

Complete My Joy, Make Me Proud

In the name of him who commands all authority in heaven and on earth, dear friends in Christ: Today's Epistle is a continuing portion of St. Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. We spent some time with it last week, so we'll start with a little review to refresh your memory if you were here or to bring you up to speed if you weren't.

Paul is in Rome where he is being held under house arrest while he awaits trial for a crime he did not commit. The only thing he's guilty of is preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But for this his Christ-hating enemies believe him to be public enemy number one, so they've trumped up all kinds of accusations against him. It's been a long ordeal. Altogether, Paul has spent four years in confinement. Because he believes he won't get a fair trial at any lower court, he's appealed to the Emperor, and it takes a long time to for the average Roman citizen to get his case heard. To the members of the church at Philippi, Paul's confinement is a terrible tragedy. They see the greatest evangelist who ever lived, the man who first told them good news about Jesus and who founded their church, the man they dearly love, unable to do what he does best: get out there, preach the Gospel, and save souls from damnation. They also fear that his enemies will have their way and at trial he'll be condemned to death. So they've sent word to Paul expressing their concerns, along with a generous gift to help pay for his defense.

The book of the Bible we call Philippians is Paul's response to them. In it he thanks the members of the congregation for their care and concern, and especially for their prayers on his behalf. He also provides them a good deal of comfort. In the section we looked at last week, we heard Paul explain how his difficult circumstances, as tragic as they seem, were actually helping the cause of Christ. In many surprising ways the Lord was using his confinement to get the Gospel to more people than he would have reached if he were free. So, Paul told them (and I'm paraphrasing), "I don't want you worrying about me. I'm in the Lord's hands, and he knows and will do what's best for me and for you. Entrust all things to him. Everything will work out in the end according to his wise and perfect plan.

This is where today's section picks up. Having just told them not to worry about him because worrying does no good, he says there *are* a couple of things that you *can* do for me that will help. And that's what I want you to focus on.

He sets up the first pitch with a long rhetorical wind up. He says, "If I've given you any encouragement in Christ, if you've found any comfort in God's love, if you have any participation in the Spirit, if you've got any affection and sympathy ..." And look: these are all standing conditions. Of course, Paul has encouraged them in Christ. He preached the Gospel of salvation to them. They know that their sins are forgiven, that they have eternal life through faith in Jesus. What's more encouraging than that? And of course, they've found comfort in God's love, a love so great that he gave up his Son for them. It still boggles their minds. It's also a given that they are all partakers in the same Holy Spirit. It's through the one Spirit that they became believers. It's the one Spirit who worked in them the gift of faith and who gave them new life in Holy Baptism. And it's evident that they have affection and sympathy for Paul. That's why they are worried about him.

So, with all these conditions that Paul knows for certain have been met, he says, "If any of that is true, then complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in one accord and of one mind." And here we see so clearly that Paul has the heart of a pastor, for this is every pastor's single greatest desire for the people he serves. It is the same thing

Jesus himself prayed for on the night of his arrest: that those who believed in him would be united as one in mind and in heart, that is, in what they believed and in what they did together and how they treated each other as a result of their faith in Christ.

That the Philippians are faithful Christians fills Paul's heart with joy; but here he says my joy in you will be complete if you have among yourselves perfect doctrinal unity. I want you all to confess and believe the same truths about Jesus, about his life, death, and resurrection, about his Gospel of salvation, about God and creation, about the work of the Holy Spirit, about what the Christian life is supposed to be, and about the life of the world to come. No divisions. No contrary opinions. No false teachings. I want you all on the same page. That will tickle me pink. You will cause my joy to overflow.

And you're probably thinking, "That's a pretty tall order." Yes it is. And Paul knew it. The Philippian congregation was only one of many Christian churches that Paul got up and running. And some of them, the Corinthian church especially, were nightmares of disunity and dysfunction. Various factions were vying with each other for power and control. Others were denying basic tenants of the faith like belief in the resurrection. The way they did Holy Communion was atrocious; so bad that Paul said it wasn't really Holy Communion at all.

In our day, we have only to look at the wide array of Christian denominations to know that achieving doctrinal unity is a seemingly impossible goal. The reason we have so many denominations is that though we all call ourselves Christians, we do not believe the same things. And, of course, within each denomination there are divisions of belief and practice. Even local congregations are divided on certain issues. It's like where two are three are gathered in Jesus' name, there will be at least the same number of different beliefs. It would seem that in Paul's great desire for the Philippian church, he was doomed to disappointment.

