

Paul's Letter to the Philippians: Joy in Suffering

保祿致斐理伯人書——苦難中的喜樂

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摘要：在保祿的書信中，《斐理伯書》被廣稱為「喜樂的信」，但這封書信卻是保祿在獄中正面臨生命威脅時期所寫的。保祿由一位在希伯來法律來說是無瑕可指的法利塞人，本應受上主的祝福和庇護，卻變成一位因著基督的緣故而受盡屈辱的階下囚。在當時大眾眼光中，保祿是在受苦的，而保祿自己也承認他正在為基督受苦。令人難以費解的是，一個本是擁有令人羨慕、地位崇高的人，卻在被人摒棄的獄中說他自己：「在主內非常喜樂」（4:10），並勸喻信友們：「在主內應當常常喜樂！」（4:4）。究竟，保祿在獄中所寫的在主內非常喜樂，是發自內心還是純粹給面對困難中的信友作鼓勵？本文嘗試以保祿的文化背景、神學、經驗和生活去深入探究《斐理伯書》中所寫的「在主內喜樂」的含意。

關鍵詞：保祿、斐理伯書、喜樂、受苦

Abstract: *Among Paul's letters, the Letter to the Philippians is widely referred to as the "Letter of Joy," but this letter was written while Paul was facing a threat to his life in prison. Paul was a Pharisee who was blameless and highly respected under the Hebrew law, and was supposed to be blessed and protected by the Lord. Instead, he became a prisoner humiliated for Christ's sake. Paul was suffering in the eyes of the public at the time, and he himself admitted that he was suffering for Christ. Inexplicably, Paul said, "I rejoice greatly in the Lord" (4:10) and exhorted his faithful to "rejoice in the Lord always" (4:4). What was Paul's great joy in Christ in his heart? Why did he encourage believers to rejoice in the Lord as well? Was it pure encouragement to believers in face of difficulties? This paper attempts to investigate Paul's cultural background, theology, experience and life, to delve into the meaning of "rejoice in the Lord" in the Letter to the Philippians.*

Keywords: *Paul, Philippians, joy, suffering*

1. Introduction

If people were to search for joy, they probably would not think to look in prison. But this was where Paul wrote the best known of the theological themes—joy in the midst of suffering. In the letter to the Philippians, joy is not the primary motif; rather it is a leitmotif.¹ The command to rejoice in the Lord always extends the theme of joy and rejoicing developed throughout the letter. The verb “rejoice” (χαίρω) occurs nine times throughout the letter, at least once in each chapter (1:18 [twice];² 2:17, 18, 28; 3:1; 4:4 [twice], 10).³ In addition, the verb “rejoice with” (συγχαίρω) occurs twice (2:17, 18).⁴ These verbs expressing joy are complemented by the noun “joy” (χαρά), which occurs five times throughout the letter (1:4, 25; 2:2, 29; 4:1).⁵ The noun “joy” is employed in the letter to refer to the joy of both Paul (1:4; 2:2; 4:1) and of his Philippian audience (1:25; 2:29).⁶

Every other reference to joy in this letter encourages an appropriate response to the circumstances described in the immediate context. In Philippians 1:18, Paul twice expressed his own joy—“I rejoice (χαίρω) and I will be joyful (χαρήσομαι)”—

1 Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), p. 52.

2 Reference to Philippians unless otherwise stated.

3 John Paul Heil, *Philippians: Let Us Rejoice in Being Conformed to Christ*, Early Christianity and Its Literature 3 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), p. 1.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

