

Paul Expresses Joy in Prison

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Joy in Christ is available regardless of our circumstances.

On May 6, 1966, Richard Wurmbrand stood before the United States Senate in Washington, D.C., to talk about the torture he endured at the hands of Nazis and Communists. The Romanian pastor had been hung upside down, beaten, prodded with red-hot pokers, cut with knives, starved, forced to stand in nail-lined coffins, and thrown into freezers until he lost consciousness. Pastor Wurmbrand was also told that unless he recanted his faith and stopped preaching God's Word, his wife and his son would be tortured and killed.

He did not recant.

In his memoir, *Tortured for Christ*, Wurmbrand reflected on the joy he experienced in Jesus Christ during his fourteen-year imprisonment.



How do you think believers like this are able to endure such hardships for Christ?



Voices from the Church

"Fellowship with the Father and the Son is most vivid and sweet, and Christian joy is greatest, when the cross is heaviest."¹

—J. I. Packer

As we explore Philippians, remember that Paul wrote these joyful words *from prison*. We will see the reason Paul could be joyful was because he could look past his circumstances—past any pain and hardship he was experiencing in that moment—and know the gospel was advancing. Hearing that Jesus Christ was being glorified and knowing other believers were standing firm in their faith filled the apostle with joy. Paul found deep joy in Christ shining in and through his life. We will also see that knowing Christ would shine through his death gave him joy as well.

1. Joy at Seeing the Gospel Advance (Phil. 1:12-18a)

In the opening of his letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer *with joy*” (Phil. 1:3-4). Look at his warm words: “I hold you *in my heart*” (1:7) and “how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus” (1:8). His words of encouragement would not end there. The imprisoned apostle was just getting started.

¹² I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. ¹⁴ And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

¹⁵ Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. ¹⁶ The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. ^{18a} What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

As Paul reflected on his circumstances, he wrote about the joy his physical hardships brought him. Paul was grateful not necessarily for the slander, opposition, shipwreck, and chains *themselves* but the fruit they all bore—the advance of the gospel. The apostle recognized that his pains, as difficult as they might have been, had purpose. Through his afflictions, Christ was being made known to others who may not have heard the gospel otherwise. The imperial guard was a perfect example of this (1:13).

The imperial guard was a military force tasked with protecting the Roman emperor and serving him as he saw fit. As these elite soldiers rotated shifts guarding the emperor's prisoner from Jerusalem, Paul told his story and shared the gospel with them. Paul, the captive, took advantage of the captive audience God had given him! He wasted no time in sharing Jesus with every soldier who guarded him so that the exact reason for his imprisonment was evident. Paul was in chains for preaching Christ.

Light shines brighter in darkness than in daylight. Paul found joy in the shadows of his imprisonment knowing the darkness allowed others to see Jesus, the Light of the World, more clearly. Through Paul's suffering, and ours, the cross is lifted high.



How have you seen God use suffering—yours or someone else's—to advance the gospel?

The church had risen up in response to Paul's imprisonment, but it had not risen as one. The church was united over newfound zeal to share the gospel, but it was divided over Paul, the person God had used to spark that zeal. While some preached the gospel out of love for Paul, others preached out of envy and rivalry, thinking they would cause him more trouble in prison.



Voices from Church History

"The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed."²

—Tertullian (circa 160–225)

Surely this distressed Paul. Surely he was hurt and angry that others would maliciously do something to harm him, especially preaching the gospel that was supposed to unite them together as one in Christ. Perhaps he was, but if so, he didn't stay there. Any additional pain or difficulty these people caused him was not his focus. Christ was. Paul recognized the one thing that mattered was that Christ was being proclaimed, and if that proclamation came through more hardships for him, he would rejoice all the more.

God can use any circumstance and any vessel to advance the gospel. Let us pursue joy in experiencing His kindness to use us.



Was Paul advocating that the ends justify the means in ministry, or does our attitude and motivation for serving God matter? How so?

2. Joy in Exalting Christ in Life or Death (Phil. 1:18b-26)


^{18b} Yes, and I will rejoice,¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance,²⁰ as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.²¹ For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell.²³ I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.²⁴ But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith,²⁶ so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

As we read these verses, we can feel the internal struggle along with Paul. He is wedged between two worlds and he is torn between the two. On one hand, Paul knew his appeal to Caesar could lead to his execution, which meant he would be with Jesus. And that was a thought that captivated Paul's mind and heart. The day he would be called to stand before Caesar might be the day Paul stood before his Savior and saw Him "face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12).

But on the other hand, Paul wanted to keep on breathing. He wanted to leave prison on his own two feet, not in a coffin. Not because he was afraid of dying—we have already seen that he longed to be with Christ—but instead because there was still more fruitful work to be done for Christ. Paul wanted to continue the mission God had given him to push the gospel farther and faster. Death would be gain for him, but life would be Christ—every minute of every day God gave him would be lived to reveal Jesus.

Which was better? Living *for* Christ in this life or living *with* Christ in the next? For Paul there was no clear winner. They both got him what, or better who, he wanted—Jesus Christ.

One day, your life will be summarized by a single punctuation mark. On your tombstone, the only thing separating your birthdate from your death-date will be a dash, a small horizontal line. It won't matter if you die at twenty-six or ninety-six. All our dashes will be the same length. What matters is not how long you live but how you live and, more importantly, *for Whom* you live.

 What are you living for today? How might you need to change the way you spend your time, energy, affections, and resources?