The point to be made is that Paul didn't think so. Sure, he knew doctrinal unity was difficult to achieve; but he didn't think it was impossible. The reason he wrote the epistles that make up most of the New Testament was to correct errors and create unity of faith among Christians. How this is doctrinal unity achieved? Simple: by studying the Word of God. If one person says "yes" to a theological statement, and another says, "no", we don't agree to disagree. No, we go to the Word of God to find the answer. We go to the Word of God to find the truth. The Word itself is clear. It's the sinful baggage we bring to it that makes it cloudy. It's our presuppositions. It's how we don't want to believe parts of what it says. It's the way we want to bend the Word so it supports what we want it to say. Division comes of sinful mankind's refusal to submit to the authority of God's Word. Unity comes of confessing our sinful desire to place ourselves above the Word and trusting instead in what God has clearly spoken.

It is an achievable goal. By God's one Holy Spirit we can all believe the one truth. And from this unity of faith flows true Christian love. It's a love that seeks the good of others in the body of Christ above one's own good, even as Jesus sought our good at the expense of his own life. Pure faith leads to pure practice. And this is what Paul wanted above all else for the church at Philippi.

Paul had a second request for them. He said that on the day of the Lord he wanted them to make him proud that he had not labored in vain. We normally think of pride as a sin. Indeed, it usually is. But there is a good sort of pride. It's the kind of pride that a parent feels when they see their child make good choices, display godly virtue, withstand temptation, and show dogged determination when the going gets tough. These sorts of things tell a father or mother that all that hard work of parenting paid off. And when it does, it's not at all wrong to tell that son or daughter, "You make me proud."

This is the kind of pride Paul wants to have on the day of the Lord. That is, he wants to see all the members of the Philippian church standing with the faithful in their resurrected bodies before the throne of God, and hear the Lord Jesus say to them, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” That, says Paul, will make me proud in knowing that the Lord used me as his instrument, and that my labor for you in Christ was not wasted. You will make me proud by staying faithful and making it to the final goal.

This statement is preceded, though, by several warnings that Paul issues. And these words of caution take his hearers back to the time Moses and the exodus from Egypt. Recall that at that time, all Israel was rescued from slavery. All Israel passed through the Red Sea. All Israel gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai and heard the voice of the Lord. But not all Israel made it to the final goal. No, by the time they crossed the Jordan, the wilderness was filled with the graves of those who grumbled about conditions in the desert, who questioned the authority of Moses, who turned from the Lord to worship idols, who sinned sexually with cultic prostitutes, or who simply lost faith and wanted to give up and to go back to Egypt.

Paul’s point here is that we have a greater salvation. It’s not human bondage we’ve been rescued from, but the bondage of sin and death. And we have a greater deliverer. Not a mere man like Moses, but the Lord Jesus who loved us and gave himself for us. Ours is a greater Baptism. Not passing through the Red Sea, but the washing of rebirth and regeneration in the Holy Spirit. Ours is a greater Word of God. Not the Law of Moses, but the Words of Jesus’ peace and forgiveness. Ours is a greater food for the journey. Not manna from heaven and water from a rock, but Christ’s true body and blood given under bread and wine. Ours is a greater goal. Not a semiarid stretch of land on the east side of the Mediterranean Sea, but the eternal Promised Land in paradise.

Because what we have is in every respect so much greater than what the ancient Israelites had, we are that much more guilty if we fall into the same sins that caused them to drop out along the way. We read those stories and think, “How could they be so faithless and stupid?” And then we turn around and do the same things they did when we grumble that things in the church are not exactly to our liking, or we question the authority of God’s Word, or we despise the Word by refusing to hear it or to submit ourselves to it.

This is why Paul says, “Do all things without grumbling or questioning.” And the questioning he means here is not the genuine desire to know the answer to a theological issue, but rather the contentious sort of questioning that seeks to undermine what God has said or established. Paul’s desire is that his hearers at Philippi be blameless and innocent of such things, children of God through faith in Jesus, without blemish, shining as lights of Christian faithfulness and virtue in this otherwise dark and loveless world. He wants them all to remain steadfast and to make it to the goal. That, he says, will make him proud that his work among them was not in vain.

Like I said earlier, in these two requests, Paul reveals the heart of every pastor. And with that in mind, what he said to them, I now say to you: complete my joy by being of the same mind and having the same love. And on the Day of the Lord, make me proud. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!