

# **PREACHING THROUGH PHILIPPIANS**

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# I Hold You in My Heart

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Philippians 1:1-11

August 8, 1999

“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel thus about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.”

What a wonderful expression of the joy of the Christian faith and life and especially of the way that the grace of God leads to such heartfelt love between a pastor and a congregation! The Apostle Paul writes to all the saints at Philippi, to all the members of the first church he started in Europe, “I hold you in my heart.” He had been away, and now he was in prison, but it was of them that he was thinking. He had been arrested, not for any crime but for the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and yet it was for and about them that he was praying. “I hold you in my heart.” This is not only a profession of love. This is also a profession of faith and a proclamation of the gospel. It communicates that good news because it is the result of that good news which we hear yet today.

All of us here today and all who join us by way of radio know too well that vast misery of the human race marked by broken hearts, empty hearts, and forgotten hearts. We all know too well the pain of loneliness, contempt, hatred, and neglect. We know too well the far reaching gone-wrongness of human life that infects and affects everything we do, for it is not only attested to by scripture, it is not only the subject of the great literature of the world, it is not only the stuff of the history of the rise and fall of many nations and empires, and it not only runs through the dark side of the history of the church, but it is also the story of our own lives. It is also the truth of our own being and history. It is the reality of our own past and, far more than it should be, of our present. It is the stuff with which we deal and struggle day in and day out. What great joy and wonder this is, that Paul could and did write words we all need and yearn to hear, “I hold you in my heart.”

Even he sensed that this needs some explanation, some accounting for, something to help us understand it. No sooner did Paul write, “I hold you in my heart,” than did he add, “for you are all partakers with me of grace.” He and they, you and I, have all received the grace of God almighty in Jesus Christ our Lord,

reclaiming us as his own, forgiving our sin, cleansing us of all unrighteousness, regathering us from our lostness, healing our brokenness, reconstituting community, overcoming alienation, and replacing estrangement with love. That is, Paul could hold the Philippians in his heart because—and only because—God was holding both him and them in the very heart of God.

And so God is holding us in the heart of God today. God holds us dear, you and me. God holds us close, not just Paul and the Philippians. God loves not only the stranger far away, whose name we do not know—yes, that is true, too—, God loves not only those who appear to, and whom we assume to, have everything together so much more than we do, and God loves not only the great and mighty, but God loves also you and me. And so it is that Paul could and did hold the Philippians in his heart. And so it is that you and I can and do hold each other in our hearts.

The love which we need we cannot achieve. The community we seek we cannot accomplish. The goal for which we were created eludes our every effort. We cannot love each other as we ought because we love ourselves too much instead. And yet, by the grace of God, Jesus Christ has captured our hearts and souls and minds and attentions, drawing us away from ourselves and toward him. Jesus Christ suffered to alleviate our suffering, he died so that we might be forgiven, and he was raised from the dead so that we, too, might live forever. How could Paul possibly have held the Philippians in his heart so long as his heart was full of himself? But when Christ drew Paul's heart out of himself and to the cross, both to be held and so to hold, there he found room for all the world.

Is your heart cramped? Is it small and tiny, hard and shriveled up, with no room for anything or anyone else? Does it need stretching and expanding? Does it need cleansing and renewing? Or is your heart broken, aching, hurting, smashed and torn beyond all human mending? Do you remember those who remember you? Are you, perhaps, forgotten by those whom you remember? Come to the cross of Jesus Christ. There you will see the heart of God breaking so that ours might be healed. There you will see the heart of Jesus Christ pouring out so that ours might be filled. There you will find grace, mercy, and peace such as the world has never known. There you will hear again the voice of God saying, "I will be their God, and they shall be my people." There God holds us in the heart of God, so that we might hold each other in our hearts.

That ancient promise has been fulfilled many times over. Now it is our turn. Now it is time for the old covenant to be made new in us. Now it is time for us to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, and hearing, so to believe, and believing, so to obey, and obeying, so to share the gospel with others.

