

Paul's Epistle to the Philippians

Chapter Four

Rejoice, Now and Always

The final chapter of Philippians deals with some practical matters, including the message of thanks for support from Paul's congregation. It also offers some advice and words of encouragement that have resonated to this day in Christian life.

The opening verse (v. 1) is really the conclusion to the admonition that concluded chapter 3, where Paul had urged the Philippians to follow his example and think of themselves as citizens, not of an earthly empire, but of the realm where Christ ruled. His admonition now is simply to "stand firm." This is the kind of exhortation that would have sounded familiar to the Philippians as Roman citizens, and perhaps veterans of the Roman military. But their station is not on the front lines of a line of battle, but "in the Lord." What that means had been spelled out by the Christ hymn of chapter 2, the willingness to engage in humble service of those in need.

Within this exhortation Paul addresses the congregation in words that show his confidence in them and also sound themes important for the letter. The Philippians are, he says "my joy and crown." The "crown" evokes a scene of victory in an athletic contest, the kind of image that Paul uses elsewhere (Note the same language at 1 Thess 2:19; for the notion of life as a race see 1 Cor 9:24; cf. 1 Tim 6:12; 2 Tim 4:7). In the first chapter Paul had also expressed his pride in the life of the Philippian community (1:1-11). "Joy" has been a theme that runs through the whole letter (or letters). Paul rejoices in the proclamation of the gospel (1:18). He yearns to share the joy of the Philippians' faith (1:25). He urged the addressees to welcome Epaphroditus

with joy (2:29) and he had called on them to rejoice (3:1). He will soon issue that summons again (4:4-7).

Before Paul develops the theme of rejoicing he has words of admonition for two women in the community, Euodia and Syntyche (v. 2). Their names in Greek might be translated as “Fragrant” and “Lucky,” not names that one would associate with the upper classes in Roman society. Whatever their social standing, the fact that Paul singles them out for attention suggests that they have been playing leading roles in the Philippian community. In that regard they would resemble many other women who bore significant responsibility in the early Christian groups founded by Paul. These women include:

Prisca, with her husband Aquila, a fellow worker with Paul (Rom 16:3; 1 Cor 16:19; cf. Acts 18:2-26 and 2 Tim 4:19),

Junia, who with her husband was “prominent among the apostles” (Rom 16:7),

Chloe, whose “people,” probably members of her household, delivered to Paul a letter from his Corinthian converts (1 Cor 1:11);

Phoebe, a “deacon” of the Church at Cenchreae, the port of Corinth (Rom 16:3), who was probably the first recipient of a copy of Paul’s letter to Rome;

the anonymous women who “pray and prophesy,” i.e., lead worship, in the Corinthian community (1 Cor 11:5).

Paul goes on (v. 3) to speak of Euodia and Syntyche as companions who have “struggled beside me in the work of the gospel” and lists them with other “co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.” Euodia and Syntyche are not marginal participants in the life of the Philippian church or in Paul’s missionary endeavors; their dispute, whatever its basis, was a cause for concern. Their disagreement, unlike the kinds of differences in the community at Corinth about

issues such as eating sacrificial meat, or proper behavior at the worship assembly, apparently did not rise to the level that required Paul to discuss theological principles, as he did in 1 Corinthians. The dispute may simply have been a conflict of strong personalities. Paul, in any case, encourages the two women to “have the same mind.” Whether this admonition is from the same original letter or not, in giving this advice Paul probably has in mind the advice that introduced his Christ hymn (2:5), the summons to have the “same mind” that was in Christ.

While Paul admonishes Euodia and Syntyche to get along, he also addresses an unnamed third party, “my loyal companion” (v. 3), asking him to assist the women. This address to an anonymous single individual may be another indication that what we have as a single letter combines fragments of more than one letter of Paul. It is also possible that Paul made assumptions about the mechanism of delivering his correspondence that are not explicit or transparent to us. Paul’s letters were not delivered by a public postal service, but by his emissaries, people like Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19-30). They would have carried the letter to the community, which probably met as a house church in the home of one of members of the community. Paul may have had that householder in mind as one who could mediate whatever dispute had arisen.

After delivering his gentle admonition, Paul returns to his call to “rejoice” (vv. 4-7). His call perhaps echoes the frequent summons in the Psalms to rejoice (e.g., Ps 48:11; 64:10; 97:1, 12; 118:24) or the prophetic commands to rejoice in the salvation that God had or was about to accomplish (Isa 25:9; 65:18; Joel 2:21, 23; Zech 2:10). Paul is so taken with this summons to joy that he emphatically repeats it twice in this one verse (v. 4). Paul’s insistence on joy, even in the midst of suffering and sorrow is not unique to Philippians. It also appears in an emphatic way in

