

Philippians: The Triumph of Joy over Suffering (1)

Benjamin Morgan Palmer served as the minister of First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans from 1856 to 1902, except for the years of the Civil War. During that time he witnessed great suffering, heartache, and death. Twice during his pastorate there was a widespread outbreak of yellow fever. In 1858 alone there were some 4,858 deaths in the city. And neither was Palmer spared. He suffered the loss of his four adult daughters from tuberculosis. As a young pastor he lost his infant son. Yet, through these grim circumstances, Palmer was able to soberly remark:

It teaches me whole volumes of theology- these tender, timid girls treading upon the fears of death and the solemnities of the tomb as if they were roses strewn upon their bridal path. I never knew before how strong grace is, nor how easy it is to walk upon the sea. My dead children have been my teachers, and I bow with awe before them.¹

Palmer, even through the great sorrows of his life, was able by the gospel of grace to rest upon the power of his Sovereign God, Jesus Christ. Those of his day would remark upon the restorative and healing truth that flowed from his preaching. He remained faithful to Christ and gained the victory, along with his hearers, because of the great truth of the gospel and its down-to-earth joy.

Much like the life of Palmer, when we look at the Epistle to the Philippians and particularly the first chapter, we are introduced to a suffering pastor. In Acts 16 we are told of the imprisonment of Paul and Silas in Philippi and the subsequent conversion of the Philippian jailer. Suffice to say, the Philippians had an intimate knowledge of Paul and were familiar with a leader who seemed to always find himself in chains. This produced a deep love and friendship between the Apostle and the church at Philippi that shines through every chapter of the Epistle (Phil 1:3-8).

While in prison, Paul became aware of those who opposed his ministry. There were some who were preaching Christ to spite Paul by the success of their own ministries (Phil 1:15). In Philippi, a wonderful church in so many respects, there was still a great danger of false teaching infiltrating the church. And, on top of all of this there was Paul's deep concern for the welfare and spiritual maturity of the church itself. Paul was pressed and suffering. Yet, there is through the epistle a pervading tone of joy. So, we need to ask ourselves: what was the source of Paul's solid joy?

Well, Paul gives us the answer himself where he says, "Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance...*for to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain*" (Phil 1:18b-21). Ah, there it is! Paul like Palmer, believed in a Sovereign Lord, who through his outstretched hand and powerful arm was working all things, both happiness and sorrow, for his ultimate deliverance and vindication. Whether Paul lived or died, he had reason to rejoice because Christ was and is directing the course

¹ Kelly, Douglas. Preachers With Power., 101

of history. The source of Paul's joy was not the passing circumstances all about him, but the unchanging God who holds the world as it were in the palm of his almighty hand (Psalm 137).

Maybe you find yourself lacking that down-to-earth, reasonable joy that every Christian ought to have. How do you get it? Well, the first step is to acknowledge that God is Sovereign over every aspect of your life, both the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly. The second step is to rest your fears and worries upon Christ in prayer (Phil 4:4-7). And, please do not misunderstand me. No one should expect themselves to live their lives on 'sunshine mountain'. That's unrealistic. We will not always be happy and that is perfectly normal. In fact, sometimes we will be in deep despair. Even still, every Christian can have a firm hope and down-to-earth joy that cannot be moved by circumstances. This blessing comes as we grow deeper in the knowledge that Jesus is in control of all things and will work it out for our good.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Blessings,

Tom