 How should our perspective of death encourage and challenge unbelievers?

There are many times when we wrestle with the disconnect between what our minds know and what our hearts feel. *Knowing* we are to live for Christ in all circumstances is one thing. *Feeling joy* in living for Christ in difficult circumstances is another. Is there anything we can do to close that gap?

If you can't feel joy today, steal it from tomorrow. Allow your future hope of living with Christ to foster present joy in living for Him. If you can't find joy in the darkness of the *here* and *now*, you can borrow it from the light of the *then* and *there*. The psalmist has promised, "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning" (Ps. 30:5).

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

88. Edification

Edification refers to the progressive growth and maturity of the church, both individually and collectively. The Bible talks about different ways maturity, or edification, may happen, such as through the fellowship Christians share with one another (1 Cor. 12:26; Gal. 6:2). In addition, edification takes place through the church's preaching and teaching of Scripture (Eph. 4:11-12), helping people understand and internalize the whole counsel of God. In the end, edification is building up the body of Christ, equipping people to live on mission for the kingdom of God.



What are some of your greatest challenges to living in joy?

3. Joy at Seeing Others Stand Firm in Suffering (Phil. 1:27-30)

²⁷ Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸ and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. ²⁹ For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, ³⁰ engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

“Just one thing, Philippians,” Paul told them. “Just one thing I want you to take away from my experiences and my struggle with the desire to live and die: Live your life worthy of the gospel of Christ!”

Paul was telling the church exactly what they needed to hear. He did not want them to see his adversity as something distant, something they were detached from in Philippi. They needed to be ready. If it wasn't already there, opposition was coming and they needed to brace for it—“standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (v. 27). They would suffer for Christ. They were engaged in the same struggle as Paul. Were they ready?

With this persecution on the horizon, the Christians in Philippi needed Paul's letter more than they perhaps realized. Many of the Philippians would likely find themselves facing the same plight as Paul. That's why he challenged them, and us, “not only [to] believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (v. 29).

Why? Because persecution makes the gospel go viral—and global—just as it had as a result of Paul's imprisonment. When the world sees Christians suffer and die for Christ, they are forced to consider if there is something *real* about faith in Him.



What lessons can we learn from Paul’s encouragement to the Philippians?



How does standing firm together with the church impact the way we might handle increasing persecution for our faith?

Paul’s letter to the Philippians is a two-way street. He encouraged *them* to endure suffering, but they encouraged *him* with their obedience. Before His ascension, Jesus told His disciples, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The word “witness,” is *martus* in Greek. It’s where we get the word “martyr.”



Voices from Church History

“We want to be saved, but we insist that Christ do all the dying.”³

—A. W. Tozer (1897-1963)

Paul had witnessed in the courtrooms of Jerusalem and Caesarea. Soon he would witness in another way—as a martyr. But Paul wouldn’t be the only one. The apostle had “so great a cloud of witnesses” who would also die with him (Heb. 12:1). That cloud of witnesses would soon cover the entire Roman Empire.

One day, Jesus Christ will return to earth, “coming in clouds with great power and glory” (Mark 13:26). But before He does, let’s decide today what kind of witnesses we will be.



What stories of martyrs or faithful believers in history have encouraged you to live more faithfully for Christ?

Conclusion

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses into the castle-church door in Wittenberg, Germany. It was a hammer heard round the world—a sound that spawned five banner cries of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation: *Solo Christo* (by Christ Alone), *Sola Fides* (by Faith Alone), *Sola Gratia* (by Grace Alone), *Sola Scriptura* (by Scripture Alone), and *Soli Deo Gloria* (Glory to God Alone).

We should never be ashamed to shout these five *solas* at the top of our voices. But today, five centuries later, I think our generation should add a sixth *sola* to the list—*Solus Gaudium* (by joy alone). Joy in Jesus is the greatest defense against the onslaught of the world, the temptations of the flesh, and the vicious assaults of the devil.

Christian, you are most beautiful where you are most broken. Wurmbrand, the imprisoned Romanian pastor, knew it. Paul knew it. And so do the Christians that are currently suffering in chains throughout the world.

When persecution comes your way, take out your hammer, point it at Christ's nail-pierced palms, and then drive the thesis "Joy Alone" deep into the doors of this world. Because you never know how your joy in Jesus today will change the church tomorrow.

CHRIST CONNECTION: Far from seeing his imprisonment as an obstacle to God's mission, Paul trusted that God's sovereign plan over his life was working to further God's kingdom and build up His church. Because salvation for our sins came through the redemptive suffering of Jesus, Paul understood that God's mission would go forward through the redemptive suffering of God's people.



Voices from Church History

"There isn't a word about feeling in the scriptures in reference to salvation. It doesn't say, 'He that feeleth.' It is 'he that believeth.' Not one word about feeling. I do a great many things that I don't feel like doing. Obedience means marching right on whether we feel like it or not. Many times we go against our feelings. Faith is one thing; feeling is another...Don't mind your feelings. Let feelings take care of themselves. What you want is to obey."⁴

—D. L. Moody (1837-1899)

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to express joy and confidence in God's plan, no matter what circumstances we encounter.

1. What are some ways we can encourage others who are enduring hardship for their faith without minimizing their suffering?

2. Identify one way you will exalt Christ in your life this week.

3. How can your present circumstances lead to opportunities to exhibit joy in Christ and to share with others the reason for the hope you have within you?

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