that Christ has been preached,⁷ even though some preachers have been motivated by selfish motives. In 2:2, Paul urged the Philippians to make his joy complete by being like-minded and of one mind. Paul exhorted the Philippians to rejoice with him as they were joined together in sacrifice and service (vv. 17-18). Paul told the Philippians to welcome Epaphroditus with great joy because he almost died for the work of Christ (v. 29). Rejoicing in the Lord was encouraged as a safeguard against the dogs, the Judaizers, who required conformity to their standards (3:1-2).⁸ And finally, the generous gift of the Philippian church to Paul caused him to rejoice greatly in the Lord (4:10). Since each reference to joy in this letter was tied to a specific reason or context for joy, the command to rejoice always in the Lord (v. 4) called for a thoughtful response to the circumstances and reasons for joy.⁹ But how could Paul find joy in prison (1:4)? How could he suffer for Christ (v. 29), being poured out like a drink offering, sacrificing for and to be of service to his audience, and yet could still be glad and rejoice (2:17)? Paul urged the Philippians to join together in following his example (3:17). In 4:4, Paul emphasised that his audience should rejoice in the Lord and always rejoice! This seems contradictory. Why and how could Paul rejoice in the midst of suffering?

7 Heil, *Philippians*, pp. 1-2.

8 G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), p. 287.

9 *Ibid.*

2. The Background of Paul

Paul never met Jesus when he was alive. Jesus of Nazareth was crucified during the reign of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor or prefect of Judea, in 30 AD.¹⁰ It is determined that seven years after Jesus' death, around 37 AD, Paul reported the initial apparition of "Christ," whom he identified with Jesus raised from the dead.¹¹

Paul boasted himself as an apostle (Gal 1:1) and he had seen Jesus (Gal 1:12), he equated his experience with that of those who had known Jesus face-to-face (1 Cor 9:1). He claimed he himself received the teaching directly from Jesus a significant number of years after Jesus' lifetime (Gal 1:12, 16; 2:2; 2 Cor 12:1–10).¹² These "revelations" were not a one-time experience of "conversion," but a phenomenon that continued over the course of Paul's life, involving dialogue with the risen Jesus as well as extraordinary revelations of a mystical nature.¹³

2.1 Paul and Other Apostles

Paul did not know the other apostles very well. It was about ten years after Jesus' death that Paul first met Peter in Jerusalem and spent fifteen days with him. Meanwhile, he had a brief audience with James

¹⁰ James D. Tabor, *Paul and Jesus: How the Apostle Transformed Christianity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012), p. 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jesus movement (Gal 1:18-19).¹⁴ Paul subsequently operated independently from the original apostles, preaching and teaching in Syria and Cilicia for another fourteen years (Gal 1:21) before making a return trip to Jerusalem around 50 AD.¹⁵ It was only then he encountered James and Peter again in Jerusalem and met for the first time the rest of the original apostles of Jesus (Gal 2:1-9). This rather extraordinary chronological gap is a surprise to many. It is one of the key factors in understanding Paul and his message.

2.2 Jewish and Greek Background

Paul was a Greek-speaking Jew¹⁶ from Asia Minor.¹⁷ His birthplace, Tarsus, was a major city in eastern Cilicia, which had become part of the Roman province of Syria by the time of Paul's adulthood.¹⁸ Two of the main cities of Syria, Damascus and Antioch, played an important role in his life and letters.¹⁹ He was born around 5 BC and converted to faith in Jesus Christ around 35-37 AD or perhaps 32-35 AD.²⁰ He died in Rome, about 62 AD.²¹ His letters are written in Koine, or "common" Greek,²² rather than in the elegant literary Greek of his wealthy contemporaries.

14 Tabor, *Paul and Jesus*, p. 2.

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 232.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Michael Gagarin and Elaine Fantham, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 189.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 188-189.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 188.

