

I will sacrifice with shouts of Joy – a look at the book of Philippians

(Please read Psalm 27)

In writing to the church in Philippi, Paul makes it clear, in case if there was any confusion, that their calling is unto suffering for Christ (1:28-30). They are called to suffering just as Paul was in Acts (“I will show him how much he must suffer for My name” Acts 9:16). And Paul certainly did suffer for Christ. He even gives a list in 2 Corinthians 11, which includes being beaten by the Romans and beaten by the Jews (39 lashings on 5 separate occasions). Paul closes the book of Galatians by saying, “let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus.” Paul wasn’t talking about having gone to the local tattoo parlor. He was referring to a body that was no doubt scarred beyond belief. In Acts Paul was once beaten to near death and left outside the city. Fellow believers came and prayed over him. He was healed, and he proceeded to go right back into the city where he was beaten. In other words this suffering that Paul was calling the church in Philippi to was a heavy reality.

(Please read Philippians 2:1-11)

In this suffering Paul urges us to take on the same attitude of Christ. It is an attitude that is willing to sacrifice, an attitude that sacrifices or gives up “self-interest”. We are called to give up attitudes that are only concerned with our own comfort, just as Christ did not live for His own comfort but offered Himself on a cross for our well-being, for our salvation. This sentiment is echoed in verse 21 as Paul condemns those unwilling to join him in his work as they are concerned with their own interests, not Christ’s. Of course Christ is concerned for our well-being, but as His disciples we are meant to model that selflessness to others.

In all of this Paul seems like a pretty serious guy. He has some very heavy instructions for the early churches and for us, but at the same time we see that he was also filled with great joy. In Acts 16 we find him singing after being imprisoned. In Philippians 3:1 we see him telling the church to rejoice in the Lord, and informs them that he will not stop or grow tired of telling them to do so. In the next chapter 4:4, he is telling them again already, “rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, rejoice!” So Paul is suggesting that this life of suffering, sacrificing one’s own interests or comforts, is meant to be a life of great joy?

This may seem hard to believe, and likely very few people actually do believe it. There is a popular saying, “do what makes you happy.” Daniel Gilbert, a professor of psychology at Harvard University and co-author of Stumbling on Happiness, performed a study on the ability of individuals to predict what will make them happy. Amy Lavoie writes about his findings in the Harvard Gazette, <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2009/03/do-you-know-what-makes-you-happy/>.

This study highlights the inability of individuals to be able to correctly discern what will make them happy. Gilbert finds that a complete stranger’s testimony is actually a better indicator of what will make us happy than our own assumptions. In this article Gilbert also shows that very few people believe his findings, thus most people still prefer to trust their own judgment, not a stranger’s testimony. Gilbert asserts this to the assumption of many people that everyone is more unique than what is perhaps accurate.

I share this simply to make the point that testimony is powerful, though very few recognize it. Paul's testimony that his life of suffering and sacrifice is also a life of incredible joy may be too difficult to believe for most, but there are also many who echo Paul's testimony.

King David is one such person. At the end of the book of 2nd Kings, David prepares to make a great sacrifice as a sign of repentance. A loyal subject offers David all of the animals for free, but David explains that the sacrifice is meant to cost him something. There is supposed to be a sting that goes along with a sacrifice, but at the same time David says in the Psalm we read earlier that he will sacrifice with "shouts of joy" (Ps 27:6).

Even though David purposely felt the sting of sacrifice, he also felt great joy in this. In order for any of us to feel joy in sacrifice, whether it is our time, money, reputation, or physical well-being, we must value the one we are sacrificing for more than what we are giving up. If we are to have joy, we must value God and others more than that which we sacrifice. In verse 4 of Psalm 27 it is clear what David values most, "One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple!"

This brings us back to Paul (please read 3:1-12). Paul is warning this Gentile church from thinking that it has to earn salvation through the law. Paul describes his religious efforts to be garbage compared to God's grace.

In this Paul is also making it clear as to why he lives this life of suffering and sacrifice. Paul is not still trying to be "good enough" or to earn his salvation. Paul is making these sacrifices out of pure joy, not just to get joy sometime in the distant future but from a joy already abiding in him. Paul is enduring all of this suffering because he considers a life of vain glory and self-seeking comfort to be garbage compared to knowing Christ. He considers knowing Christ to be more valuable than any earthly pleasure, even the God-given pleasures, it isn't even close, he says that all things are like garbage compared to the pleasure of knowing Christ. Paul considers knowing Christ to be more valuable than anything he had ever sacrificed; it was his joy to loss everything for Christ, for Christ was easily worth it.

So, do we believe the testimony of Paul? What is God asking us to give up? Do we value Christ enough to give up what God asks of us with an attitude of joy? I cannot say that I am at a place of absolute surrender yet; even Paul reminds us that he hasn't "arrived" yet, but he did say that he presses onward toward the goal to know Christ fully. I certainly am far from perfect; I still try to find joy in so many things that simply do not satisfy. I often stray from the path of true joy, but once one has tasted the goodness of knowing Jesus it is difficult to stray very far before longing for that which truly satisfies, that is to know and be known by Christ.

Paul tells us that joy is found in knowing Jesus, even being like Him in His suffering. This life of sacrifice is a life of joy, not just for us, but for all we lead to a knowledge of Christ (Philippians 1:24-25 & 2:17-18). Let us consider Paul's testimony carefully, that we too might find that all else pales greatly in comparison with knowing Jesus.