

GEMS OF JOY FROM PHILIPPIANS

By Roy Hefti

Rejoice In A Good Work Begun

I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴Every time I pray for all of you, I always pray with joy, ⁵because of your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am convinced of this very thing: that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:3-6 EHV)

Philippians is Paul's epistle of joy. Certainly, Paul prays for all the congregations he has founded. But when he prays for the Philippians, he prays with an extra measure of joy because of their partnership in the gospel from the first day he set foot in Macedonia. They never let him down. He could always count on them. Paul's letter to the Philippians is a sort of bright and happy thank-you note.

Sadly, many congregations and many Christians don't seem particularly happy to be what they are—baptized sons and daughters of the King of kings on their way to glory. Often enough, we ourselves don't seem all that happy to be Christians. The British preacher Charles Spurgeon once said to his seminary students, "When you speak of heaven, let your face light up with a heavenly gleam. Let your eyes shine with reflected glory. And when you speak of hell—well, then your usual face will do."

These Christians at Philippi were outrageously happy to know what Christ had saved them *from*—hell itself—and what Christ had saved them *for*—service in his kingdom now and life at his side forever. Paul is joyfully confident that God who began this good work in them when he brought them to faith will carry it on to completion until the day Christ comes again.

There is a time and place for the warnings of the law. On this side of the grave, the Bible warns me that if I am careless and secure in my sins, then I need to be reminded that King Saul, Judas, and many others lost the faith they once had. The warning of the law is: "Let him who thinks he stands be careful that he does not fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12). We need to hear that.

But when you and I fear that we won't make it to the Promised Land, when we see souls around us, even friends and family members, forsaking the truth, when we tremble at how many casualties lie strewn on the path around us, then we don't need the pointing finger of the law. We need to hear only the Good Shepherd's gospel promise, "No one will snatch [you] out of my hand" (John 10:28), and Paul's words to the Philippian believers, "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion."

Stronger than our fear is the hand of the Good Shepherd who holds us. In him we can say with Paul, "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers, neither things present nor things to come, nor powerful forces, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

The British poet John Donne liked to use his name as a pun or a play on words in his poems. In this one, the poet turned preacher said:

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun my last thread,
I shall perish on the shore;
But swear by thyself, that at my death,
thy Son shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
And having done that, thou hast done; I fear no more.
(John Donne, "A Hymn to God the Father")

Rejoice That To Live Is Christ, And To Die is Gain

²¹Yes, for me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²²But if I am to go on living in the flesh, that will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet which should I prefer? I do not know. ²³I am pulled in two directions, because I have the desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far. (Philippians 1:21-23 EHV)

If I live or die, says the optimistic apostle, I win. Here was a man under house arrest facing an unknown future. Yet instead of singing, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen,” he frames the past, present, and future with these words: “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” His optimistic words are fueled by the knowledge that with or without him, the gospel will be proclaimed.

This old warrior of God had reached the stage in his life where he was, as he put it, “pulled in two directions,” torn between two desires—the desire to depart this world and be with Christ and the desire to go on living in the body to serve Christ and his people.

For Paul, humanly speaking, death had more appeal than life. The Greek word here translated “depart” is the word sailors used to talk about loosing a ship from its moorings, casting off the ropes and setting sail. The word also referred to pulling up the tent pegs and breaking camp. So says the old hymn, “While time on earth is spent, absent from him I roam, yet nightly pitch my moving tent a day’s march nearer home” (CW 1993 213:2). For Paul, being home had a good ring to it.

As it turned out, however, Paul would remain a few years longer to help God’s people, including those in Philippi. Although death would have been great gain for Paul, he is convinced that living would be great gain for *them*.

Paul frames the tension between these two desires with these famous words: “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” This is far different from the way the world thinks. A bumper sticker says, “Life is hard, and then you die.” A T-shirt says, “Life is short. Play hard.” A famous American author, whose teenage son was dying of a brain tumor, advised him, “Live life while you can. Die and be done with it.” The Epicureans of the ancient world, along with the party animals of today, subscribe to the creed, “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” An old beer commercial says, “You only go around once in life, so grab for all the gusto you can.” The world’s message is, the living can find happiness. The dead can only be forgotten. To live is me. To die is to lose my very self.

But our inspired authority disagrees with all this. The apostle Paul contradicts the whole world and says, “To live is Christ, and to die is gain.” For Paul, to live is not to satisfy himself but to serve Christ. To die is not to lose himself but to gain Christ—fully and for an eternity in heaven. Only those who trust in Christ can say such things. The imprisoned apostle has no morbid death wish. His yearning for death is not some whining, selfish desire to escape responsibility, to desert his post, to flee suffering and pain. He knows there are people who lean on him. He knows that if God, who alone can set the hour of his death, still has work for him to do, he will remain at his post, preaching, teaching, and putting up with whatever comes his way.