22 Tabor, *Paul and Jesus*, p. 109.

Paul was a Hebrew or Israelite, he was born a Jew and circumcised on the eighth day, and belonging to the Jewish tribe of Benjamin (3:5; 2 Cor 11:22). He was unmarried (1 Cor 7:8) and once a member of the sect of the Pharisees.²³ By his own account, Paul was the best Jew and the best Pharisee of his generation (3:4-6; Gal 1:13-14). He states that he advanced in Judaism beyond many of his contemporaries, being extremely zealous for the traditions of his Jewish faith (3:5; Gal 1:14). Prior to his conversion, he zealously persecuted the Jesus movement (3:6; Gal 1:13; 1 Cor 15:9).²⁴

Sometime around 37 AD, Paul had a visionary experience he described as “seeing” Jesus and received from him his gospel message and his call to be an apostle to the non-Jewish world (1 Cor 9:2; Gal 1:11-2:2).²⁵ In the narrative of Acts, Paul was travelling on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus on a mission to arrest Jesus’ followers when the ascended Jesus appeared to him in a great bright light. He was struck blind, but after three days his sight was restored by Ananias of Damascus, and Paul began to preach that Jesus of Nazareth is the Jewish Messiah and the Son of God (Acts 9:20-21).

3. The Letter to the Philippians: Brief Background

3.1 Author and Time of the Written Accounts

The Apostle Paul is widely regarded as the author of Philippians (1:1). Internal evidence bears out the traditional view, for its many personal

23 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*

references cohere well with the life and experiences of Paul known from Acts and his other epistles.²⁶ Most scholars have divided the letter into three, all written by Paul to Philippi, but written at different times with different purpose.²⁷

Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians in a prison (1:7, 13, 14, 17), indeed in danger of death (vv. 20-23). Though Paul was jailed several times in various places (2 Cor 11:23), this likely refers to his first imprisonment in Rome between 60 and 62 AD, where he lived with a Roman soldier under house arrest (Acts 28:16, 30). References to the “praetorian guard” (1:13) and “Caesar’s household” (4:22) lend credence to Rome as the setting of the letter, and Paul’s expectation of an imminent trial (1:26; 2:24) points to 62 AD as a likely date for its composition.²⁸

3.2 The City of Philippi and the Christian Community

Philippi was the leading city of eastern Macedonia (northern Greece) in the first century.²⁹ The city was named after Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, and was established by Caesar Augustus as a Roman military colony in the first century BC.³⁰ Its inhabitants were mainly retired army veterans who enjoyed the status of Roman citizenship and other civic privileges.³¹ Philippi was

26 Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament*, rev. and 2nd Catholic ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), p. 355.

27 Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, p. 21.

28 Hahn and Mitch, *The New Testament*, p. 355.

29 *Ibid.*

30 *Ibid.*

31 *Ibid.*

the urban political center of the eastern end of the plain.³² Its population was both Roman and Greek, and Latin was the official language, Greek was the predominant language of commerce and everyday life.³³ Unlike many prestigious cities of the Roman world at this time, Philippi had only a small Jewish population.³⁴ The Philippian church was the first one established by Paul on the mainland of Europe.³⁵ Paul and his companions came to the city about 49 AD (Acts 16:11-40)³⁶ and made one or more return visits on his third missionary journey (Acts 20:1-6). It is difficult to determine how long Paul stayed in Philippi on these occasions, but it was long enough to develop a close relationship with the community.³⁷

3.3 Purpose of the Letter

The Letter to the Philippians does not address any doctrinal or disciplinary crisis; rather, it is a letter of thanks and encouragement to a congregation of dear friends.³⁸ The only practical concerns that Paul addresses in the letter have to do with resolving a personal conflict between two Philippians women (4:2-3) and with putting the congregation on guard against Judaizing missionaries, who, should they make their way to Philippi, would likely pressure them to receive circumcision (3:2-3).

32 Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 26.

33 *Ibid.*

34 John MacArthur, *Philippians: Christ, the Source of Joy and Strength*, MacArthur Bible Studies (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007), p. 2.

35 *Ibid.*

36 Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 26.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

38 Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, p. 7.

