

I found this letter. It is not addressed me, nor did I write it. It is from Paul of Tarsus and sent to "All the Saints, in Christ Jesus, Philippi, Macedonia." Let's open it. We find greetings, a prayer for the intended recipients, a suggestion about imitating Christ's humility (good instructions!), encouragement to shine as a light in the world, a mention of Timothy and Epaphroditus' upcoming visit, more encouragement, some exhortations, a thank-you note for a gift, and some final greetings and benediction.

Obviously, this is not the original Letter to the Philippians. However, when we open an epistle, we are reading someone else's mail. The whole letter takes fifteen minutes to read, and I encourage you to read the whole thing this week. Read and hear Paul's message to the church at Philippi, addressing their current situation from his current situation.

What were their respective situations? Paul was in prison. Most likely, he was in Ephesus. It is possible he was in prison in Rome, but that is over 800 miles away. He could have written from Caesarea, but that is even farther. He served time in all three places, but it does not matter which one. In ancient Rome, prison was a terrible place. There was no society for the improvement for penal conditions. The ancient Roman historian Gaius Sallust describes the most famous prison in Rome. He writes, "Its appearance is disgusting and vile by reason of the filth, the darkness and the stench."¹ Paul wrote from a vile place.

Roman prisons were not a place for hope. They were not filled with joy. These were some of the least hospitable places on earth. People did not serve long sentences in Roman prisons. Like everything else in Ancient Rome, there was clear social stratification. Wealthy Romans served house arrest or voluntarily exiled themselves. The poor majority received swift justice (or injustice), and it was usually fatal. Being in prison meant waiting for death. Yet, Paul writes the pit of that hell, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, rejoice!"

What was the situation for the church in Philippi? Certainly, it was better than Paul's. Acts 16 gives us the impression that this church was founded during Paul's brief visit. He interacted with Jews and Gentiles, met a merchant woman named Lydia, and founded the church in her house. Connecting this origin of the church in Philippi with our reading today tells us two important things about it: (1) everyone is included, (2) women played a significant role.

(1) Paul shared God's good news with everyone, regardless of their background. This becomes clear by looking at who was involved. There are all kinds of Greek references. For example, in the first verse, Paul refers to the people as his joy and crown. The word crown, στεφανος, means a prize in the public games, like a wreath or crown. He was speaking their language and it is not the same kind of reference they used in Jerusalem. He adapts his language to the locals. Including Jews and Gentiles means that we should not let human boundaries influence us today. We can interact with everyone. We can share God's grace and mercy with everyone, regardless of who they are or where they come from.

(2) Lydia was a leader of the church at Philippi at the outset, and Paul specifically mentions two women, Euodia and Syntyche, in this passage. Although they are in conflict with one another, they are clearly leaders in the church. Therefore, Paul sets a clear lesson before us, a lesson that is difficult to ignore. It is even clearer than what he says because we take this lesson from what he does. That is, women had leadership roles in the earliest church. Arguing that one gender should do one thing and the other gender should do other things sounds like projecting sexism into the Bible.

This is a letter about rejoicing during uncertain times. No matter what is happening in our lives, we can turn to God and move forward in faith. The kind of faith described in Philippians is not a vacuous, all-will-be-well, Pollyanna world view. It is a recognition of God-with-us in all circumstances. Paul has high expectations. If he did not, he would not seek reconciliation in this church. He thinks they are capable, spiritually mature people.

God calls us to exhibit this kind of spiritual maturity to the world. Paul encourages the Philippians to imitate Christ's humility, and since we have opened their mail, we can take that lesson and apply it to our lives. Paul hopes Euodia and Syntyche will be humble. He asks the others in the church to help them to "be of the same mind." Like them, we can "be of the same mind in the Lord." Fred Craddock writes about this passage, "To accept a leadership role is to accept responsibility beyond private preferences."² We rephrase it: 'to accept a role in God's family is to accept responsibility beyond private preferences.'

We live in a world filled with pain. There are natural disasters, hurricanes following hurricanes. There is also the violence we do to one another, both locally and internationally. We have mass shootings, institutional violence, wars, and hatred. So, how can we rejoice in a world filled with such pain, and so bleak, vile, and disgusting? Paul, from the depth of prison, writes, "Do not worry about anything." Frederick Buechner compares this to telling someone with a cold to simply stop sniffing. Buechner writes,

...sorrow, loss, death await us all and everybody we love...[Paul] does not deny that the worst things will happen finally to all of us... he must have had a strong suspicion they were soon to happen to him. [Paul] does not try to minimize them. He does not try to explain them away as God's will or God's judgment or God's method of testing our spiritual fiber. He simply tells the Philippians that in spite of them—even in the thick of them—they are to keep in constant touch with the One who unimaginably transcends the worst things and also unimaginably transcends the best.³

Joy echoes through this book.⁴ We can rejoice. We can reconcile and build God's family. We can follow Paul's advice to Euodia and Syntyche, letting "our gentleness be known to everyone." What we do matters. When Paul says, "ὁ κύριος ἐγγύς," (in English) "The Lord is at hand," he believes that the day of Christ is near, and "because the peace of God stands guard, the church can rejoice."⁵ In other words, no matter what happens, God is still God. We have a reason to hope. We can be optimistic, not only about the future and the end

of time, but about the present—what God is doing now. God is active and moving, and we have the opportunity to be part of it.

I don't know about you, but when I open this letter and climb inside that disgusting Roman prison cell with Paul, and experience his faith, I see a bright future. I see a reason to rejoice. And, I want to be part of it.

¹ Robert D. Hanser, *Introduction to Corrections* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2012), 5.

² Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians*, ed. James L. Mays, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 70.

³ Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 24.

⁴ Morna D. Hooker, "Philippians," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 546.

⁵ Craddock, 72.