Many things distract us. It is easy to believe that our deepest problems are financial, or political, or social, or medical, or racial, or something else. If that were the case, we could solve our problems with more money, better politics, a better society, better medicine, and racial harmony. But our deepest problem is theological. Our deepest problem is a problem of the heart, a problem of the brokenness of our relationship with God and so with each other. And this is a problem we cannot solve, a disease we cannot heal, a condition which we cannot set right. But here is the answer: God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. God provides for the love of God, working in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to take away our cold, hard hearts of stone and to replace them with living hearts, loving hearts, hearts that can and do work properly both to love God and so to love each other.

So it is that Paul was not bragging about how good he was. Paul was not exaggerating about his love for the Philippians. Instead, Paul was reiterating the content and the implications of the gospel which he had preached so many times before, the gospel by which and in which he believed and to which he had borne faithful witness, the gospel so well received by the Philippians, the gospel for which he was arrested and for which he was ready and willing even to die.

And if that were not hard enough, he knew that the Philippians, too, might soon die for their faith, the Christian faith. The Roman Empire would not long tolerate those who did not worship the state and the Emperors, who did not ascribe all power and glory to the Empire, who did not believe and obey the government. It was bad enough that Paul's imprisonment and suffering may have scared and scandalized the Philippians, making them question not only Paul but even Christ. If Roman guards held Paul in prison, maybe the gods of Rome were stronger than the God and Father of Jesus Christ. Seeing him suffer from a distance was bad enough. What would they do when the guards came after them?

Paul's confidence was not in the Philippians, but in the God who had made them and saved them. "I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." He believed in the perseverance of the saints not because of the saints but because God would provide for the preservation of the saints. Their first faith was not their own accomplishment but the work and gift of God. So would their final faith be not their own accomplishment but the gift of God to them and the work of God in them. God would not abandon them. God had not brought them this far only to desert them. No, God would see them through, even if it meant arrest and martyrdom. God would bring them safely home.

We in the church yet today would do well to follow Paul's lead here. We would do well not to place either our confidence or the lack thereof in the church, in the pastors, in the elders, in the deacons, in the congregation, in the presbytery, in

the General Assembly, or in any other part or component of the church. Instead, we believe in God. We trust in God. And so we place our confidence in God, in God's good will and plan for us, and in God's good work in and for us, already well begun though not yet completed. To do otherwise would be to guarantee disappointment. This is not to say that we should not work hard and strive to be obedient both in the unity of the church and in the mission of the church. But it is to say that we know the one who made us, we know the one who saves us, and we know the one to whom our gratitude is due.

Lest this confidence in God seem unjustified, Paul justifies it by his holding of the Philippians in his heart, which, as we have already seen, can only be the direct result of the grace of God. This, for him, was proof of the work of God. And the Philippians were all partakers with him of grace, he writes, not, as we might expect, in some grand and glorious ways. Instead, Paul writes, "you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel." His was a remarkable faith and intellect, that could both believe and understand that his being locked in prison was by the grace of God! I think most of us would take it the other way. But he knew that God had put him there for a reason, so that it would work not to the shame or diminishment of the gospel but for the proclamation and advance of the gospel.

And the church at Philippi shared Paul's imprisonment with him by holding him in their hearts and prayers. They shared it with him by giving him gifts. And they shared it with him by defending and confirming the gospel. Had Paul been attacked for his preaching? So had Jesus been attacked for his preaching. Had Paul been arrested for his faith? So had Jesus Christ been arrested for his faith. Would Paul be executed for the gospel? So had Jesus Christ been executed for the gospel. Would death be the final end of Paul? Jesus Christ has been resurrected, raised to a new and different life as the first fruits of a promised large harvest of resurrection. Did all that Paul was suffering in any way count against, negate, or invalidate the gospel? No, not at all! Given what Christ had suffered, how could those who would follow him expect any better? Apparently the Philippians were sharing in the hard work of defending and confirming the gospel of Jesus Christ, in the face of the hard and shameful reality of Paul being in prison, and Paul regarded this as sharing in the grace of God.