What a magnificent obsession for any of us! Rejoice that “To live is Christ, and to die is gain!”

Rejoice In Our Savior's Humiliation And Exaltation

⁵Indeed, let this attitude be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus. ⁶Though he was by nature God, he did not consider equality with God as a prize to be displayed, ⁷but he emptied himself by taking the nature of a servant. When he was born in human likeness, and his appearance was like that of any other man, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11 EHV)

The heart of the Christmas account is that at a certain time in history, the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, took on himself a complete and sinless human nature. He became true man, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary. His human nature shares in all the power of his divine nature. He is not two Christs but one Christ: the God-man. He is not half God and half man but fully God and fully man in one person.

Yet in order to save us, during his life here on earth, Christ set aside the full and constant use of his divine powers, which he possessed even as a person who has human nature. This is what we call his state of humiliation. He enters the world and lies in the feedbox of a stable rather than in the nursery of a palace. He has no place to lay his head. He spends a long time in the wilderness where he gets hungry. He allows puny little humans to tie him up, beat him, and kill him. All this he does willingly in our stead.

Even so, from time to time, he draws back the curtain and gives people a glimpse of his glory as true God. He walks on water, stills a storm, feeds multitudes, heals the sick, and raises the dead, and once on a mountain he was transfigured.

But for the most part, he veiled his glory and did not use his divine power. Paul says it this way in the classic text before us: Christ “did not consider equality with God as a prize to be displayed.” In ancient times, conquerors paraded through the streets the people and plunder taken in battle, proudly displaying proof of their power. Christ, since he is equal with God, has far more power than a conquering general. But his humiliation consists of this: He did not consider his equality with God something to be paraded around, displayed, and flaunted. So when the princes of the Jewish nation prance about beneath the cross, chanting, “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!” (Matthew 27:40), Jesus surely could have done so. But he chooses not to. And so we are saved.

But once the price for sin was paid in full—once Christ had lived the perfect life in our stead and died in our place—then our dear Savior took up again the full use of his divine powers and began his rule over all things for the benefit of his church.

By his victory march into hell, by his triumphant resurrection, by his ascension to the omnipresent right hand of God, by his pledge to come for us on the last day, Christ has taken up the full and continuous use of his divine power for you and me.

Now Jesus' name is the name above every name. At that name, every knee will finally bow. On the Last Day, unbelievers will be forced to confess Christ's name to their own shame. The devils will

admit to Christ's power with impotent frustration. Believers in Christ will confess that name with joy, “for there is no other name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Let us rejoice in our Savior's humiliation and exaltation! It means that Jesus wins! And so shall we!

Rejoice In The Work Of God In Us

So then, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed, not only when I was with you, but also now much more in my absence, continue to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. ¹³In fact, it is God who is working in you, both to will and to work, for the sake of his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12-13 EHV)

The work that God does in us begins with the fact that he preserves us in the faith. Let's peel back the layers of these few verses. Paul is under house arrest in Rome during his first imprisonment. He is writing to the congregation in Philippi, those happy believers who bring a smile to his face. He is so grateful that the Holy Spirit brought them to believe in Jesus as their Savior.

But as the old saying goes, a bridge that ends one inch from the other side of the river is not a bridge; it is a disaster. What brought Paul such joy when he thought of the Philippians was this: "So then, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed, not only when I was with you, but also now much more in my absence, continue to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

Pause a second. Did that grab your attention? Read it again. "Continue to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." Is Paul denying justification by faith alone? Is he teaching salvation by works? Is he contradicting everything he says in this and every other letter—and what the Bible emphasizes everywhere—that our coming to faith and our remaining in the faith are all a gift from the one who loved us and gave himself for us? Not one bit.

We are pardoned in Christ, and we are fully justified, declared "not guilty." Our guilt was paid in full by the blood of our Savior. Our preservation in the faith is the work of the Holy Spirit alone through the gospel. When Paul says, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling," he is encouraging us as people who have become new creations. According to our new nature, created by the Holy Spirit, we want what God wants. We hunger for the Bread of Life. We thirst for the still waters of God's Word.

When Paul says, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling," he has in mind the struggle we all have as we journey to the promised land of heaven. More than 1,500 years ago, the church father Augustine wrote his classic work *The City of God*. He compared the worldly city founded by Cain's descendants with the city of God where the descendants of Abel live. Three hundred years ago, an imprisoned British preacher named John Bunyan wrote a book called *Pilgrim's Progress*. It's the story of a man named Christian who sets out from the City of Destruction to go to the Celestial City, his name for heaven. The book tells about all the people who try to stop Christian from arriving at the Celestial City. Mr. Worldly Wiseman tempts Christian to turn to his own good works for salvation. The Giant Despair tempts him to give up on God's grace and mercy. The people at Vanity Fair tempt him to trade away eternal treasures for temporal, fleshly pleasures.

