

Philippians: Joy and Rejoicing with St. Paul

By Steve Ray

It was the strangest thing they had ever heard. It was not necessarily the singing—they had heard that before. It was the *time* of the singing—midnight—and it was the *place* of the singing. This was no temple or amphitheater. The men were down below, where rats scurry over their faces in the darkness and the bugs scamper under their clothing and bite. It was damp and cold and foul. The wounds from the severe beatings were swollen and discolored. The shackles clamped on the ankles would usually incite cursing. They had heard screams and cursing from the jail before—that was nothing new. But *never* had they heard joyous singing.

But it was the earthquake that scared the jailer. The ground shook and prison doors flew open. He saw the open door and was ready to fall on his sword, afraid the prisoners had escaped. He knew the penalty for allowing prisoners to escape—instant execution. From the depth of the prison he heard a voice calling: “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” The city was Philippi in Macedonia and the year was about AD 51. Paul and Silas had been imprisoned for preaching and for casting an evil spirit out of a young slave girl—a girl exploited by her masters for soothsaying and great profit.

Having been spared by the two men rejoicing in chains—and the power of God—the trembling jailer fell to his knees before Paul and pleaded, “What must I do to be saved?” He was baptized that very night with his whole household. They soon joined Lydia and her household who had heard Paul’s message earlier and believed (Acts 16:14–15). The church in Philippi was born.

It is now about ten years later, between AD 61–63 and Paul, *again in chains*, writes a joyful letter to the young church that he had established in Philippi. They had been the first to hear the gospel in Europe. Paul was writing from prison, in Rome, confined by chains and guards (Acts 28:16, 30–31). But again, he was joyful. In fact, in his short letter to the Philippians he uses the word “joy” or “rejoice” an unprecedented *sixteen* times. His heart could sing with joy even though his body groaned in pain. He was teaching by example—rejoice always; keep your eyes on Jesus.

The early Church was full of singing; it was the verbal expression of the joy within. Singing was probably different than we know it today—probably a melodic chant led by a cantor and repeated by the people. Christians did not invent hymns. They were sung by pagans to honor and laud their gods and heroes. In the Church hymns were sung as a natural expression of Christian joy, and, based in part on Jewish synagogue practice, an integral part of worship. Paul exhorted his friends in Philippi, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (Phil 4:4).

Not only were these ancient hymns sung as an expression of joy, but they were also used to instruct the faithful, providing a creed, so to speak, memorized as a song. Paul embeds such a hymn in the second chapter of Philippians (see *Catechism*, paragraphs 461 and 2667). These are poetic words, yet they contain some of the most profound theological and Christological insights ever uttered by Paul. Paul's primary intention here is to teach humility, not Christology (interestingly, it seems to be almost an afterthought). This hymn carries us on a sweeping flight from exaltation to humiliation and *back* to exaltation—from heaven to earth and back to heaven. Paul writes,

“Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 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” (Phil 2:5–11).

One can imagine the Philippian Christians dressed in their robes and sandals—singing in Greek, probably chanting with no musical accompaniment, with a cantor leading the assembly—raising their voices to God in praise of Jesus who humbled himself to save the world. This passage of Scripture not only pulls the curtain back on early worship, but also allows us to gain a glimpse into the heavenly mystery. Paul sang such songs in prison and the Christians sang such songs in the liturgy celebrated in homes long before there was such a thing as church buildings.

Paul often wrote letters to correct errors, often instructing and chastising churches for missing the mark. Not so in the letter to the Philippians. With the exception of a short exhortation for unity and humility (Phil 2:1–5), this letter is full of compliments, confidence, and appreciation. The Philippians had proved their generosity and obedience to the faith. These faithful converts lived what Paul taught, and gave financially to support his needs. He extolled them with words such as “My brethren, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved” (Phil 4:1).

The Judaizers (see articles on Romans and Galatians) had visited Philippi and Paul reminds these faithful believers that salvation is by faith and not by circumcision and the requirements of the Old Covenant. Using himself as an example—and providing us with some marvelous biographical information—Paul reminds them to stay focused. If anyone could have achieved salvation through circumcision and works of the Jewish law, it was Paul. He was “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 (Phil 3:5–6). His pedigree and

resume are impeccable. And, he praises them for their correct theology, their generosity, for staying the course, and for remaining focused on the teachings and traditions he had handed on to them (Phil 4:9).

Similar to our day, staying balanced on the “straight and narrow” is not always easy, especially with so many voices trumpeting new theologies and practices, all claiming to know and teach correctly. And just as the apostolic authority—the magisterium—was crucial to the Philippians—teaching and reminding them of the truth—so it is today when we have even more voices which are just as enticing, calling to us from every side. Paul challenges them to think rightly, avoid false teachers and correct those who would upset the unity of the Church. One must never let down their guard. Times are tough; the world around us is a perverse generation. Run with your eyes straight ahead, focused on the prize—resurrection from the dead and eternal life (Phil 3:8–21).

The rich imagery in this delightful epistle takes us back to colorful Roman times—times of wars and games and great athletic competitions. One can visualize muscular bodies rippling with determination, steely eyes sharply focused. They exuded determination, a determination to win the prize. They run the race for “a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable” (1 Cor 9:24–27). Don’t be deluded, challenges Paul, we have not yet obtained it. He explains his own resolve by declaring, “[I press on] that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own. . . . but 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” (Phil 3:11–14).

Their call and assurance is certain *if* they continue to press on, knowing that God has laid hold of them. But Paul reminds them that they must stay the course and you can imagine him with arms outstretched, as a coach pleading with his athletes, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling . . . 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” (Phil 2:12, 16). He loves them dearly and tells them so. He loves them so dearly that he challenges them to run for the prize: the resurrection of the dead and eternal life through faith and obedience.

The road was long and dusty. The humble servant and messenger was trudging back along Roman roads to deliver this “love letter” written by Paul—the rejoicing prisoner — to those in Philippi who rejoiced in the Gospel with him. Epaphroditus had traveled to Rome, over 550 miles as the crow flies but much further in actual travel miles. He had delivered the generous care package from this fellow Philippians to their beloved Paul. His journey and selfless sacrifice had left him sick unto death (Phil 2:25–30; 4:18) but he was now well enough to return to Philippi. He was taking the long trip back clutching the precious cargo—a charming and tender letter, yet one pregnant with theological and

personal insights. Epaphroditus had delivered a gift to Paul, he was returning with a gift for the whole world.