Paul speaks very highly of the Philippians and so does them great honor. Of course, he was not merely reporting on what had already been or even reflecting what then currently was the case. He was also encouraging them for the hard days yet ahead. He was telling a great truth in order to help them to live up to it. And the grace of God has been working through his words to help the church ever since.

## **I Hold You in My Heart**

What a wonderful expression of the joy of the Christian faith and life and especially of the way that the grace of God leads to such heartfelt love between a pastor and a congregation! Paul writes to all the saints at Philippi, “I hold you in my heart.” He had been away, and now he was in prison, but it was of them that he was thinking more than himself. He had been arrested, not for any crime but for the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and yet it was for and about them that he was praying. “I hold you in my heart.” This is not only a profession of his great love. This is also a profession of faith and a proclamation of the gospel. It communicates that good news because it is the direct result of that same good news which we hear yet today.

So, as your pastor, I dare to take Paul’s joyful words as my own, or perhaps I should say that I add my concurring voice to his, and, though I am not in prison, I joyfully say to you all as I return to the pulpit today: “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel thus about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.”

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

# 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.*

# Every Knee Should Bow

Isaiah 52:13–53:12; Philippians 1:27–2:16

August 22, 1999

“Christ Jesus... though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Have you ever been caught in a downward spiral? Round and round everything goes, faster and faster, until you hit the bottom. This might be true of an airplane, or of your finances, of your relationships, your feelings, or of life itself. There is a helplessness about this from which we would prefer to escape, and sometimes we can escape, but often we cannot. Life is hard. We know that all too well. And this reality makes today's reading all the more remarkable.

These few verses provide a summary of the gospel of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And it starts with Jesus Christ willingly stepping into the downward spiral that is human life, or which at least characterizes so much of human life. It starts with Jesus Christ willingly stepping into that downward spiral, setting aside all the prerogatives of heaven, relinquishing all the privileges of divinity, disdaining any special treatment, declining to exploit his position as the Son of God, and refusing the ease of the life of glory. Though he was in the form of God, he emptied himself of all power, strength, eternity, dignity, and honor. He deigned to take on instead all the weakness, finitude, and humility of a slave. He became one of us, sharing the vulnerabilities and vicissitudes of human life.

And as if that were not enough, as if it were not grace beyond all imagining that Christ should be with us, he humbled himself even further, being obedient to God unto death. How is it that obedience requires death? Because death is the final test. It is easy to be obedient on the good days. The question is, What happens when the pressure is on? What happens when all the world is against us? Whom shall we obey then? It is not that God required death but that Christ proved his obedience under the most extreme, the most severe, indeed, the ultimate circumstances. He refused to quit believing, even when it seemed that God had forsaken him. He refused to quit loving, even when all those about him hated him and executed him. He refused to curse God or his persecutors.

You see, even at the bottom of the downward spiral, Jesus did not fail us, or fail God. If he had hated those who hated him, it all would have been over. Hatred would have won. If he had cursed those who cursed him, it all would have been over. Evil would have won. If he had quit believing in and obeying God, it all would have been over. Sin would have won. If he had grasped hungrily after this life, calling for the angels to take him down from the cross, it all would have been over. Death would have won. But he refused to exploit his position. He suffered all that we suffer and more, allowing it to pour over him and do its worst, even killing him, but it did not break him. He was obedient unto death. And he did that for you and me.

Interestingly enough, no mention is made here of burial, though that is clearly implied by his death. For that matter, no mention is made of the resurrection, though that is clearly implied by the universal acknowledgment of his lordship. What happens instead is the immediate and jarring juxtaposition of his execution and his exaltation, his gory death and his glory in heaven.