To stay on the path to heaven, we need to stay close to the gospel. To cut ourselves off from regularly hearing the gospel is to step on our oxygen hose. It is to become spiritually anorexic, foolishly looking in the mirror and thinking we are well fed when, in fact, we are starving to death. Paul's words warn us, but they also comfort us. As God preserved the Israelites on their wilderness journey with manna from heaven, so he feeds us daily with the message of Christ and gives us the will to do what pleases him. An old man once remarked that throughout the course of his marriage, he figured his wife had prepared 32,369 meals for him. "For the life of me," he said, "I can't remember a single one of them, but I have the distinct impression that without them, I would have starved to death long ago." You may not remember last week's sermon, the one before that, or what was in the chapter of the Bible you read last week, but this is how God keeps us each day in his grace.

Rejoice That The Rubbish Is Removed

But, whatever things were a profit for me, these things I have come to consider a loss because of Christ. ⁸But even more than that, I consider everything to be a loss because of what is worth far more: knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his sake, I have lost all things and consider them rubbish, so that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, which comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God by faith. (Philippians 3:7-9 EHV)

Paul labels the glittering work-righteous things he did as rubbish. The Greek word can also be translated “refuse,” “garbage,” “trash,” “off-scouring,” even “excrement.” The King James Version uses the word dung. You get the idea.

But what Paul calls rubbish are not gross and disgusting actions. They are primarily what the world sees as beautiful and noble. These are rubbish if they come between Paul and his absolute reliance on Christ. It’s the same for us. Paul sees everything he did apart from Christ as rubbish.

Leviticus, chapter 16, describes the great Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*), which some have called the Good Friday of the Old Testament. On that day, two goats were chosen, one for a sacrifice and one to serve as a scapegoat, that is, a goat that took on itself the sins of God’s people. After the first goat had been sacrificed and its blood sprinkled on the mercy seat, the high priest took the scapegoat, that is, the goat of removal. He brought this live goat forward and faced it toward the worshippers. This reminds us of a scene in the gospel of John: “So Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, ‘Behold the man!’” (John 19:5). Then the high priest, with both of his hands on the head of the goat and solemnly confessed the sins of the people, thus placing on this helpless animal all their sin and guilt. We remember Isaiah’s words: “We all have gone astray like sheep. Each of us has turned to his own way, but the Lord has charged all our guilt to him” (Isaiah 53:6).

Now, in the sight of all the Israelites, a man appointed for the task took the goat out into the desert. The Lord explained this to Moses, “The goat will carry all their guilt on itself to a remote, desolate place, and the man will send the goat away into the wilderness” (Leviticus 16:22). We remember John the Baptist pointing to Jesus: “Look! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

On the Day of Atonement, each man, woman, and child watched as this scapegoat, bearing a year’s accumulation of guilt and shame, disappeared from sight to a forsaken place, carrying their guilt to a place where God himself promised to do the impossible—to forget those sins, to never bring them up again, to never bring them back again.

Who of us wants to make therapeutic visits to the dump so we won’t forget what our garbage looked like? Or to chase the garbage truck down the road, demanding to have our garbage back, to sniff it, taste it, or rummage through it to remember the good old days? For Paul, his garbage was permanently gone because he had found Christ: “For his sake, I have lost all things and consider them rubbish, so that I may gain Christ.” Do you know that the word forgive literally means “to send away”? Just like God sent the Israelites’ sins away using a special goat, so King David knew that God had sent his sins far away: “As distant as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our rebellious acts from us” (Psalm 103:12). How far is the east from the west? Certainly farther than we can go. Where now is that sin and guilt that once lay so heavy on you? It can’t be found. The Lamb of God has taken it away: “I lay my sins on Jesus” says the old hymn. That is what you do with your rubbish. That is how you get rid of it. And what shall we put in its place? Jesus Christ. We only need Jesus Christ. What is it that Paul says? “And be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, which comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God by faith.”

Rejoice As You Press On!

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus also took hold of me. ¹³Brothers, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it yet, but there is one thing I do: Forgetting the things that are behind and straining toward the things that are ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal, for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12-14 EHV).

Like you and me, the traveler sometimes catches sight of the city that lies ahead, but he is not there yet. The poet Robert Frost wrote, “The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep” (“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”). Paul said something like that. But he had miles to go before he was truly awake in eternal life. He had to press on, just like we do.

