

## ***JOY IN THE DARKNESS, PHIL1:1-11***

Letters from Prison #1

◆**Intro:** This letter has been called by scholars Paul's letter of joy. It's one of Paul's "prison epistles", because that's where he was when he wrote it. So here is a person who writes joyfully while incarcerated. Have *you* ever been in prison, or on house arrest? I want to know how this can happen. There must be something about joy that doesn't depend on circumstances, and yet so much of our moment by moment emotional stability seems quite bound to circumstances, doesn't it? How are people joyful who have nothing of the so called "good life" that the other half has? And what about the book titles promise it: *The Joy of Natural Childbirth*? I don't know about you but from what I've seen of childbirth, give me that *unnatural* shot or pill or anything at all! What if I'm all alone, or bored outta my gord? Is joy ruled out then? Why do so many rich people not have joy? Well let's get some clues about joy from the Apostle Paul, shall we?

◆**1. True Joy transcends circumstances.** If you're feeling poorly under the circumstances, then get out from under the circumstances and look up into the future.

◆You can read all about Paul's experiences in Philippi in Acts 16. He had a vision of a man from Macedonia calling for help, so to Philippi he went; a central city built by Alexander the Great's warrior father, Phil. Philippi was on a major trade route called the Egnatian Way, and was essentially a Roman city in Greek territory. There was a gold mine nearby. You know what that does to a city! It's location was so pivotal that it was the scene of

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the battle after Julius Caesar was assassinated in which Octavian and Mark Antony defeated Brutus and Cassius winning control of the Roman Empire. Philippi was one of the places where wealthy Roman veterans retired.

◆ But it's wasn't so luxurious for Paul. He started a church there beginning with one woman. He cast a spirit out of a slave girl who was telling fortunes and also following him around. It created a riot landing him and Silas in prison, but only after being severely beaten. When the authorities found out he was a Roman citizen as well, it was, as they say, "a scene". And so I ask you, if you were reminiscing on your excursion to Philippi like Paul's, wouldn't it be possible your thoughts weren't such joyful thoughts?

◆ But then this isn't limited to just Paul. The early Christ-followers exemplified the same kind of things.

◆ *Acts 5:41 The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.*

◆ *1Pet. 4:13 But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ.*

◆ And then I think about myself, and maybe you've had similar experiences.

◆ You come back to your car in the parking lot to find dent and a scratch and it's all you can heatedly think about for the rest of the day.

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◆ You have a head cold and *don't nobody expect any kindness from you!*

◆ Best Buy won't give you your money back for some piece of electronics and it ruins your day.

◆ 2. My joy seems so much less... stable than those early followers of Jesus. Can I learn their secret? Here's part of it: True joy needs an eternal focal point. That is, to really live in joy in any moment, you need to have an answer to life's biggest questions, and that answer needs to be hopeful.

◆ illy: Tim Keller, in *Making Sense of God*, writes "Imagine you have two women of the same age, the same socioeconomic status, the same educational level, and even the same temperament. You hire both of them and say to each, "You are part of an assembly line, and I want you to put part A into slot B and then hand what you have assembled to someone else. I want you to do that over and over for eight hours a day." You put them in identical rooms with identical lighting, temperature, and ventilation. You give them the very same number of breaks in a day. It is very boring work. Their conditions are the same in every way—except for one difference. You tell the first woman that at the end of the year you will pay her thirty thousand dollars, and you tell the second woman that at the end of the year you will pay her thirty million.

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◆ After a couple of weeks the first woman will be saying, "Isn't this tedious? Isn't it driving you insane? Aren't you thinking about quitting?" And the second woman will say, "No. This is perfectly acceptable. In fact, I whistle while I work." What is going on? You have two human beings who are experiencing identical circumstances in radically different ways. What makes the difference? It is their expectation of the future. This illustration is not intended to say that all we need is a good income. It does, however, show that what we believe about our future completely controls how we are experiencing our present. We are irreducibly hope-based creatures."

◆ *"For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."* 2  
*Corinthians 4:17, 18, NIV.*

◆ B. Now what is the focal point that permeates Paul's letter to the Philippians? Lets see if we can pick it out.

◆ *v1 servants of Christ Jesus...* The term is actually "slaves". Paul sees himself as intrinsically bound to the risen Jesus. His life has been linked in with this man who actually climbed out of his grave.

◆ *v1 to the saints in Christ Jesus...* (there's Christ again, right?) And do you know who a saint is? The word means to

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separate out, set aside as special. People think a saint is a person of a high moral level, or a destination of moral perfection to which one arrives. Not so. Sainthood isn't something you accomplish. It simply means you have been singled out, claimed, and requisitioned by God for his holy control and use. It is a specific mind and attitude towards persons on God's part, not ours (Barth). It is a identity *bestowed* on me by someone (Christ v1) who chose me apart from my deserving. Isn't it interesting that Paul's letter addresses the congregation of saints before he even mentions the Council (elders and deacons)?