3.4 Paul's Friendship Letter to the Philippians

In most ancient Greco-Roman societies, friendship played a primary role in basic societal relationships.³⁹ Friendship was a regular topic of philosophical discussions. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle claimed that there were three kinds of “friendship” between “equals”: (1) true friendship between virtuous people, whose relationship is based on good will, loyalty and trust; (2) friendship based on pleasure, people enjoy the society of those who are “agreeable to us” and “enjoy the same thing to us”, (3) friendship based on need, a purely utilitarian arrangement, which Aristotle disdained, as do most of his successors.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Aristotle admitted that, there are some forms of friendships which are “unequal” in relationship position, e.g. parents and children, an elder and youth, husband and wife, and ruler and the persons ruled.⁴¹

Given this ancient Greco-Roman context, it is easy to recognise Paul's letter to the Philippians as a friendship letter, which follows an informal structure and is marked by a joyous and personal tone. This letter contains many of Aristotle's “ideal friendships” components. The letter not only expresses the mutual goodwill between Paul and Philippians believers but also their mutual suffering for the gospel (1:29-30; 2:17).

39 Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 4.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

41 *Ibid.*

The Philippians supported Paul through their constant prayers (1:19), as well as by sending him financial assistance by the hand of Epaphroditus (4:18). They helped Paul several times in this way and became one of his most generous congregations (vv. 15-16). Paul sent this letter back to them by the same messenger, Epaphroditus (2:25-30), to thank them for their gift, to update them on personal matters, and to assure them of God's rich blessings in return (4:19). On the journey of preaching the gospel, Paul worked as a manual labourer to support himself on his travels (1 Cor 4:12; 1 Thess 2:9). Paul accepted gifts from the Philippians, which he did not desire (4:17). In the Greco-Roman culture, this shows that Paul valued Philippians as true friends.

In addition to the Greco-Roman culture mindset of friendship, Paul introduced the ideal of "Christian friendship" in Philippians 2: (1) to pursue their love relationship in Christ (v. 1). (2) Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but also for those of others (vv. 3-4). Paul named Timothy and Epaphroditus as examples of true friends. Both men were well known to the Philippians precisely because both exemplify the gospel. Unlike those who sought all for their own interests but not those of Jesus Christ (v. 21), Timothy, as a true friend of the Philippians, would take "genuine interest in whatever concerns [them]" (v. 20) and care about God's people and God's work (v. 23). Epaphroditus was also a true friend of the Philippians who "nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete [their] service" (v. 30) and also "has been longing for all of [them] and [they] were distressed because [they] heard that he was ill" (v. 26).

4. Paul's Christology: "The Gospel of Jesus Christ" as the Primary Christian Message

4.1 The Crucifixion of Jesus Christ: The Human Christ Fully Expressed God's Love with Actions

The Lord, Jesus Christ showed his love, the ideal love—God's unconditional love—in action. Paul tried to explain his beliefs about Christ's prior existence as God. Jesus was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men and being found in human form (2:6-8).

Paul expressed that Christ was in "the form of God" and emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, entered into human history. These imply that Christ's "mindset" in both expressions of his being, first as God and second in his humanity.⁴² Christ in human nature, "the form of a servant" (2:7), chose to cooperate with God, rejected the popular human view regarding kingly power to grasp the world but poured himself out for the sake of others. Thus, human beings could choose to cooperate with God, walk the way of love, and strive to attain the perfection of love by loving one another even to the extent of sacrificing oneself (vv. 3-5).

Christ chose to humble himself, and he was obedient to God's will to the point of death—even death on a cross (2:8). Jesus did not

⁴² Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press: 1999), p. 93.

look for his own human interest, but for the will of God (Lk 22:42). Jesus, who was the one in “the form of God”, equal with God, revealed the truth about God: that God is love and that this love expresses itself in Jesus’ self-sacrifice—he endured the cruel, humiliating death on a cross—for the sake of those he loves.⁴³

4.2 Paul's Life Aspiration and Goal: Follow God's Love in Christ

Paul boasted that he himself had an impeccable status in Judaic culture. He was circumcised in accordance with the Abrahamic covenant (3:5; Gen 17:9-14); his tribal affiliation with Benjamin made him a true Israelite (2 Cor 11:22); his ancestry as a Hebrew (from Eber; Gen 11:16) made him a pure-blooded Semite (from Shem; Gen 11:10); and his zeal as a Pharisee linked him with one of the strictest renewal movements in Judaism (Acts 22:3; Gal 1:14). After he met Christ, he saw these gains which he counted as loss for the sake of Christ (3:7).