And that, in the greatest challenge to the way we think, to what we value, and to all that we hold dear, is what Paul is doing here. At the end of this downward spiral, from heaven to earth, from divinity to humanity, from master to slave, from life to death, at the end of this downward spiral and at the beginning of exaltation, at the beginning of the return from earth to heaven, at the beginning of the restoration from death to life, at the beginning of the rescue from ignominy to glory, right there in the middle of the whole thing, the center of all time, the hinge upon which the ages turn, there stands the cross. Oh, the horror and the shame! There stands the cross. There stands the most awful, gruesome, shameful, low-down means of execution and death. Everything in the work and ministry of Jesus Christ, everything in the life of the universe, comes together at this point.

There is some thought that verses six through eleven are poetic in their rhythm and structure. If this is the case, they may form all or part of an ancient Christian hymn. Even in this first generation Christian letter, he may be quoting what was already an old favorite hymn of the Philippians to make his point. There is only one problem with this, one piece that does not fit into the poem, right here in the middle, the phrase “even death on a cross.” It appears that Paul may have added this for emphasis, daring to name the terrible name of the hated and dreaded Roman instrument of death, the very cross which he and the Philippians were likely facing themselves. And his naming it does two things.

First of all, Paul takes the old juxtaposition of the death and exaltation of Jesus Christ and holds it even closer together into the one and single moment and reality of the cross. Jesus did not die in bed of old age. He died as a young man on the cross. Jesus did not die a noble death. He was executed on a garbage heap

outside Jerusalem. And yet, because he was obedient to the end, because they did not break him, because he chose to believe in God rather than not to believe in God, his death on the cross was a moment of glory. As Paul holds this together for us to see, his humility and humiliation was his glory, his obedience was his victory, his weakness was his strength, his suffering was his greatest gift, and by his dying he conquered death. His whole ministry is concentrated into this single moment of weakness, shame, horror, and death. And yet, in a way just the opposite of the way we would normally think of things, Paul holds this together for us so that we may see that the cross of Jesus Christ has become his throne from which he rules the universe.

Second, for Paul to hold this all together so tightly also helps make him and the Philippians brave for what lies ahead. “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict which you saw and now hear to be mine.” Can you imagine that? It is likely that Paul was crucified like Jesus. It is likely that some of the Philippians were crucified, too. They had to know what was coming to them. Others may have been fed to the lions in the coliseum, for the amusement of the drunken and blood-thirsty masses. So it is not only the case that Jesus came to share our life and death, but also that we can share his life and death. Let me say that again: it is not only the case that Jesus came to share our life and death, but also that we can share his life and death. If the meaninglessness of his crucifixion can make sense, and it does, then the meaninglessness of our own lives and our own deaths can make sense.

This is not a problem limited to the first century. The struggle for meaning in life just as intense and maybe even more so today. Can the words of Paul about the cross of Jesus Christ still speak to us today? Can they still give us faith and courage today? Can they still make us brave to face the terrors of attack, the cruel sting of hatred, and the massed onslaught of sin, death, and evil? I think they can. In fact, I think the gospel of Jesus Christ alone can give us the faith, hope, and courage we need for the living of our lives and the dying of our deaths.

Now, once we hear the word of the cross, once that hinge swings, once that center is revealed, everything changes. Instead of a downward spiral, everything is going up. Yes, Jesus was exalted in his faithful death on the cross, but that was not all of his exaltation. Yes, Jesus willingly stepped into the downward spiral of human life to be with us, but now God has raised him up so that we might be with him. The Lord God Almighty, who revealed himself to Moses as “I Am Who I Am,” and of whom the single most important verse of the Old Testament says, “The LORD our God, the LORD is one,” God bestows on Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the highest name of all, his own name of “Lord,” so that at the simple name of Jesus of

Nazareth “every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

This is our future. This is our goal. This is the purpose of our lives. One day, everyone will know that Jesus Christ is Lord. One day, everyone will admit that Jesus Christ is Lord. One day, every knee shall bow in recognition and worship of Jesus Christ as Lord. One day, every tongue in the universe will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. And what a glorious day that will be! But why wait? We know the truth now. We have heard the good news already. We have named the name here today. So why wait? We can align our lives and our worship and our being with the direction, the movement, and the ultimate destination of the universe right now. Why swim against the stream? Why waste another moment on anything else, anything less, anything other than the true Lord and Savior?

