

Philippians 1:1-11
(Psalm 116:1-2; Matthew 6:5-15)
“Rejoicing in Prayer”

Introduction

How can we rejoice when our hearts are breaking? How can we trust our heavenly Father when he permits us to experience hardship and pain? We trust the Lord in the good times, but what about the bad times that leave us on our faces in the dirt?

Paul wrote this letter from Rome during the middle of the first century A.D. Also living in Rome at that time was a brilliant, wealthy, influential philosopher named Seneca, who had been banished by the Emperor Claudius, but then brought back to Rome to serve as tutor to the young Nero. He had risen by this time to become one of Emperor Nero's two top advisors. Seneca enjoyed a power and prestige that few have ever known. He had at his command all that wealth and fame could bring. Yet his philosophical worldview was one of universal pessimism. He wrote that life is a living death, a fatal gift of which the best that can be said is that torture is brief.

While Seneca dominated the thinking of the powerful, a little Jewish rabbi named Paul languished in prison, seemingly another failed, insignificant religious teacher, ready to disappear and be forgotten forever in the dungeons of Rome. But from Paul's cell comes a steady call to joy and hope: Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice (Philippians 4:4). How can he say that? Hasn't he read Seneca? Doesn't he know that life is hopeless, a living death? What is the source of such joy?

The answer is found in this wonderful little letter, a call to Christians down through the ages, whatever our circumstances, however seemingly hopeless and bleak, to lift up our eyes and see that our Redeemer lives, that he is the Lord of all history, and Lord of our lives, especially at those very points where our lives seem most out of control.

Look with me this morning at the opening verses of this letter, as Paul begins to point the way to joy by calling us to see ourselves, not as isolated individuals soldiering on as best we can, but rather in fellowship with one another, as those given the inestimable privilege of standing together and actually helping each other, bearing one another's burdens, influencing one another's lives even when we are apart through prayer.

Truth be told, most of us find prayer to be a chore, an duty that we would rather avoid, except in those times when we so clearly feel our lives spinning out of control that we are driven to prayer. But for Paul, and for those who have begun to discover the secret to spiritual growth and vitality, prayer is a joy. How can we begin to move in that direction, so that we may finally begin to taste the life of Christ?

Body

1. The first key to enjoying prayer is taking time to prepare your heart for prayer.

How are we to quiet our anxious hearts and noisy minds so that we can rest in our Father's presence, and speak with him from the heart? We find three clues in Paul's description of his own approach to prayer.

We prepare by remembering the past with thanksgiving (vv. 3-5). It is extremely difficult to pray effectively for situations or people that we remember only with dread. It can be done, but until we begin to feel some measure of gratitude to God for what we have experienced together, it is very hard to pray, in the words of James, powerful, effectual prayers. Paul could easily have remembered Philippi for the public beating he received, and the unjust imprisonment he suffered. But instead, he remembers the care and affection expressed by the new believers, and their partnership with him in the gospel.

We prepare by facing the future with confidence (v. 6). Just as unresolved stuff from the past can hinder our prayers, so too anxiety about the future can make us frantic wheelers rather than trusting children. Paul could easily have been anxious about what faced him. He had appealed to Caesar, and this Caesar was a madman. But, instead, he faced the future with confidence that God alone is Lord of history.

We prepare by feeding the proper affections of our hearts (vv. 7,8). We are not called to deny passion. God does not want his children to be passionless anymore than we do. But he does expect us to begin to feed those passions and longings that are from him, and to resist and re-channel those that are not from him. Paul longed for his friends with a deep affection. He was a man of passion, whose passion had once been directed toward persecuting and destroying those whom he deemed his enemies. Now he was ready to lay down his life to bring them life.

2. The second key to enjoying prayer is in praying those things that you know are God's will.

Often we find ourselves praying a sort of tedious round of requests for health and prosperity for one another, when that may not be what God has in store for us at the moment. It just may be that God is about to bless us with some very difficult days because that is the only way that we will grow in the way he wants us to grow. Some of us feel like bonsai plants, more pruning than growth in view, always feeling stunted and forced back. But God is shaping us for nothing less than glory, if we could but see now what we shall one day be. He trims and shapes in tender love so that we can bear much fruit.

We should learn to pray for ourselves and one another as the people in the Bible prayed for one another, as Paul prays here for his friends in Philippi.

We know that God wants his children to grow in love (v. 9). This is, of course, the key to everything, and both the logical and experiential starting place for everything else. When God changes us, he does not do it by a mere outward conformity, which is the way of religion and law. We can never measure up to that standard. But God, in his wisdom, mercy and grace, changes our hearts: that is, he changes our affections, our desires, our passions and longings.

We know that God wants his children to grow in wisdom (v. 10). Apart from love, one can only at best be very smart. But one must love in order to be wise. Having prayed for changed affections, we should also pray for a depth of discernment to know not only what is true and right, but also how to apply truth to life, which is the definition

of wisdom.

We know that God wants his children to grow in holiness (v.11). The goal of it all is to share in the life of God, which is supremely marked by holiness. This we should ask God to work in us ourselves and in one another. As the old song says, May the beauty of Jesus be seen in me. In Ronald Rolheiser's memorable phrase, we are to give God skin as the incarnation continues through the lives of folk like you and me.

Conclusion

As we learn to pray like this, from the heart, we truly pray in Jesus name, for we pray according to God's will and thus participate in the redemption of the world. We know the joy of being part of God's work in one another's lives and in the life of the world. And God in his mercy lets us see, not all that flows from our prayers, but enough to let us know that he has heard and is ready and able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, according to the power at work within us. And so those who are learning to pray say from hearts filled with the joy of the Lord, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Ephesians 3:20-21)

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