



## “Paul to the Philippians”

*Philippians 2:1–11*

***Happiness and Joy.***

***How? Where?***

A long time ago, an article in the New York Times caught my eye: “The Futile Pursuit of Happiness.”<sup>1</sup> The author traces the work of several researchers on our search for happiness. What they found is no real surprise. We humans are dreadful when it comes to imagining how we’ll feel about something in the future. As the author put it, “we overestimate the intensity and duration of our emotional reactions.” More simply stated, that new BMW isn’t going to make you as happy as you thought it would and any boost it does give to your happiness won’t last as long as you thought it would! The same is true on the downside; emotional devastation was less intense and shorter-lived than people expected. Mistakes we make in understanding what to expect from a raise or a new car or a new house lead directly to poor choices.

More recently, Arthur Brooks has been writing in *The Atlantic* and lecturing at Harvard Business School on the topic of happiness. Brooks brings together wide ranging research and finds, not surprisingly, that there are four keys to a happy life: faith, friends, family, meaningful work. Yes – that would about some it up, especially if the object of your faith is Jesus.

Sadly, many people think they know what will make them happy or content or joyful – but they don’t. The truth is that it is easy for us all to spend most of our lives looking for happiness, and even better, joy, in all the wrong places.

### ***Make me happy!***

Paul cared deeply for each church that he started and, surely, he hoped that they felt the same way towards him. In his letter to the Philippian Christians, he told them flat out what would make him happy – “Have the same thoughts, share the same love, be of one soul and mind . . . don’t do anything from selfish ambition or from a cheap desire to boast, but be humble towards one another, always considering others better than yourself . . . look out for one another’s interests, not just your own” (from the Good News Bible). This is what would make Paul happy, make his own joy complete. He didn’t want the Philippians’ praise or their money – only that they would humbly love one another.

Sometimes the Bible challenges our understanding – but not here. There is nothing confusing or ambiguous in Paul’s words. The challenge lies not in understanding, but in doing. We are called to lives of selflessness and sacrifice. Not only are we to “do unto others as they do unto us,” we are to put all others -- everyone -- ahead of ourselves. Indeed, this is the very meaning of love in the New Testament. True love

## Paul’s Letter to the Philippians

Paul’s letter to the Philippians is one of the brief poignant letters that Paul wrote during his several imprisonments. The others are Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon.

Philippi is in Greece, but in the first century it was no typical Greek town. Having about 10,000 inhabitants, Philippi was on the Via Ignatia, the major highway connecting Asia Minor and the Adriatic Sea. Named for Alexander the Great’s father, Philippi had the status of a Roman colony – its inhabitants were Roman citizens, with all the attendant privileges. City inscriptions were in Latin, not Greek. City government was modeled on Rome, not Athens. Philippi was very “Latinized.”

Eugene Peterson calls *Philippians* “Paul’s happiest letter.” Most commentators would agree. Perhaps this is because we read the letter knowing that Paul wrote it from prison, in circumstances that most of us will never face. Yet, in his adversity, Paul finds reason to celebrate everywhere he turns, and he prays that the Philippians will themselves find the joy that God has given him. Indeed, Paul writes that the Philippians themselves bring him great joy – they occupy a special place in his heart.

I urge you to find an easy-to-read version of *Philippians* (such as the *New Living Translation* or *The Good News*) and read the letter through in one sitting, perhaps several times. Take the time to read slowly, even prayerfully.

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<sup>1</sup> by Jon Gertner, published in the *NY Times* on September 7, 2003.

is not merely a feeling, it is action. Love is not abstract; it is concrete. God loved so much that he gave his only Son to die on a Roman cross. It is in the shadow of the cross that we learn about love: love is sacrifice and self-giving. It is putting others ahead of ourselves. It is the practice of humility – even in the midst of our ambitions.

### ***Humble Ambition***

The typical Philippian Christian hearing Paul's letter read aloud<sup>2</sup> was probably a farmer or herder, or perhaps a simple merchant or tradesman or homemaker. Their ambitions might have been to add a few sheep to their flock or sell a few more tunics in the market. We live in a far different world. Many of our life ambitions are played out in organizations. The large for-profit and not-for-profit organizations for which so many of us work simply did not exist in the first century. We live in the Age of the Organization – and it is only a little more than 100 years old!

In some ways, our challenges exceed those faced by the Philippians. Most of us do not work in isolation or even amongst just a few trusted friends. Rather, whether we are working with others to build cars or instruct third-graders or care for the ill, many of us must manage countless relationships every day. We have ample opportunities “to push our way to the front” or “sweet-talk our way to the top” rather than to “put ourselves aside and help others get ahead.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, such words hardly even seem to make sense in the context of the many modern workplaces. But we are followers of Jesus, seeking to be ever-better disciples. We seek to do as our Master did. We don't get to pick and choose among our relationships -- as if we are called to be humble, selfless, and Christlike with some people, but not others, at home, but not at work. Paul calls us to put the interests of others ahead of our own so that we may find the joy we seek.