In a few moments, a young lady who has traveled around the world to get here is going to make a reaffirmation of her faith. This acknowledges that she has made an initial profession of faith before, in Korea, where her father is a Presbyterian minister. But it also brings to us the gift of hearing someone say out loud again that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. As she does this, I invite all of us here and all who are listening to the radio to join her in reaffirming our own faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that...you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel....If there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus....Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.”

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

# 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.*

# The Upward Call of God

Ecclesiastes 9:11-12, Philippians 3:1-21

September 13, 1998

“One thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” For several weeks, in my prayers and preparations for this Sunday, these words have been impressed upon my heart and soul: “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.” The image is of a runner not wanting to lose even a fraction of a second by looking back where he has already been, or checking on the competition, but instead focusing on the goal, the finish line, the victory, and the prize. And to think that the Apostle Paul used this dynamic language while locked in prison and awaiting trial and likely execution for proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul set aside all that he had suffered and all that he had accomplished, and he was sustained by looking ahead to the glory of salvation: “the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” He writes this not only for himself, but also for the Philippians and so for us: “Let those of us who are mature be thus minded.”

How much there is that lies behind, and so how much there is to forget! Most of us think of this in highly personal terms: the follies of misspent youth and lost opportunities; the hurt we have caused to the ones we love and who, inexplicably, love us; the help we have not extended to those in need. The old prayer of confession puts it well: “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.” At least part of what the gospel of Jesus Christ means is that even though we cannot undo the past, even though we cannot make up for the past, even though we cannot escape the past on our own, Jesus Christ can and has forgiven our sin, taken away our guilt, and restored us to good relationship with God our Father. That is a wonderful and glorious part of the gospel for which I am eternally grateful, but it is not at all what Paul is talking about here. He talks about forgiveness of sin at many other places, and nothing he says here contradicts or denies it, but that is not what he is talking about here.

How much there is that lies behind, and so how much there is to forget! What Paul is talking about here is what appears to be otherwise justifiable self-righteousness! “If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a

persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless.” The problem being dealt with here is not how bad Paul was but how good he was. The problem being dealt with here is not Paul the miserable sinner but Paul the upright citizen and thoroughly religious, spiritual person. And so the problem is not only that our worst is so terribly bad, as we are all so keenly aware, but also that our very best is nowhere nearly good enough. And that may hurt even more.

It is bad enough that our filthy, stinking sins need to be forgiven. We know that. It is even worse that our filthy, stinking righteousness is not much better. That really hurts. Oh, of course, there are vital and dramatic differences between doing good and doing evil. We all know that. We want to preserve that. We want to discourage evil and encourage good. That should go without saying, but it does not, so we say it often. But today what we are saying is something different. It is not enough to be good. It is not even enough to do good. We want to be good and to do good, and maybe some days by the grace of God we succeed in small and partial ways. But that is not the point. Even our very best, our most religious, our most highly spiritual does not gain us access to Jesus Christ. Therein lies the problem.

What is there to do? Paul says, “Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.” That is, Paul not only threw out the garbage in his life, which of course had to be done, but also he threw out the treasures in his life and counted them as garbage. Now, that is hard to do. How is that possible? Only by comparison with Jesus Christ. Only by comparison with Jesus Christ does everything else fade into insignificance, waste, and burden. Are you the most wonderful person who has ever lived? Would you like to hang onto that, or would you like to meet Jesus Christ? Are you the richest person who has ever lived? Would you like to cling to that, or would you like to meet Jesus Christ? Are you the smartest person who has ever lived? Would you like to keep believing that, or would you like to meet Jesus Christ? None of this is to say that there are not wonderful, rich, smart people in the world, or in Philippi, or in this room, or in our radio audience. None of this is even to say that those things are not nice or even good in and of themselves. It is not to say that they cannot be put to good use. But the point is, what is most important? What are our priorities? Do we want to cling to all of our self-righteousness, which today we might call self-importance or high self-esteem, or do we want to meet, to get to know and to follow and to obey the Son of God, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior? We cannot have it both ways. Choose one or the other. The problem of the human condition cannot be

helped by increasing self-esteem. Paul says to throw out the trash and go with Christ. Do not even look back at how wonderful you think you have been, just go with Christ.