Paul gave up the benefits of being a Pharisee and counted everything as trash compared to “knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (3:8): the blessings he received from Jesus.⁴⁴ Paul mentioned that he was joyous because of a long term partnership with the Philippians in spreading the gospel (1:5). The noun gospel (εὐαγγέλιον) occurs nine times in this letter.⁴⁵ It is easy to recognise that preaching the gospel was the singular passion of Paul's life. Most importantly, the gospel

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁴⁴ Hahn and Mitch, *The New Testament*, p. 360.

⁴⁵ Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 82.

is related to Christ, both his person and his work. Paul learned from Jesus that while humans were still helpless, Christ was willing to die for the ungodly, which proves how God loves us unconditionally (Rom 5:6-8). Jesus' sacrificial and unconditional love is the perfect act of God's love for human-kind. The love of God in Christ Jesus became Paul's life goal.

To preach Christ (1:15-16) is to preach the gospel, which is all about Christ. To preach the gospel is to proclaim God's good news of salvation that he has effected in Christ. As elsewhere, "Christ" and "the gospel" are at times nearly interchangeable.⁴⁶ Therefore, living "worthy of the gospel of Christ" (v. 27) means to live worthy of Christ as he has been made known and proclaimed in the gospel which has him as its focus and content.⁴⁷ Paul pressed on to reach the goal and to win the prize. The goal is God's eschatological conclusion of things; the prize is Christ, and in this context it means the final realization of knowing him.⁴⁸

4.3 Paul's Desire: Knowing Christ

Paul's goals were all Christ-centered: to gain Christ, to be found in him, and to know him.⁴⁹ Paul focussed totally on Christ and emphasised that his relationship with Christ surpassed everything else in his life. For the sake of knowing Christ, Paul suffered the loss of all things, and turned to gain Christ: to be found in him.

⁴⁶ Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 82.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Fee, *Philippians*, p. 155.

⁴⁹ Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, p. 242.

Thus, he found true righteousness from God, which is based on faith (3:9). Knowing Christ, he received his blessings. Paul explicated the meaning of knowing Christ in terms of two objects of knowledge: to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings (vv. 10-11).⁵⁰ This knowledge is both relational and experiential.

Knowing Christ means being born anew, living in hope through his resurrection from death, and attaining to an inheritance which is imperishable (3:10-11). The depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God's plan of salvation is unfathomable, God shows mercy to the disobedient ones and upon all (Rom 11:30-34). Paul told the Philippians to press on towards the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (3:14). To respond to God's call, one needs to be "mature to be thus minded," that is, having the mind of one whose citizenship is in heaven, from where one eagerly await the Saviour (vv. 15a, 20-21). Paul tended to see all of Christian life in terms of God's calling. Christian life should be about "forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead" (v. 13b) and to "live up to what we already attained" (v. 16). People who have been called into "the fellowship of Jesus Christ" [already] (1 Cor 1:9) are called "to be saints" [not yet] (1 Cor 1:2a). God's calling lifts the believers heavenward to share in his eternal Presence⁵¹. Paul said that them that their "citizenship is in heaven," (3:20a) from where they awaited the coming of the Saviour. Thus, he turned immediately to press on them the need to follow his example—with a "mature" mindset to reach the prize, which is, knowing Christ.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 241-242.

⁵¹ Fee, *Philippians*, p. 156.

