

1-1-1997

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Recommended Citation

Cope, Diane (1997) "Clothed with Joy," *Leaven*: Vol. 5: Iss. 3, Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol5/iss3/4>

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Clothed with Joy

By Diane Cope

Philippians has long been thought of as the book on joy. Yet, as important as the theme of joy is, it is just one of the motifs presented throughout Philippians. A greater, deeper theme is the presentation of Christ—his life, his suffering, his death on the cross, and his resurrection, which provide us with a hope for his return. It is this message of Christ—and this message alone!—that allows us to live daily with joy. And it is this gospel-shaped joy that we find interwoven throughout Philippians.

It is evident in reading the letter to the Philippians that Paul has for them a great love marked by reciprocity and hospitality. Following their conversions, Paul spent time in their midst and stayed in the home of Lydia. While no other church offered him financial support, his friends in Philippi provided for Paul throughout his ministry, even when he was in Thessalonica (Phil 4:16 and 2 Cor 8:1–5). Consistent with his regard for them, he holds them up to the Corinthian church as a model of generosity. The closeness of their relationship has allowed Paul to accept their gifts; one of the reasons he writes this letter is to thank them for their consistent provision for him.

Paul and his friends in Philippi share their deep relationship through Christ. It has been their joy to give and receive from each other, but also to suffer for the cause of Christ. That is another reason for Paul's writing to them. He wants to encourage them to "stand firm in the Lord" in the face of their struggle with forces from outside the church as well as from within.¹

Apparently, Epaphroditus—Paul's "brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier" and their "messenger"—has

brought information to Paul regarding their circumstances in Philippi, circumstances that include suffering both from within and from without. According to Gordon Fee, it is likely that the suffering they are enduring from outside the church is from the Romans. Therefore, though they are separated, Paul and the Philippians are sharing a common experience—a reality acknowledged by Paul (Phil 1:30). Assuming Paul is writing from Rome, he is under the Roman authorities and is surrounded by Roman citizens, just as are the Philippians. Concerning the political environment in Philippi at the time, Fee states:

Philippi owed its existence as a Roman colony to the special grace of the first Roman emperor, thus ensuring that the city would always have special devotion for the emperor. By the time of our letter, the primary titles for the emperor were *kyrios* and *soter* ('lord and savior').²

Such a circumstance would create a dilemma for the Philippians; they could not grace Nero as their "lord and savior" in public assemblies, such as public performances in the theaters, since Christ was their *kyrios*. "Their allegiance was to another *Kyrios*, Jesus Christ, before whom every knee would someday bow and every tongue confess, including the citizens of Philippi who are causing their suffering, as well as the emperor himself."³

The struggles the Philippians faced from within their church could have been harassment from the Jews and from disgruntled members who were looking to their own interests rather than the interests of others. In Philippians

3:2–4, Paul seems to be referring to the Jews as the “mutilators of the flesh.” We don’t know if these are members of the church in Philippi or if Paul, out of exasperation for what the Jews have preached to the Gentiles in times past, is simply reminding them that their salvation is from the

Paul knows that in the midst of turmoil, grief, or happiness there is an inner peace and joy that is available only to the Christian.

Lord and not from the Law.

We do know from the text, however, that there are rumblings of dissatisfaction within their church. Paul suggests this possibility in 4:2 when he asks Euodia and Syntyche to “agree with each other in the Lord.” He doesn’t spell out exactly what they are to agree upon, but that is probably an indication that the situation is well known and does not need to be specifically addressed. However, much of Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi refers to a spirit of oneness, humility, and peace in the Lord. It is possible that these themes permeate the letter as a means by which Paul leads them into a deeper understanding of what it is to be “one in the Lord” and to “rejoice in the Lord” regardless of personal circumstances. Paul uses Christ as their ultimate example in chapter 2, and additionally refers to Timothy, Epaphroditus, and himself as examples for them to emulate. Their models are of those willing to put others before themselves. In particular, Paul and Timothy provide examples in their proclamation of the good news of Christ; Epaphroditus, in his willingness to sacrifice his life for the gospel.

According to Gerald Hawthorne, there are three ways of expressing “joy” and “rejoicing” in the Bible. The first is *agalliaomai/agalliasis*, which “is used to describe shouts of joy, singing, clapping of hands, lifting up of the voice in glad praise and prayer to God (cf. Luke 1:14, 44, 47).” The second, *euphraino/euphrosyne*, refers to “feelings of merriment and good cheer,” expressed through “banqueting, eating, drinking, and making merri-

ment (cf. Luke 15:23, 32).” Hawthorne states that these two word groups are used primarily in the Old Testament and only a few times in the New Testament.⁴