We must understand what Paul means by all of this. He says that the purpose of counting the treasures as garbage is so “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” Life had been good on the outside. Paul was a preacher and a scholar. He made tents and started churches. Oh, there was the occasional stoning and misunderstanding. But he was traveling the best cities of the known world, preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Now, he was in prison. He was awaiting trial. Life was hard, and he would probably be executed. What did it all mean? Was the gospel wrong? Was he being punished for his sins? Had he dedicated his life to the wrong cause? Did all of this contradict and falsify the gospel? No, Paul was being carried forward to the next stage, the next level, the next place in the Christian life. Once he had preached the suffering of Christ, now he lived and shared the suffering of Christ. Once he had preached the death of Christ, now he anticipated his own death as a becoming like Christ in death. The fact that the leading preacher of the gospel in their day was locked in prison should not scandalize the Philippians or cause them to lose their faith, but instead should verify the gospel and confirm their faith. If everything had been going well for Paul, they would have had to have asked what he possibly could have known about the sufferings of Christ. But the fact that he wrote from prison meant that he knew whereof he spoke. The fact that he did not miss what had gone before meant that he appreciated what he had been given in Christ. The fact that he cared more about them than about himself meant that he knew something about the love of God. The fact that this letter is the letter of joy meant that he somehow already anticipated the glorious resurrection of Christ as the promise of his own. All of this confirmed the gospel. It gave proof and power to what he said. Christ had not forgotten Paul. Christ was doing Paul the honor of allowing Paul to share in his life, his sufferings, his death, and therefore his resurrection. As Paul writes, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” That is the key to it all: not what Paul did or owned, but who owned Paul.

Can you imagine what all this meant to those who first read it? Some little house church in Philippi received this letter from prison, in full expectation of persecution for their own faith, and they were made bold to face the soldiers of the Roman Empire and the gladiators and lions of the coliseum. They would rather give up the dearness of all they held dear than to go through life without Christ. They would rather give up life itself than go to death without Christ. The preaching of the

gospel of Jesus Christ always arouses enemies of the gospel and therefore of those who believe in the gospel. This disappoints us, but it should never surprise us. It has always been so. People reject the gospel. Some cling to their sin. Some cling to their self-righteousness and self-importance. And they attack the proclamation of the gospel, even from inside the church. “If in anything you are otherwise minded, God will reveal that also. . . . Many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.” But some who hear the gospel are moved to believe and to obey. Some are made brave and bold to cling to the cross and to suffer what may come. “Our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself.” Does the gospel of Jesus Christ have the same effect on us?

“One thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” Paul is forgetting not only his sin which has been forgiven but also all of his self-worth, all of his accomplishments, and all of his religiosity. We need to be clear that he does not forget, and does not encourage us to forget, the history of the goodness and grace of God. He does not forget, and does not encourage us to forget, the history of the people of God. He does not forget, and does not encourage us to forget, the scriptures as the revelation of the word of God. Most of all, he does not forget, and does not encourage us to forget, Jesus Christ the Son of God. All of these things from the past help us to know who we are, what we are about, and, most importantly, where we are going, what the goal is toward which we are striving. We spend a great deal of time and effort here at church rightly trying to learn and remember scripture, grace, faith, and history. That is at least part of the reason that we read and preach from the scripture each week, and why we installed all of these Sunday School teachers today for a massive educational program. What Paul does forget is his plausible claim to self-importance, and we would do well to do the same.