5. Paul's Mystical Experience: Delight in Weaknesses

In 42 or 43 AD, Paul had a mysterious experience related in 2 Corinthians 12. He described himself being caught up to “the third heaven” (v. 2a).⁵² In the experience, he could give no answer “whether in the body or out of the body” and heard inexpressible things, things that no one was permitted to tell (vv. 4-5). Paul viewed this experience as “a surpassingly great revelation.” Paul named this place as paradise, but at the same time he met a messenger of Satan who tormented him in the flesh (v. 7b). The sequel to Paul’s mystical experience was a distressing, humiliating, physical ailment which he at first feared might handicap his ministry.⁵³ But rather than taking a toll on his self-esteem, it made him learn constantly to rely on the divine help. Suffering for Christ turned out to be a help, not a handicap.⁵⁴

In the paradise introduced in 2 Corinthians 12, three times Paul pleaded with the Lord to remove his suffering (v. 8), but God did not remove the suffering for him. God said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (v. 9a). From this experience, Paul learned to boast all the more gladly about his weaknesses, so that Christ’s power might rest on him (v. 9b). Thus, for Christ’s sake, he delighted in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. Paul said, “For when I am weak,

52. F. F. Bruce, *Paul Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), p. 134.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

54. *Ibid.*

then I am strong” (v. 10b). He received the necessary grace to bear suffering—not simply to live with it but to be thankful for it. If his ministry has been effective despite this physical weakness, then the transcendent power is from God, not his own (2 Cor 4:7).

Paul said in Philippians 3:18-19 that the enemies of the cross set their minds on earthly powers. They looked to the emperor of Rome to exert his supreme power to solve their problems, satisfy their appetites, save them from their difficulties, and protect them from danger.⁵⁵ In contrast, Christians in Philippi were called to focus their trust and hope in the Lord and Saviour above all earthly powers. Paul invited Philippians believers to have the same mindset as in his story (v. 15) and join him (v. 17) on the heavenly path prepared by Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour for his followers (vv. 20-21). This change of loyalty would inevitably involve them in the suffering of Christ (v. 10).⁵⁶ Their suffering would make them eagerly wait for their Saviour from heaven, who has the power to enable him to control everything (vv. 20-21). Their hope for the future would not be fixed on Caesar, the saviour and lord of the Roman Empire, but on Jesus Christ, the heavenly Lord and Saviour.⁵⁷ Paul persuaded Philippian believers to put no confidence in the flesh (v. 3b), but have faith in Christ (v. 9). The mystical experience strengthened Paul's mind and he learned to rely on God's grace.

⁵⁵ Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, p. 270.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

6. Faith in Christ and Righteousness from God

The two uses of the noun “faith” (3:9-10) serve to clarify the role and emphasise the importance of faith in Christ.⁵⁸ The first use points to faith as the agency or means by which righteousness from God is received: through faith in Christ.⁵⁹ The second use indicates the basis or foundation upon which this experience of being found in Christ and having the righteousness from God rests: on the basis of faith.⁶⁰ By referring twice to faith in Christ in his definition of the righteousness from God, Paul highlighted the crucial difference between righteousness achieved by keeping the law and righteousness received by dependence on Christ.⁶¹ Paul was not advocating faith by itself as the means or basis of this extraordinary righteousness. Faith in Christ is not a self-achievement; it looks to Christ.⁶²

The phrase “faith in Christ” (3:9) explains how righteousness is received.⁶³ Paul used of the noun “faith” three times (1:25, 27; 2:17) and the verb “believe” once (1:29) to refer to the faith of the Philippians in Christ in the context of their experience of suffering. Knowing Christ is a two-sided reality, it includes both suffering and resurrection.⁶⁴ Paul acknowledged the difficulties the Philippians faced and encouraged them to face the challenge like him. He said,

58 Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, p. 242.

59 *Ibid.*

60 *Ibid.*

61 *Ibid.*

62 *Ibid.*

63 *Ibid.*, p. 241.

64 Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 314.

