

A NUGGET OF JOYFUL EVANGELISM

Philippians 1: 12-30

Rev. Philip Parker

August 6, 2023

If you have ever run a marathon or even part of a marathon, you probably know this story. If not, let me share it with you. In 490 BC the Persians, a powerful empire from the east, landed a large army on the shores of Greece, just north of Athens at a place known as the plain of Marathon. Facing them was an Athenian army mostly made up of citizen soldiers. It was only about one fourth the size of the adversaries facing them. Nevertheless, they boldly attacked, forcing the Persians to flee back to the ships that had brought them to this distant shore. One of the victorious Greeks was a soldier by the name of Philippides. In spite of his weariness after the battle, he ran the 26 miles from the battlefield to Athens. Greeting the magistrates of that city who were eagerly awaiting news of the conflict, he cried out before dying of exhaustion, "Joy to you, we've won." In doing so he became an evangelist. He was an evangelist because the Greek word "evangelist" literally means, *he who brings good news*.

"Evangelism," it's a word that conjures up all kinds of feelings among Christians. Some eagerly embrace it, a description of their mission in life. Others hold it in disdain. They associate it with a desire to force one's faith upon another individual. Either way the word has a simple and unambiguous meaning. It describes an individual's desire to share some good news, a celebrative message of joy to those who are listening. Certainly that's what Paul had in mind as he described what was happening during his imprisonment in Rome. Even in chains he still possessed a joyful spirit, because he was an evangelist, a bringer of good news and that's what God wants us to be. He wants us to be bringers of good news. So let's take a look at what Paul had to say as he wrote to his beloved friends in Philippi and discover how his comments can apply to our lives as well.

But before I do, there is something else I need to share with you. His joy was rooted not only in bringing good news, but also in bringing that good news without regard to his own well-being. In many respects, he was like Philippides, willing to pour out his life even unto death, if that was necessary to deliver the great and wonderful news of God's salvation. In other words, the desire to tell others about Jesus was more important than life itself. It was like the kind of joy that an athlete experiences when he leads his team to victory, even though he leaves the field bruised and bleeding after the game is over. He has given his all, regardless of the consequences, and for that reason he can rejoice.

So, with that in mind, let's take a look at what Paul had to say. In verse twelve he writes, "Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear through the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ" (Philippians 1:12). I don't know of anyone who likes to be in jail. I don't think Paul did either. But he wasn't going to let that get the best of him. He was going to take something bad and

use it for good. Even among the Praetorian Guard, the troops that protected the emperor, people had heard about Paul and more importantly why he was in prison. As a result, Paul's Christian friends in Rome had been emboldened to share the good news more courageously and that I'm sure that warmed his heart.

Speaking of transforming difficult situations into something good for the sake of Christ, let me share this story that I heard many years ago about a Christian evangelist in India. He had received training at the All India Prayer Fellowship in New Delia, India. He was then sent to the Himalayan Mountains to share his faith with the people of that far distant land. Soon after his arrival, he was arrested and thrown into jail for preaching the gospel. While there he witnessed to his fellow inmates and some of them became believers. Worried that the situation was getting out of hand, the authorities, decided to release the evangelist and get rid of him by putting him on a bus to the next village. In his report the evangelist joyfully summarized what had taken place, "I received free room and board, was provided with a captive audience, and was given transportation to my next assignment." Like Paul, he knew how to transform lemons into lemonade and the same can be true for you and me. It's not what we're facing but rather how we deal with what we're facing that makes the difference as to whether or not we are a joyful evangelist.

Looking a little further into this passage of Scripture, Paul was not concerned about the motives of those who were emboldened to share the gospel because he was in prison. Some were motivated by love. They knew why he was in prison and wanted to support him. Others proclaimed Christ out of envy and selfish ambition. They wanted to stir up trouble for Paul, perhaps suggesting that they were more effective than this jailbird in prison. Either way Paul didn't care. He declared, "The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice" (Philippians 1:18). In other words motives were secondary. Proclaiming the gospel was primary.

Indeed, such an attitude is a cause for rejoicing. Years ago an individual shared this personal testimony with me. He said, "I was saved under the preaching of the Bishop of Bourbon Street." Now, you may never have heard of him. He was a minister in New Orleans and for a time was even featured on TV. While his initial calling to the ministry was probably valid, fame and fortune got the best of him. Both morally and spiritually he went bankrupt because his motives for preaching the gospel were self-centered. Consequently, one could not help but wonder if those who had accepted Christ under his ministry were truly saved. The individual with whom I was speaking to answered that question. He stated, "I know that the Bishop of Bourbon Street was a fraud who probably did not believe a lot of what he was saying. However, I can assure you, I was saved under his ministry, just as surely as if I had been listening to Billy Graham." Although a person's motives for sharing the message of Christ may be less than pure, or awkwardly and clumsily delivered, the truth of the matter is God knows when a person truly invites Christ into his life. When that happens, even if the bearer of the message is tainted, there is great rejoicing in heaven. As far as Paul was concerned, there was cause for great rejoicing here on earth as well.

Finally, there was another reason why Paul could rejoice as an evangelist, a bringer of good news. He says, "Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance" (Philippians 1:18-19). At first glance you might think that Paul is saying that he expects the Lord to get him out of jail so that he can continue his missionary work and revisit his friends in Philippi. But if you read further on, verses 18 through 26, you realize that he has something entirely different in mind. He's saying, "I'm not so sure what the future holds, but I know who holds the future. Regardless of what happens, I'm relying upon the Lord. I may be executed for my faith, or I may be released and set free. Either way it's ok by me. In fact, I'm so tired and weary, I'd rather go home to be with Jesus, but there's still work for me to do here. So for the sake of my friends in Philippi and for the sake of the gospel, I'm pretty well convinced that I'll be staying here a little while longer. Should that happen and we get to see one another again, 'I know your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me'" (Philippians 1:26).

Now what about you and me? Like Paul we too are bringers of good news, whether it be through what we say or how we live. Can we rise to such a complete reliance upon the Lord that we are ready to joyfully embrace whatever comes our way? Recently, I had an opportunity to see an example of this kind of faith in a dear friend. Sherry and I have known her and her husband for many years. She is a vibrant Christian who works for a major real estate firm in Hampton Roads. She's a chief executive in this firm. Recently she received a diagnosis of a dreaded disease which called for emergency surgery. Like Paul, she got herself ready for heaven, getting her affairs here on earth in order. But she also reached out to family and friends, including us, asking for our prayers on her behalf, just like Paul did when he wrote to the Philippians. Furthermore, the firm whom she works for is a Jewish corporation. When they heard she was ill, they literally moved heaven and earth to provide her with the best medical care available. Why? Was it just because she is a valued employee? No, it's because she is joyful evangelist. She's not pushy, but you know from the get-go that she's a Christian and that she is more than willing to share her faith with you.

So in closing, let me remind you of what Paul said in the last section of today's Scripture, verses 27-30. He told the Philippians, "Whatever happens (with regards to me), conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Philippians 1:27). That included facing persecution, just as he was facing persecution and possibly martyrdom in Rome. He knew that they too would be facing trials and tribulations and he wanted them to stand strong. The same is true for us. In a world increasingly hostile to the gospel, the Lord calls upon us to not waver in our determination to be bringers of the good news of God's salvation in Christ Jesus. So like Philippides who ran from Marathon to Athens to bring the good news of victory, let us never grow weary of being the bearers of joyful evangelism. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Paul said a long time ago and he continues to say to us today, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good tidings (Romans 10:15)! So put on your running shoes, lace them up tight and head out into the world with this joyful message upon your lips, "God has saved us through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ."