

A Nugget of Joyful Radiance Philippians 2: 12-18

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Years ago my son and I were at a summer camp with the Boy Scouts. One night as we carried our gear to my car in preparation for leaving early the next morning, I looked up and saw a beautiful sight. The sky was filled with twinkling stars that were so bright, it felt like you could almost reach up and touch them. After we had put our packs in the back of the car, I said to Tim, "Look up." He did and responded with just one word, "WOW!"

Have you ever had a similar experience, an opportunity to view the heavens on a really dark night? If not you ought to. It will take your breath away as you gaze upon thousands and thousands of bright little orbs, shining ever so wonderfully in a darkened sky. As you take in this sight, you will notice that some stars are brighter than others. Here's why. A star's brightness is determined by how far away it is and how hot it is. The more distant the star, the less bright and the hotter or cooler and the greater or less brilliance it possesses. The brightest star in the nighttime sky, especially one that we can see in the wintertime, is known as Sirius. Compared to most of the other stars in the universe, it's fairly close to us, about 8.7 light years away. It's also twice as big as our sun and it has a blue-white color, which means that it is plenty hot. That's why it was named Sirius, a Greek word which when translated into English means "glowing."

Paul, like all of the people living in his day and time, were familiar with the heavens. He could probably identify Sirius as well as a number of other bright luminaries in the evening sky. Perhaps that's what inspired him to write to his friends in Philippi that they should strive to shine like the stars. If he were right here with us this morning, I suspect that he would tell us the same thing. He would want us to also shine with a joyful brilliance just like the stars. So let's take a look at what he said to the Philippians and see if what he had to say to them can bring a little extra brightness into our own lives.

In today's passage of Scripture there are two very important things that Paul is saying to us. Here's the first one. Encouraging the Philippians to obey his instructions, he told them in verse 12 to "work out their salvation with fear and trembling." Whoa, stop right there! What did he just say? Isn't that diametrically opposed to just about everything Paul ever said about being saved. In his letter to the Ephesians, for example, he wrote, "For by grace are you saved through faith and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). In these verses and in countless other places throughout his letters, Paul makes it perfectly clear that we are powerless to save ourselves. It's what God accomplished through the sacrificial death of His Son, Jesus Christ, that opens the door to our deliverance from sin. So, what's going on here. It sounds like Paul is contradicting himself. Or is he?

Take a look at the next verse. It reads, "For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose" (Philippians 2:13). Sounds like God is still involved, even while we're anxiously trying to somehow work out our own deliverance. What's going on here? Perhaps a military illustration will prove to be helpful. When a person joins the army, that does not mean that this individual is ready for the battlefield. It means that he has made a commitment to serve our nation, a commitment which will require a lot of training—marching, hiking, exercising and learning how to use the weapons of war. At times it will be a dangerous and even terrifying experience, especially the live ammunition drills. Additionally, there will be the oversight of the drill sergeant. Nothing escapes his watchful eye and his forceful demeanor. Then, finally, at long last, after six weeks of intense scrutiny, the soldier who was a raw recruit, who knew almost nothing about what he had gotten himself into, has now become a real soldier. When he joined up about the only thing he could do was put on his uniform. He was a soldier, but in name only. Now he possesses the skills and abilities which will enable him to serve his country honorably.

That's precisely what Paul was talking about in these verses of Scripture. When a person accepts Christ, not because he has earned the privilege, but because he has accepted Christ as his Savior, that individual is like a raw recruit. He has been saved by God's grace and his name has been added to the Lamb's Book of Life in heaven. But that's not the end of it. Being a Christian, a person who is ready for active duty, involves a lot more than just signing up. It involves being a student of the manual of instruction, the Bible and it involves listening to the drill sergeant, the inner voice of the Holy Spirit. Why is that necessary? Because God is in the business of transforming us from buck privates into "First Class Christians."

The second thing that Paul is telling us in this passage of Scripture can be summed up in his own words in verse fourteen. "Do everything without complaining or arguing." Have you ever worked with someone who was always complaining, always arguing? It's one of the most unpleasant things that any of us will ever experience. In fact, I don't know about you, but I tend to avoid these kinds of people whenever possible. Unfortunately that can't always be accomplished. I remember one such person in the church that I served years ago who could have received an award for her disruptive spirit. She found fault with anything and everything. In fact, the office at the school where her children attended hated to see her walking up to the front door of the building. They knew she had arrived to complain and that she was going to make life difficult for everyone.

Evidently, there was something of a similar nature taking place in Philippi. In the fourth chapter of his letter, Paul wrote, "I plead with Eudodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord" (Philippians 4:2). Paul knew that this kind of conflict could be quite harmful to the well-being of a congregation and he was correct. When there is discord and strife in a church, it not only harms the fellowship of that congregation, but it also diminishes their ability to witness to others. Who wants to join a church where everybody is fighting with one another? Therefore, Paul wanted these two women and indeed the entire church family to be blameless in terms of working together, living exemplary lives that would serve as an example to attract others, not drive them away. He wanted them to be like stars, shining brightly in a sin darkened world, sharing their faith with such a joyful brilliance, that a multitude of people would be drawn to Christ. Thankfully, I believe

that what Paul desired for the Christians in Philippi is reflected in the life of our church. We possess a spirit of cordiality that permeates our fellowship of believers. We enjoy being together and working together and that's a good thing. Paul would be proud of us.

He also wanted to be proud of the church in Philippi. In case you haven't figured this out yet, Paul thought of himself as the spiritual father of that congregation. He had helped to birth it. He had nurtured it in faith and he had kept in touch with it over the years. Facing the possibility of martyrdom, he knew that once in heaven, he'd have to give a report of what he had accomplished. Jesus would ask him, "Ok, Apostle Paul. Tell me about that church in Philippi." Paul didn't want to say that he'd worked hard, but had nothing to show for all his efforts. Just the opposite. He wanted to be able to boast about the way those Christians were holding on tightly to the Word of Life, sharing it with those who lived around them. Even if Paul was going to have to forfeit his life like a sacrificial offering, as long as those folks in Philippi were still serving the Lord, it would be worth it. That realization brought joy to his heart and he hoped joy to the hearts of those beloved friends to whom he was writing.

Likewise, let us endeavor to bring joy to all of God's people here on earth as well as our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Let's work hard to be the very best Christians that we can be, constantly training and developing new skills and abilities that will enable us to more effectively serve the Lord. As soldiers in God's army let's do everything we can to please our commanding officer, the Lord, Jesus Christ. Furthermore, instead of complaining and arguing when we're given an assignment, let's reply with a vigorous salute and the words, "Yes, Sir! It's my pleasure Sir."

Years ago, a widow lady lived in a small home in a difficult part of town. She started attending a church several blocks away. Eventually she became a Christian and joined that congregation. One Sunday morning after the service, she told the pastor, "Now that I'm a Christian, I'm going to move to a better neighborhood where things are a bit nicer." In response, the pastor asked her this question, "What if there was only one overhead light on the street where you live and someone came along and took it down. Don't you think it would be terribly dark at night?" Several months later the widow once again greeted the pastor after the service. Gently smiling she told him, "Pastor, I'm pleased to tell you that there are now two lights shining in my neighborhood."

The next time you go outside at night and look up at all the stars, perhaps even identifying the brightest one of all, Sirius, I want you to offer this prayer, "Lord Jesus, let me shine like the stars." That will be more precious than a nugget of gold because you will have something in your possession which is even more valuable, a NUGGET OF JOYFUL BRILLIANCE.