

CHRISTIANS WITH SHINING FACES

Philippians 4:4

Reverend Phillip Parker

Years ago a young businessman left his hotel room on Sunday morning and began searching for a church where he might worship that day. The streets of the city were almost completely deserted, but the man happened to see a policeman standing at the corner. Walking up to the officer he said, "I'm a stranger in this town. Could you suggest a church where I might worship this morning?" "Certainly," the policeman replied. The young man thanked the police officer after receiving directions about where the church was located and was just about to walk away, when suddenly he turned back around and asked, "By the way, there must be several churches on your beat. Why did you suggest this particular one?" The policeman replied, "I'm not a very religious man. I don't even belong to a church. But I've observed one thing down through the years. The people who attend the church I suggested to you are the happiest Christians in all of St. Louis."

Joy! In a world filled with so much sorrow and suffering, there is a tremendous need for happy Christians, followers of Jesus who are possessed by a spirit of joy. A native from the country of India once asked a Christian, "What kind of medicine do you put on your face to make it shine so?" "I don't put anything on it," the Christian replied. "Oh yes you do," the Indian said. "All you Christians do. Whenever I've met one of you, I've seen shining faces." A shining face. That ought to be one of the distinguishing characteristics of every Christian, a spirit of joy and happiness bubbling up out of our lives like a spring of living water, an exuberant cheerfulness rooted in the love of God. In spite of the problems and difficulties we all face, there is so much for us to be happy about as Christians.

Paul reminds us of that in his letter to the Philippians. He says in chapter 4, verse 4, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, 'Rejoice!'" In fact, he says it again and again. Sixteen times in just four chapters of Scripture he tells the Christians at Philippi to rejoice, to be joyful, filled with happiness. It almost seems impossible that a man like Paul, a man who had been stoned, run out of town, rejected by his fellow Jews, and now even imprisoned in Rome, could write such a letter of joy. And yet he did. In spite of the hardships he had faced, in spite of the fact that soon he might die the death of a martyr, Paul was still a happy man. And he wanted to share that happiness with his fellow believers in Philippi. As he wrote this letter he listed a number of reasons why both he and they should be filled with a spirit of joy. Let me share four of them with you this morning.

First, there was the joy of friendship which they had with one another. Philippi was the first city in Greece where Paul had preached the Gospel. His ministry there was quite short. And just like Rome, he had ended up in jail. But still there were many fond memories of the people whom he had met in Philippi. One of them was Lydia. She was a merchant who sold fine cloth. He met her down by the harbor. Then there was the slave girl from whom he had cast out a demon.

And, of course, there was the jailor. Paul had had the privilege of leading the jailor and his family to the Lord. Paul loved these people and they loved him. Even though they were separated by many miles, there were still strong ties of friendship. Paul opened his letter to them by saying, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now (Philippians 1:3-5)." He remembered that soon after he left them they had begun supporting him financially, so that he didn't have to work so hard sewing tents to support himself. Instead he could spend more of his time teaching and preaching. Now that he was in prison, they had not only sent him additional gifts, including perhaps a warm coat, but had also sent one of their own to visit with him, Epaphroditus. It must have really cheered the heart of old Paul to know that those Christians in Philippi really cared about him. Indeed, it's a joyful experience when we're reminded that there are strong ties of friendship and love that bind us together as Christians.

I remember the death of my father. It was my first year at seminary, and as soon as I received word of what had happened, I hurried home to be with Mom. It was a sad and hectic time as we prepared for the funeral. But in the midst of it there was still a note of joy. For my friends at seminary had not forgotten me. There was a personal telegram from the president of the school. An arrangement of flowers arrived from a singing group of which I was a member. And there were three friends who drove for more than four hours to be with me during the funeral service. Yes, there was sorrow and grief, but there was also joy. Like Paul, I experienced the joy of Christian fellowship. How about you? Has there been a time in your life when you experienced that kind of joy? Perhaps it occurred in just the give and take of life, when someone, for example, invited you over to their home for a meal. But whatever it was, those are the kind of things that can bring great joy into our lives.

There is also a second reason why Paul's letter to the Philippians is filled with so much joy and happiness. This is what he says, "Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well-known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of the Lord without fear (Philippians 1:12-14)." As he continues to write, he knows that this evangelistic zeal is not always derived from the purest of motives. Some he says are sharing the gospel because they are actually envious of what he is accomplishing. Nevertheless he declares, "What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice (Philippians 1:18)."

Proclaiming the gospel is a wonderful reason for being joyful. It is an expression of heartfelt appreciation for doing for which we were created in Christ to perform. As a child, I remember watching a craftsman build a canoe at the Old Town Canoe Company in Bangor, Maine. The craftsman looked at me with a smile of satisfaction upon his face and said, "After years of trying, finally at last, I can use

a drawing knife to shape the wooden gunnels of this canoe so that they fit together perfectly, with both my right and now my left hand.” He had mastered a difficult skill and it brought him great joy, just like the man who exclaimed, “I did it.” He had completed his evangelistic witness training and had gone out with a team to make a visit in a local home. During that visit, he had shared the plan of salvation from memory, and the person listening to him had prayed to receive Christ as his personal savior. This newly trained evangelist was so excited he could hardly contain himself. He had discovered that there is great joy when we finally arrive at the place where we can do what Christ told us to do, to be His witnesses, telling others how they too can become a Christian. What about you, as a believer have you ever experienced the joy of leading another person to Christ. It’s one of the most exciting and wonderful things that you will ever experience.

There’s a third reason why Paul was joyful, and this may surprise you. He was joyful with regards to the possibility of becoming a martyr for Christ. He said, “But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all. And you too, I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me (Philippians 2:17-18).” Wow! Can you believe it? Paul was even joyful in the expectation that he might soon be executed. That’s what he was talking about when he said that he might be “poured out as a drink offering,” like a sacrifice on an altar. The Philippians knew that you may pay a price, sometimes a severe, life threatening one when you stand up for Christ. But even then there can be joy because great suffering produces even greater joy. As one writer has put it, “The saints have sung their sweetest when the thorns have pierced their hearts the deepest.”

The Nazi regime was one of the most vile and reprehensible totalitarian states that has ever existed, and caught up in the middle of it was a Lutheran pastor by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He could have fled from Germany before and even during the beginning of World War II, but instead decided to stay and become part of the resistance movement. As a result he was arrested and finally executed on April 9, 1945. Eight months earlier, while in prison, he wrote to a friend, his words now a part of a collection of writings entitled, *Letters and Papers from Prison*.” This is what he wrote:

Please don’t ever get anxious about me, but don’t forget to pray for me—I’m sure you don’t. I am so sure of God’s guiding hand that I hope I shall always be kept in that certainty. You must never doubt that I am travelling with gratitude and cheerfulness along the road where I am being led. My past life is brim-full of God’s goodness, and my sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified. I am most thankful for the people I have met, and I only hope that that they never have to grieve about me, but that they, too, will always be certain of, and thankful for, God’s

mercy and forgiveness. Forgive my writing this. Don't let it grieve or upset you for

a moment, but let it make you happy. But I did want to say it for once, and I could

not think of anyone else who I could be sure would take it aright (page 208). What kind of joy was it that Bonhoeffer possessed while he was in prison? It was the joy of loyalty to the Lord. It was the joy of standing firm in his beliefs and principles even if that meant the sacrifice of life itself. It was the joy of being true to his Lord, no matter the cost, no matter the suffering involved.

This is the kind of joy that an athlete experiences after playing in a spirited contest, like a football game. He has done his best. He has blocked, tackled, run, passed, and performed to the limits of his ability. He has done everything humanly possible to win the game and bring honor to his team and his coach. That deep inner feeling of satisfaction, earned even at the expense of the bumps, bruises, and pulled muscles is joy, the joy of complete dedication, the joy of personal sacrifice. What about you? Does that kind of loyal devotion reside within your heart and mind? One of the books Bonhoeffer wrote is named *The Cost of Discipleship*. What about your discipleship and its cost, especially in a day and time right here in America where the persecution of Christians is becoming an ever present and growing reality?

Finally, let me call your attention to one more reason for joy in Paul's letter to the Philippians. It's found in chapter 3, verse 14. Paul says, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Notice that he doesn't use the word "joy" in this verse of Scripture, but it is clearly understood as something that he joyfully anticipates in the future. In fact, in chapter two he had already indicated that heaven was his preferred destination, although he would also joyfully continue to minister to God's people here on earth, especially his beloved Philippians. Let's be honest. Paul was getting up in years. His eyesight was nearly gone and for that reason he had to dictate his letters. Life on the road going from church to church was not easy, especially when it also included several incarcerations and at least one shipwreck. He was ready for heaven. He was ready to receive the gift of eternal life, and that was genuinely a cause for celebration. Indeed, the prospect of eternal life is something that should bring joy to everyone who has entrusted their lives into the care of Christ.

Years ago there was an elderly woman who lived on the fifth floor of a dilapidated apartment building in a large city. She was getting up in years and for months she had been confined to bed. But she was still a cheerful Christian. Regularly one of the ladies from the church, a woman by the name of Helen, visited with her. On this particular occasion she stopped by with a friend. Now the friend was a rather pessimistic person. She always looked on the darker side of things. As they entered the building, she said, "Helen, this is a crummy dump." Pointing to the staircase, Helen replied, "It gets better higher up." So they climbed the stairs, but second floor was no better than the first. Looking around her friend shook her head in disgust and said, "This place is filthy." Again Helen replied, "It gets better higher up." And so it continued floor after floor, the friend complaining and Helen

saying, "It gets better higher up." Finally they arrived at the fifth floor, and opening the door to the small apartment, Helen's friend was truly amazed. It was truly a thing of beauty. There was a pretty rug on the floor, nice furniture, flowers and ferns everywhere, and even a little bird happily chirping on the window sill. Even the person they had come to visit possessed such a cheerful countenance that Helen's friend was at a loss for words. Finally she blurted out, "It must be very hard for you to lie here all the time without being able to get up and about." To which the elderly woman offered a joyous smile and said, "It gets better higher up."

The joy that develops out of Christian friendship, the joy of proclaiming the gospel, the joy of suffering for the cause of Christ, the joy of eternal life, these are some of the reasons for Paul's declaration to the Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, 'Rejoice!'" As he spoke to them so he speaks to us, telling us to be joyful and happy Christians, telling us to be Christians with shining faces.