The third word group, *chairo/chara/synchairo*, occurs many times in the New Testament. This particular usage “becomes the religious word-group for joy in the New Testament, used a total of 140 times.” Paul alone uses this word group 50 times to help the Christians understand what he means by joy.⁵ It conveys a much deeper meaning than could have been understood before the incarnation of Christ and his resurrection from the dead. Because of Christ, we now have a reason for hope that provides us an inner strength to survive whatever circumstances in which we may find ourselves. This reality gives meaning to joy. Hawthorne describes Paul’s understanding eloquently:

[F]or Paul, joy is more than a mood or an emotion, more than a state or feeling, although it includes all these. Joy is rather an understanding of existence that encompasses both elation and depression. It is a world view that is able to accept with creative submission all events that come along, both of delight and of dismay. It is a perception of reality that generates hope and endurance in affliction and temptation, ease and prosperity, because joy allows one to see beyond any particular event, good or bad, to the sovereign Lord who stands above all events and ultimately has control over them. Joy, to be sure, “includes within itself readiness for martyrdom,” but equally the eagerness to go on living and serving, even under the most difficult of circumstances.⁶

Based on this understanding of what joy means, why does Paul tell the Christians in Philippi to “rejoice in the Lord”? He brings this up twice—once in 3:1 and again in 4:4. What makes Paul so sure that this is even feasible, given the circumstances of their suffering, which may have included persecution for the Lord by the Roman government? How can one stay “joyful” in the midst of persecution, despair, hunger, abuse, the death of a child, or whatever tragedy may come in life? Paul knows of such adversity and gives advice to the Philippians out of the reservoir of his own experience. He is not only going through the same struggles as they, but he also has endured many others. He has endured suffering for Christ on many occasions and mentions knowing what it is like to be in need

or to have plenty (4:12). And yet, he knows that in the midst of turmoil, grief, or happiness there is an inner peace and joy that is available only to the Christian. He points the Philippians to the cross. Because of Christ's love and willingness to place others before himself, redemption is made possible. This redemption provides us with a "citizenship in heaven" (3:20). The point is, Paul is able to see the whole picture: life here can be gain for Christ, but death is even better. Because of our eternal salvation, because of the "bigger picture," life is enduring. God can provide a "peace that passes all understanding" (4:7). Therefore, Paul encourages the Philippian Christians as he himself declares that he presses on "toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (3:14).

Paul also points out to the Christians in Philippi the importance of their example to others by living out their salvation, of their "joy in the Lord" despite their present circumstances. Whether they are struggling with Rome, with Jewish persecution, or with fellow Christians determined to place themselves above others, Paul asks them to live a life different from the world's perspective. The world would say, "Stand up for yourself"; "There is no God, or we wouldn't have these sufferings"; or "Forget God—live for today." But Paul says, "Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life . . ." (2:14–16). That statement is incredible! I recently spent an evening on top of a mountain in west Texas worshipping God. Because we were away from the city, the stars shone so brightly! Those of us who live in the city forget how brightly the stars shine out with their lights in the darkness. Paul is telling us that when we can live for Christ with joy and peace in the midst of anguish, turmoil, and despair, we will let our lives shine brightly among the non-Christians in this world.

Where does this message leave us today? How can we take what Paul is telling the Philippian Christians and apply it to our lives? One way is for us to "shine like stars" in our world. When we are faced with tragedies and loss and we can allow God's peace and joy to filter through our lives, we can "shine like stars." One of the most devastating times in my life was the moment

my ten-year-old daughter, Megan, slipped out of this world and into heaven. I have never felt such loss and emptiness—my child was gone! I could no longer hear the sound of her breathing, as labored as it had been. I could no longer see those big, beautiful brown eyes staring at me with complete trust or hear her pat her chest saying, "I'm Megan! I'm Megan!" You see, my daughter was handicapped, and those were some of her best words. As devastating as was that moment—and the moments, days, hours, and years that have followed—I'm still standing firm in the Lord. I'm standing by the grace, peace, comfort, and joy of God. One of the many Psalms that has touched me is Psalm 71:19b–21:

*Who, O God, is like you?
Though you have made me see
troubles, many and bitter,
you will restore my life again;
from the depths of the earth
you will again bring me up.
You will increase my honor
and comfort me once again.*

I have been brought up from the depths, although I still return there at times. But by my standing through the power of Christ, I am a living example of the power and strength of God.

Another way we can implement what Paul tells the Christians in Philippi is to remember that our hope is in the Lord. The only way to endure losing a child is to have that hope—the hope that sees beyond this world. We need to see the whole picture as Paul does. When we can see that we have a citizenship in heaven, we can have peace and joy. This is not a joy that is giddy and happy, but it is a joy that provides a deep sense of knowing that God is ultimately in control. It is a peace that provides an inner calm in the midst of the storms of life. It is a trust that God will restore our lives again, and that we someday will see him in his full glory. As Twila Paris expresses it:

*The joy of the Lord will be my strength.
I will not falter; I will not faint.
He is my shepherd—I am not afraid.
The joy of the Lord is my strength.*

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