



An Exploration of Christian Joy
JOY IN CHRIST THAT TRANSCENDS CIRCUMSTANCES
Philippians 1:12-30

Rev. John Sowers
January 27, 2008

Paul's example in Philippians asserts that to live for Jesus necessitates that we live for others. To put Christ first means that we must put others before our own selves.

Scripture

Philippians 1:12-30

¹²Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. ¹³As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard[a] and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

¹⁵It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²²If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.

²⁷*Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel*

²⁸*without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God.* ²⁹*For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him,* ³⁰*since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.*

Scripture

I wonder how many people live their lives as if the Cowardly Lion is their patron saint? The lion lived huddled in the forest, hoping that his appearance will keep him safe, hoping that no one will test his courage and discover his cowardice. The isolation of the forest appears to the lion as sanctuary, but is it not rather a prison?

It is only when the lion comes out of the forest and joins the others that he begins to discover his true self, and it's only when the lion stops thinking of his own protection and risks himself for Dorothy that he truly comes alive.

The truth is that the quest with Dorothy takes the lion into real danger. He has to overcome the dangers around him – the flying monkeys! And he has to overcome the dangers within him – his own cowardice. I don't know if he would take these dangers on for his own sake but he'll do it for Dorothy.

I don't get the sense from Paul that cowardice was ever an issue, whether before or after he became a Christian. But what he makes evident in our passage is that Paul has no concern for his own security because he is so captured by Christ.

Humanly, of course, Paul is captured by the Roman authorities and under the surveillance of the Roman guard. Because he has been so bold in his proclamation of Jesus, and because in proclaiming Jesus as King he is fundamentally denying the royal claim of Caesar, Paul has been imprisoned. In so many ways, his is a desperate situation in which a desperate response would seem perfectly justified.

But the response of Paul in this letter to his friends in Philippi seems to be completely removed from his own security, safety, and circumstance. You would expect a description of his prison conditions, that he would be asking or at least hinting about his need for more food and clothes, that he would alert his friends to the harrowing state of his life. But Paul says nothing of his own condition.

Instead Paul focuses on Christ. In his suffering, Paul turns his eyes to Jesus. We've talked about this before, Paul writes about suffering leading to endurance, which leads to character, which

leads to hope; it's all in Romans 5. We Christians can affirm that when we suffer, it can increase our faith in Christ and deepen our relationship with Jesus.

So what then does it mean to be in prison for Paul? Does he focus on how his suffering in prison has increased the depth of his own relationship to Christ? No, Paul seems mostly uninterested in his own status. What jail means to Paul is the chance to share the good news of Jesus Christ with his guards.

Suffering for Paul isn't seen as something that benefits him; he focuses on how it benefits others. He's in jail and he sees that as a benefit for those who guard him, and for the other Christians who are emboldened by his proclamation. He speaks of going to see Jesus but realizes that it would be better for him to stay here for the way in which he can continue to minister to others. Paul's joy not only transcends his circumstances, it relates to the way in which his pain leads to Christian gain in others.

Truly Paul is defining for us mature Christian joy. For those who are united in Christ, human boundaries and the necessity of personal security fade away and selfless devotion in the name of Jesus increases.

Let's put it this way: Paul's example in Philippians asserts that to live for Jesus necessitates that we live for others. To put Christ first means that we must put others before our own selves.

Paul makes explicit that his example of joyful suffering for others should be the model for the Philippians. Verse 29 and 30 says, "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have."

So where does Christ call you to suffer with and for others? Where does Jesus call you to share the Good News? For Paul the setting was jail. And you may be saying, I don't spend my time in jail. For some of you it may feel that way! The office as the jail may be more accurate than you think. But maybe you are called to suffer where you work for something greater than a paycheck. Maybe you are called to suffer there for Christ and as a witness to those with whom you work and for whom you work.

So what fellow prisoners, what jailors is Christ calling you to witness to? Who is it this week in your neighborhood that Jesus wants you to share with? Who is it in your family who is suffering, and you know that Christ is calling you to suffer alongside them?