### ***A Christ-hymn***

After urging the Philippians to always put the interests of others ahead of their own, in v.5 Paul tells the Philippians, “. . . let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” Peterson renders it this way: “Think of yourselves the same way Christ Jesus thought of himself.” So, the obvious question is -- how did Jesus think of himself?

Paul answers this question by using the glorious Christ-hymn of v. 6-11. That it is a hymn, sung or not, is widely accepted. Thus, it gives us a peek into the proclamations about Jesus that were made by some of the earliest Christians. Whether Paul composed it or simply used it in his letter, this hymn, this “Christ-hymn,” was written before any of the gospels.

Philippians is filled with Paul's teachings about how the disciples of Jesus Christ are to live – be selfless, stay humble, pray about everything, be content in all things, think about what is true and good and honorable and excellent, and so on. Yet, in this Christ-hymn there seems to be no moral teachings at all, no “do's and don'ts.” We are ready for Paul to tell us why we ought to be selfless – and all we get is verse after verse of theology. Jesus was “in the form of God” . . . Jesus “emptied himself” . . . Jesus was “found in human form” . . . all this theology. But this is Paul's way. When Christians brought Paul a practical question, he was likely to give them a theological answer. The Corinthians came to Paul with questions about eating meat sacrificed to pagan idols – and he began his answer with this “yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and from whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor 8:9). Paul understood that we cannot separate what we believe from what we do. He forces us to hold together our theology and our morality. We seek the truth about God and ourselves, but always in the service of discipleship. So, after calling the Philippians to selflessness, Paul reminds them of Christ's selflessness and all that he willingly surrendered for us.

### ***Surrendering our rights . . . and gaining it all***

With the passing of each decade, we Americans seem more and more consumed with our rights. Sometimes, I think we've about convinced ourselves that we have the inherent right to do whatever we want. Still, Jesus certainly enjoyed rights and privileges that you and I could not imagine. He was God . . . existing from God's beginning . . . equal with God . . . all-knowing . . . all-Good – however, we might choose to phrase it, Jesus had it all! But he gave it all up. He didn't cling to his inherent rights and privileges, he instead “emptied” himself, taking on the “form of a slave . . . in human likeness.” He gave up the privileges of God so that he might be obedient – obedient all the way to an excruciating and humiliating death on a Roman cross.

Sometimes, Christians get off track with this. We get too consumed with trying to tease out the meaning of “form” or “emptying,” wondering whether Paul is talking about Jesus' surrendering his omniscience or omnipotence. But this is not

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<sup>2</sup> In the first century, only about 5-10% of people were literate. Even in the cities, it wasn't more than 15%. Thus, Paul's letters were read aloud to Christians when they gathered in homes for worship and fellowship.

Paul's point. As Morna Hooker wrote, "Christ did not cease to be in the 'form of God' when he took the form of a slave, any more than he ceased to be the 'Son of God' when he was sent into the world. On the contrary, *it is in his self-emptying and his humiliation that he reveals what God is like.*" God is love (1 John 4:16b). Love is selfless sacrifice. How do we know this? Because "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him" (1 John 4:9). If we want to know what God is like, we can look to Jesus. If we want to know what love is like, we can look to the cross.

How does God respond to Jesus' "obedience to the point of death – even death on a cross"? God does so triumphantly, exalting Jesus above all others. Jesus is Lord. It is he to whom "every knee should bend" and "every tongue confess." Using these stirring words of worship from Isaiah (45:23), Paul points us toward Jesus as the image of the one true God, whose self-sacrifice embodies the meaning of true love. Jesus is to be worshiped. His example urges us on toward loving sacrifices of our own. We are not to cling to our rights and privileges; we are to surrender them for the sake of others. For, this is what God is like . . . and we too are made in the image of God.

### **The Humiliation of Christ**

Rome ruled the NT world and did so with the most rank-and-status-conscious culture ever known. Frankly, life was little more than a relentless quest to gain status and honor. Even wealth was desired only for the status it might bring.

Philippi, in Greece, had a unique history and was the most Roman city outside Italy. When Paul arrived in Philippi, we can be sure that he felt like he had stepped into another world. The Roman obsession with status and honor was every bit as evident in Philippi as it was in Rome.

Yet in today's passage, Paul calls upon two images to portray the selflessness of Jesus Christ. First, he uses "slave" (v.7) – the most dishonorable public status one could have, and then "cross" (v.8) – the most dishonorable public humiliation one could suffer.<sup>1</sup>

It is surely impossible for us to really grasp the shocking nature of Paul's claim that Jesus, God himself, had taken on the form of a slave, been crucified, and then exalted so that all creation might bow before him. Indeed, the average Philippian was probably less shocked than simply amused. The Roman world scoffed at the very idea.

The humiliation of Christ turns the world upside. Power is weakness. Honor is humiliation. First is last. Victory is death on a cross. And for whom did Christ turn the world upside-down? For whom was he humiliated? For you and for me. Surely, this ought to stagger us, to drive us to our knees as we throw ourselves before such a God and sing praises to his name.

<sup>1</sup> This was driven home to me in an article on Christ's humiliation in the social world of Philippi by J.H. Hellerman in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, v. 160, n. 639 & 640.