As Paul writes, “Brethren, join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us.” Most of us will want to apply today’s reading in our own personal lives. There is much both good and bad that needs to be forgotten and left behind. You know better than I what these are. Can we do this in our own lives?

At the same time, this is a wonderful and powerful passage to apply to our life together as a church. There is much both good and bad that needs to be forgotten and left behind. You know that as well as I. There is no use in dwelling on the evils we have done or suffered, and there is no use in dwelling on the good old

days, whenever we might think they were. Instead, there is much ahead of surpassing great value toward which we have the opportunity and therefore the responsibility to strain forward with all our strength. There is a goal and a prize beyond all description. Today is the first day in a new year in this church's life. What wonder, what glory, what high privilege by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, that we should have been called together in this time and place for just such a day as this. Are you ready to let go? Are you ready to move ahead?

“One thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

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

# Rejoice in the Lord Always!

Psalm 97:1-12; Philippians 4:1-23

September 5, 1999

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” After all that Paul has had to say about life and death, after all that he has had to say about imprisonment and trial, after all that he has had to say about division and partisanship, after all that he has had to say about risk and sacrifice, after all he has had to say about suffering and loss, still he comes down to this: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” And as he writes to the Philippians, so does he write to us.

“Rejoice in the Lord always.” This seems to be a high calling, but the very fact that Paul can and does exhort us to do this means at the very least that it is possible, for God does not ask us to do the impossible. And the fact that it is possible means that God has already done something to provide for its being possible. And it is this something that God has already done which is the good news hidden in this exhortation, the good news of the gospel, the always given prior reality in the situation which is of far greater importance and interest than our reaction, or lack thereof, to it. What is it that God has already done?

God has made us, and we are his, and for this we give him thanks. God has called us by name, and he has called us his very own, and for this we give him thanks. God has provided for our life and well-being, creating the world and all that is in it as an arena within which we are to live in relation with God, and for this we give him thanks. When we have wandered and strayed, God has spoken his word to us through his prophets, and for this we give him thanks. And in the fulness of time, God sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, to live with us, to die for us, and to be raised again so that we might live forever, and for this we give him thanks. Christ gives himself and his life for our nourishment and our life, as we shall recall around the communion table today. You are familiar with the full sweep of the gospel. This is what God has already done for us. This forms the basis of the possibility of rejoicing. In fact, this forms the basis of the imperative for rejoicing. The fundamental dynamic of the Christian faith is that God’s grace elicits our gratitude. So the basic attitude of the Christian is one of joy and thanksgiving. The Christian life is one of profound happiness. Is that of interest to you? This letter is written to

people who are already Christian, but it is based upon the very reasons for which they first became Christian. That appeal still reaches out to us today.

Note, of course, that Paul's exhortation is to rejoice "in the Lord." That is the key to it all. It does not say to rejoice in good luck or good fortune, which may or may not smile upon us. It does not say to rejoice in strength or wealth, for those may fail us. It does not say to rejoice in power or fame, for those may flee from us. It does not say to rejoice in political accomplishment or victory, it does not say to rejoice in intellectual arrogance, it does not say to rejoice in the stars or the moon or the turning of the seasons. It says to rejoice in the Lord. It says to rejoice in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the one in whom we rejoice. This is the one and the only one who provides us with what we need and who give us good reason to rejoice.

When are we supposed to do this? "Rejoice in the Lord always." Rejoice in the Lord all the time. Rejoice in the Lord morning, noon, and night. Rejoice in the Lord from the beginning to the end of our lives. Rejoice in the Lord in all circumstances, good and bad, when we feel like rejoicing and, yes, especially when we do not feel like rejoicing. This does not have to do, primarily, with feelings passing emotions. This has to do with deep seated affections, with the fundamental orientation of the self. Either we are turned toward God and drawn toward God and therefore rejoice in God, or we are turned away from God and toward self and there we know only death. It is the work of Christ the Lord to win us back for God, to reorient us toward God, to provide the basis for our life and rejoicing, and nothing can count against that. This is the reason we are to rejoice always. And just in case we did not catch it the first time, Paul says it again.

