they would abandon the faith. It would be too easy to say that if God really loved Paul, he would have protected and saved him. It would be too easy to say that if God were really in control of things, he would not have let this happen. It would be too easy to say that if the gospel of Jesus Christ were true, Paul would still be alive and preaching it. It would have been too easy to have said all of this and more, and very understandable, but it would have been all wrong.

It was the purpose of Paul's writing to stand all these casual observations on their heads and so to demonstrate both the truth and the power of the gospel. If Paul had been able to live the easy life, that might have demonstrated the veracity of the gospel of prosperity, but not of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Moreover, if Paul had chosen to flee his persecutors, that would have saved his life but jettisoned his faith. The only way for him to confirm the gospel was for him to stand and fall with Christ, and that is what he was doing. If the victory of Christ could give Paul the courage to face even the final enemy, death, then the gospel of Christ was true, and in that he could be glad and rejoice. Moreover, if he did stand and fall with Christ, that would demonstrate to the Philippians that the gospel was true. Yes, of course,

at one level they would mourn the loss of their pastor, the one who had first taught them the love of God and preached to them the gospel of Jesus Christ, but in and through and beyond that sorrow they would believe and know that everything he said and stood for was true, and in that they could rejoice and be glad.

Paul told them that the love of God was greater than the power of death, and his willing death would prove that. He told them that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was for the forgiveness of their sins, and his willing death would demonstrate his own confidence in that. He told them that the love of God in Jesus Christ could grab hold of their hearts and souls, turn their lives around, and mean more to them than race, money, nation, Empire, ethnicity, education, gender, status, the Roman gods, the demons, or anything else in all of creation, and his willing death would demonstrate that the love of God had in fact set him free from all those harsh masters and had claimed Paul as his very own. And if it were true for Paul, it was true for them. That is why he told them to be glad and rejoice. And if it was true for them, it is true for us today. Are you interested?

Do you have harsh masters driving your life? Does self-interest distort your every decision? Do fear and confusion cripple you? Do anxiety and depression eat away at you? Do greed and lust corrupt you? Do money and power entice you? Have sin, death, and evil ganged up on you to claim you as their own? I submit to you the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who lived with us to be with us, who died for us to forgive us of our sin, and who now lives eternally so that we might live with him. And if the single, solitary cross of Jesus Christ is not sufficient to convince you of the validity of the faith, I add to that the secondary witness of the Apostle Paul, whose own gladness and joy in the face of willing death confirms the truth and the reality of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And I add to that the tertiary witness of the Philippians, whom Paul also told to be glad and rejoice in the witness of his death, and who obviously did so at least enough to preserve this letter for you and me to read. If they had not believed it, and if they had not had good reason to believe it, they would not have passed it on. Now it is our turn to believe and to be glad and rejoice.

Friends, believe the good news of the gospel: “Even if I am to be poured as a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.... Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord.”

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

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