2 Cor 6:10. In the midst of a long catalogue of the tensions in his life between appearances and reality.

Paul's insistence on joy paralleled in the farewell discourses of the Fourth Gospel (John 14:28; 15:11; 16:20-24, 33; 17:13) give expression to an eschatological hope that has implications for the present reality of the believer. Paul makes clear the ground of his joy in the next verse (v. 5) when he reminds his congregation that "The Lord is near." Paul firmly believed that he was living in the last days and that he would soon see the promises of a transformation of the world with Christ's return in glory (cf. 1 Thess 4:13-18; 1 Cor 7:26-31). Yet for Paul joy was not simply a response to a hoped for reality. It was also something that he thought could and should be cultivated as part of the life of the spirit that believers now lived. That seems to be implied by the admonition that he offers just before referring to the coming of the Lord, when he advises the Philippians to "let your gentleness be known to everyone." The association of joy and gentleness recalls Paul's famous description in Gal 5:22 of the characteristics of life lived in the Spirit, as opposed to the flesh. His description of the "fruits of the spirit" begins with love, immediately followed by joy, works through other virtues or states, and concludes with "gentleness and self-control." For Paul, joy is part of a larger picture, an emotion perhaps, but also an attitude, a stance, that is based in the experience of God's presence in his beloved community and intimately tied to the other virtues or stances appropriate to that set of relationships. Paul's remarks of joy throughout Philippians is part of that general celebratory stance toward joy characteristic of his thinking.

In his next bit of advice (v. 6) not to worry but to pray, Paul echoes the teaching of Jesus to imitate the lilies of the field and the birds of the air (Matt 6:25-34; Luke 12:22-32) and to offer petitionary prayer to a gracious heavenly father (Matt 6:7-13; Luke 11:2-4).

Paul offers a bit of encouragement often cited in Christian worship, assuring the Philippians that if they so act, the “peace of God” will be with them. Like “joy”, peace is something that Paul often celebrates, as the result of being “justified” (Rom 5:1), as a characteristic of life of the Spirit (Rom 8:6; 14:17; Gal 5:22). Like joy it is both gift (Rom 15:13) from the God of peace (1 Cor 14:33), for which one may pray (1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; 6:16; 1 Thess 5:23), and something to be pursued (Rom 14:19; 2 Cor 13:11).

The peace of which Paul speaks “passes all understanding” (v. 7). It is a divine mystery, not reducible to ordinary human experience. Paul will often use similar language to highlight the transcendent dimension of his gospel (Rom 8:31-39; 11:33-36; 16:25; 1 Cor 2:9; 15:51).

Paul begins his attention to some practical matters with another reference to rejoicing (v. 10), this time his own. The cause of that rejoicing is the concern shown for him by the Philippians who had apparently sent him some support. Paul eventually gives thanks for that aid (v. 14). Before doing so he assures the Philippians that was not really needy. Sounding rather like a Stoic sage, he indicates that he knew how to deal with depravation (vv. 11-12). Paul may sound a bit too self-assured here, but he is not above boasting in his own ministerial style when it serves a rhetorical purpose (1 Cor 9) and sometimes does so with heavy irony (2 Cor 11-12). Here his reference to his own ability to cope, coupled with the word of thanks may be designed to forestall any further gifts from the Philippians. While grateful for their support, he does not want to put himself overly much in their debt, precisely the kind of concern he claimed in 1 Corinthians.

His final paragraph reinforces that stance. He expresses gratitude for previous gifts (vv. 15-16), when he was conducting missionary activity in that part of northern Greece (cf. Acts 16-17). He highlights the fact that the Philippians alone among the churches of the region were

supportive (v. 15). But he is not seeking any further gift. He is quite satisfied with what Epaphroditus has brought (v 18), a gift that he describes with terms taken from the Temple cult, a “sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God” (v. 18). In that description Paul uses a strategy, to equate generosity with a sacral act; that may have been part of his own fundraising ability, long imitated by leaders of Christian communities. Paul had used to good effect his ability in raising money for the poor in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8-9; Rom 15:30-32), a major focus of his ministry among the Gentiles of the Aegean region.

After giving thanks for their support, Paul expresses his hope that God will return their favor (v. 19). A prayer, giving glory to God, a final greeting and wish for God’s grace conclude the letter (vv. 20-23).

Questions for Discussion:

1. How do you assess Paul’s work as a pastor, mediating disputes, encouraging and offering gratitude for reasonable support, expressing solidarity with his congregation?
2. Does Paul’s “theology of joy” make sense? Can joy be understood not only as a reactive emotion, but also a stance or virtue to be cultivated?
3. Can we learn anything about living a Christian life from Paul’s attention to “peace” as well as joy?
4. Since we do not share Paul’s apocalyptic hopes for an immediate return of Christ, can we share his vision for Christian life?

Further Reading:

L. Gregory Bloomquist, “Subverted by Joy: Joy and Suffering in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians,” *Interpretation* (2007) 270–282.

Stephen E. Fowl, “Know your Context: Giving and Receiving Money in Philippians,” *Interpretation* 56 (2002) 45-58.

Wendell Willis, “The Shaping of Character: Virtue in Philippians 4:8–9,” *Restoration Quarterly* 54 (2012) 65–76.