What is the result of such rejoicing? What is the consequence? What good flows out of it? At one level, rejoicing in the Lord and worshiping God are good in and of themselves, and they are not to be judged by any practical results. Nevertheless, they do make a difference in life, in lives, in families, in communities, and in the world. Paul writes, "Let all men know your forbearance." How fascinating that positive rejoicing also issues in the withholding of anger and refraining from revenge. As Christians, we are to let everyone know that we can take whatever they throw at us. We do not live simply on the razor edge of the present moment. We do not live in the frenzy of each gust of changing wind. We do not thrive on the excitement of each passing fascination, nor do we find our identity either formed or challenged by each attacker. We do, instead, live in the setting of eternity. We live in the confidence of the gospel. We live in the assurance of the victory. We live in the faithfulness of God. So, we are not undone by the threat or the reality of imprisonment or even execution. Let the Romans do what they will. It is God with whom we have to do.

Lest the Philippians forget why this is, or lest we fail to perceive the basis for such forbearance, Paul reiterates the reason: “The Lord is at hand.” God is near. The One who made us also sustains us and provides for us. The One who has started a good work in us will bring it to completion. Jesus Christ who has won the victory over sin, death, and evil is near, and he shall return to establish that victory in plain sight of all. Why rejoice? Why show our forbearance? “The Lord is at hand.” Remember that, hold onto it, cling to it, and then we can and will endure all things. As Paul writes elsewhere, “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Romans 8:31b).

There are other consequences: “Have no anxiety about anything.” This does not mean not to care about anything or anyone. Paul himself writes of being anxious about the Philippians. But it does mean not to worry. The victory has been won. The price has been paid. The powers of sin, death, and evil have been defeated. All else is secondary at best, and probably only tertiary or farther down the line. In the driven world in which we live, can you imagine the witness of a Christian community without anxiety? In the fractured society in which we live, can you imagine the witness of a Christian family without anxiety? In the hand-wringing, disaster-expecting, bad-news-consuming times in which we live, can you imagine the witness of a single Christian church without anxiety? You see, the Christian faith is not simply a matter of personal opinion or private preference. It has to do with truth and reality, and it has far reaching implications for the way we live and for the shape of the life of the society and world in which we live.

Paul continues, by way of contrast with the life of anxiety: “In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” It is not the case that Christian life will be without wants and needs. We are not called upon to endure simply with Stoic indifference. But it is the case that we are to communicate our requests to God in the constant context of thanksgiving, which is to say in that combination of gratitude for what God has already done for us and of full confidence that God’s faithfulness continues in the present and into the future. We endure within the context of a vital relationship with the living God, who loves us, cares for us, and has given his son for us. The life of rejoicing not only leads to, but also in large part consists of, prayer and thanksgiving, praise and worship. What we do together here sets the pace and the pattern for our prayers night and day, throughout our lives.

Rejoicing in the Lord is sufficient reward in and of itself. It is the goal and purpose of life, the reason for which we were made and redeemed. And yet, such rejoicing does not stand alone. There is a promise of even more. “Rejoice in the Lord always... And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep

your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Confidence in the gospel leads to rejoicing, and rejoicing leads to peace beyond all comprehension, and that wonderful grace binds us forever, heart, soul, mind, and strength, together with Jesus Christ. Rejoicing in the Lord in all circumstances helps to shield us against the devastating temptations to give our hearts to another or to place our minds in the service of another. The peace of God made Paul brave even in the face of likely execution by the Roman Empire, and he wanted to urge the Philippians to both peace and courage. Are we brave today? Do we stand against the forces of government, the ideologies of society, the cowardice of the masses? Do you have an anchor in your life to hold you steady? The peace of God will keep you in Jesus Christ, protecting you from any who would snatch you away.

Hear these words from Paul. And hearing them, learn them and make them your very own. And having learned them, live them, now and forever: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

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

Revised May 7, 2006