I’m not in heaven yet, says the apostle. I have not reached my final goal, I am not perfect like I will be in heaven. Luther was fond of describing the Christian with the Latin phrase *simul justus et peccator*. It means being a sinner and a saint at the same time. As believers in Christ, our pardon is perfect, and his “not guilty” verdict on us is a done deal. By his perfect obedience in our place, by his suffering and death in our stead, by his resurrection on Easter morning, we are saints, and heaven is open to us.

But on this side of heaven, we are still pressing on to take hold of heaven, which was Christ’s goal for us when he called us to faith. On the hard path of this life, we battle with our sinful nature, that houseguest from hell. Maybe you’ve seen those Allstate commercials with the guy who calls himself Mayhem and brings disaster wherever he goes. We can give that name to our sinful nature. It’s the reason we find ourselves saying so often, “I could just kick myself.” So while our justification—our pardon for all our sins—is a done deal, our sanctification—our growth in becoming more like Christ—is a work in progress. Therefore we press on, confident of what Solomon said, “The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, shining brighter and brighter until it is day” (Proverbs 4:18).

I do not shine in glory yet, says Paul, but there is one thing I do: “Forgetting the things that are behind and straining toward the things that are ahead, I press on.” He first forgets the rubbish. He knows it will not do to carry the baggage of former work-righteous thinking, the rubbish of his sin, and the guilt that he long ago gave to Christ on Calvary. He must strain toward what’s ahead, “press on” toward his home above.

We rightly pause along the path to take stock of God’s tender mercies. We painfully remember some of the wrong turns we have taken on the path toward home, how God spared us, and the lessons we learned. But we cannot go back. We cannot linger at the place we are now. Up ahead there are challenging rivers to cross, dark valleys to tread, and steep mountains to climb, obstacles to overcome.

Runners make the mistake of looking behind. But it slows them down, making them unaware of obstacles that might lie ahead. Part of pressing on is forgetting what is behind. God does. The all-knowing God forgets? Indeed, he does! In the sense that he will not call to mind our sins, bring them up, or hold them against us. God promises, “I will forgive their guilt, and I will remember their sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:34). God rips out the rearview mirror, and so should we. Forgetting includes not just our sins but our good deeds done for the wrong reason. Paul rejoiced to press on “toward the goal, for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” The prize is heaven itself, the resurrection from the dead, our own personal Easter morning! We find this prize not in ourselves but in Christ Jesus. Rejoice to press on toward the prize!

Rejoice In The Lord Always!

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always! I will say it again: Rejoice! (Philippians 4:4 EHV)

“Rejoice in the Lord always!” Rejoice always! Really?

Just in case we didn't hear it the first time, Paul repeats, “I will say it again: Rejoice!”

This refrain runs throughout the Bible. Struggling with the unfairness of life in a chronically broken world, the prophet Habakkuk poked the finger of his faith in the eye of every sad thing he went through:

The fig tree may have no buds. The vines may have no grapes.

The olive tree may fail to produce. The fields may yield no food.

The sheep may be cut off from their flock, and there may be no cattle in the barns,

but I will delight in the Lord and rejoice in God who saves me. (Habakkuk 3:17-18)

Jesus said, “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven. In fact, that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:11-12). What was Jesus thinking? “Be happy, because misery loves company”?

Not at all! We can all be joyful because of the reward of pure grace awaiting us in heaven! Similarly, we listen as the inspired writer says to the Hebrew Christians, “When your possessions were seized, you accepted it with joy, because you knew that you yourselves had a better and lasting possession” (Hebrews 10:34).

Paul is not bidding us to rejoice that there *is* suffering in this world. He is urging us to be joyful *in the midst* of suffering for Christ, because through it all, God is doing good stuff for us.

That's what James means when he says, “Consider it complete joy, my brothers, whenever you fall into various kinds of trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces patient endurance. And let patient endurance finish its work, so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4). This is what Paul means when he says, “We also rejoice confidently in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces patient endurance, and patient endurance produces tested character, and tested character produces hope” (Romans 5:3-4).

Our troubles didn't disappear when we were brought to faith in Jesus, but we surely learned to see them differently: as events that by God's hand mold us for our spiritual good. “We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

We can rejoice always because we are rejoicing *in the Lord*. This is not a shallow happiness, like a babbling brook. It is genuine joy which, despite difficulties, runs like a deep river in its well-worn channel. Whatever storms rage around us, whatever dark hand seems to be writing the story of our life as a tragedy instead of a triumph, we are, through our God-given faith in Jesus, safe in the Lord. We are safe from the accusations of Satan, safe from the bondage of past sins, and safe from the power of guilt. We are safe inside the circle of Jesus' perfect doing, dying, and rising which he has made ours. We are safe because he is in us and we are in him, no matter how much the boat of our life is tossed up and down. Rejoice in the Lord always!