◆v2 *grace to you and peace from...* From who? From celebrities that sing you songs from their mansions during and epidemic? From newscasters who tell you we're all in this together? (Well thanks for that. Now I don't feel bad that I lost my job, 'cause we're in this together, whatever that means!) No Paul speaks grace from God, from Jesus again whom he's mentioned three times in three sentences. Grace (*charis*, the same root as joy/*chara*), comes from God, you know, the being who holds the stars up in the night sky, and stirs up the oceans with his pinky. Are you seeing a pattern here?

◆v4-5 *I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel...* Why is Paul joyful at the thought of the Philippians? They joined in with the gospel! The story of

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the man Jesus who died to forgive human sin, who couldn't stay dead, who with the Father and the Spirit rule all of history far and away above even the Roman Empire. (You see, Paul's everyday perspective looks far beyond the national government and which party controls the House.)

◆v6 *he who began...will carry it on to completion in Christ Jesus.* There HE is again! Why does Paul keep mentioning Jesus every time he opens his mouth? Is his head obsessed with Jesus? Well, yes. We'll come back to that.

◆Notice too the confidence (Paul's word) that he has that "it's going to be alright in the end." This is no cliché of a friend trying to comfort a dying comrade in his last breaths. No. This is literally true because with God, you cannot lose. His saints, his chosen ones have eternal security! That security resides in the person of, you guessed it, Jesus Christ –that fellow the Romans crucified but he just came right back to life. The End of all things is (v6) *the day of Christ Jesus.*

◆See the pattern now? Joy (chara), Grace (charis), rejoicing (chairō), Thankfulness (eucharisteo) –all of this is lashed with eternal chains to the historical fact of resurrected Jesus! Paul's joy is rooted firmly in the Resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection changed everything for human history. The resurrection is the future promise. This is the story every healthy Christian church preaches every week, everywhere in 2020, the three-fold truth of

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the Gospel: Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again! Someone who lives in a moment-by-moment awareness of that, can “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” Romans 12:12, NIV.

◆ But we don't do we? We are do easily distracted. Things go wrong so we daydream about sex with the neighbor's wife. We're disappointed so we imagine what else we could do with whiskey. We feel empty so we plan on the next gadget we're gonna purchase. That's not what Paul daydreams about in prison. He lives in an utter awe of the dead man that came walking alive. Lift up your eyes! Lift up your eyes.

◆ As a church we often identify ourselves as people of justice, or people of compassion, or people of the right theology, when in reality we are People of the Resurrection! All those other things are only worth pursuit because of resurrection.

◆ *“Imagine you're a billionaire, and you have three ten-dollar bills in your wallet. You get out of a cab, and you hand the driver one of the bills for an eight-dollar fare. Later in the day you look in and find out there's only one ten-dollar bill there, and you say, “Either I dropped a ten-dollar bill somewhere, or I gave the taxi driver two bills.”*

◆ *“What are you going to do? Are you going to get all upset? Are you going to the police and demand they search the city for the*

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*cabdriver? No, you are going to shrug. You're a billionaire. You lost ten dollars. So what? You are too rich to be concerned about that kind of loss.*

◆ *This week, somebody criticized you. Something you bought or invested in turned out to be less valuable than you thought. Something you wanted to happen didn't go the way you wanted it to—these are real losses. But what are you going to do, if you're a Christian? Will this setback disrupt your contentment with life? Will you shake your fist at God? Toss and turn at night? If so, I submit that it's because you don't know how truly rich you are. If you're that upset about your status with other people, if you're constantly lashing out at people for hurting your feelings, you might call it a lack of self-control or a lack of self-esteem, and it is. But more fundamentally, you have totally lost touch with your identity. As a Christian, you're a spiritual billionaire and you're wringing your hands over ten dollars.” -Tim Keller.*

◆ *Lift up your eyes. See what your identity is in Christ.*

◆ **Conclusion:** Now everything wasn't hunky-dory in Philippi. We'll see later in the letter that there were disputes (4:2), people with rival motives (1:15), and so forth. But Paul writes to them with joy. How? Paul identified in this letter as a slave of the resurrected Jesus writing to fellow slaves of Jesus. Lets take a lesson from the songs of slaves. Can you think of any?

◆ *I Got A Robe...*

◆ *He's got the whole world in his hands.*



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- ◆ Swing low sweet chariot coming for to carry me home.
- ◆ There is a Balm in Gilead
- ◆ One noticeable feature of all these songs is their eye on the future which lets them sing in the present. That's because the Gospel of the Resurrected Christ has begun and there's no stopping it! It's like a lit fuse that has passed under the barricade to the powder keg. It's like a torpedo released from the sub. It's like a secret aired on national TV -there ain't no going back after the Resurrection. That's how it can be alright when everything is all wrong, because we know how this story ends. That's what makes the things Paul prays for over the Philippians possible: love, insight, purity, blamelessness, righteousness (v9-11). Be joined to the resurrected Jesus. Request his Lordship over your life. Join his saints set apart for grace and peace.