“It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him” (v. 29), which was his own experience of faith in Christ and participation in his sufferings (3:9-10). Paul specifically designated the act of believing as granted by God. Paul did not view faith as a human work or virtue. Righteousness through faith in Christ is not a kind of self-achieved righteousness. Faith is a human response empowered by God's grace.⁶⁵

7. Attitude of Christian Suffering

7.1 Hope for the Imminent Return of Christ

Paul told the Philippians that “Lord is near” (4:5). It was probably to be taken as a reference to the hope of Christ's imminent return.⁶⁶ The phrase reminds the Philippians again of the imminent coming of the Saviour from heaven to transform humiliation into glory (3:20-21).⁶⁷ The shame of persecution would soon be exchanged for the glory of participating in Christ's victory. In times of suffering, the New Testament Church was often encouraged by the assurance that “the Lord is near”: “when you see these things happening, you know that he is near, right at the door” (Mk 13:29); “You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near” (Jas 5:8); “the time is near” (Rev 1:3; 22:10).⁶⁸ The Church eagerly prays, “Come, Lord!

⁶⁵ Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, p. 242.

⁶⁶ Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, ed., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 567.

⁶⁷ Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, p. 289.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Maranatha!” (1 Cor 16:22). Even when Christians suffered under the rule of Caesar as Lord, they could express courteous leniency toward all because they believed that Christ the Lord was coming soon to bring everything under his control (3:21).⁶⁹

7.2 The Future Promise Guaranteed

Paul always prayed with joy because he fully believed in the promises of Christ (1:5-6), that ultimately one day he would be with him in his Kingdom forever. He was convinced that Jesus started a good work in his followers, and he would continue to complete this work until the day of Christ Jesus (v. 6). Paul said in 1:20-21, “now as always, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Paul looked forward to his death because he knew he would one day be with Christ. The fruit of Paul’s suffering was not something that he could fully see right then. It came through Jesus Christ. In 3:10, Paul explained his motive: “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.”

Paul’s joy seemed to have both the present and the eschatological future in his mind when he referred to his friends as “my joy and crown.”⁷⁰ Paul was joyful by recognising that suffering was not in vain. Suffering had a purpose. In difficult circumstances, Paul insisted on sharing the message of Jesus with the Philippians. Throughout the letter, Paul affirmed that they were the source of his joy (1:18-19; 2:17).

⁶⁹ Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, p. 289.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

And he took pride in their partnership (1:6; 2:1; 4:15) and citizenship (1:27; 3:20) with him.⁷¹

Knowing Christ guaranteed the future promise of the complete knowledge of Christ by participation in his glorious resurrection life but it included suffering. Paul expressed present suffering as “being conformed (*summorphizomenos*) to his death,” a word which he then picked up at the end (3:21) to describe what would happen to “the bodies of our present humiliation” when they would be raised; they would “be conformed (*summorphon*) to the body of his present glory.”⁷² The knowledge of the future and present power of Christ's resurrection is an important part of Paul's depiction of the Christian life. Without the future prospect of knowing the power of Christ's resurrection in transforming lowly human bodies to be like his resurrection body, the present suffering would ultimately be meaningless and futile.⁷³ Without the present knowledge of Christ's resurrection power in the midst of human suffering, Christians would have no assurance of the future victory.⁷⁴

7.3 Joy and Crown

Even though Paul was bound in chains and suffered the pain of being separated from his friends, he still said that they were his joy and crown (4:1). Paul called them his joy and crown, because he was delighted that those who had been won through his efforts were

71 *Ibid.*

72 Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 314.

73 Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, p. 244.

74 *Ibid.*

persevering in the faith. Paul's call for imitation of his example was entirely appropriate in the context of his day and conformed to the understanding of the teacher-student relationship in both the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures.⁷⁵ Since his joy was relational rather than situational, it could not be shaken or diminished by the circumstances of his life.

The combination of joy and crown, indicated that "Paul envisions a grand celebration, where the participants were given their wreaths and there was much rejoicing."⁷⁶ He looked forward with special joy to the day of Christ because he hoped then to present his converts to the Lord. Paul said, "For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you?" (1 Thess 2:19).⁷⁷ Paul told them earlier to hold firmly to the word of life so that he would be able to boast on the day of Christ (2:16). His announcement of the Lord's imminent appearance from heaven to transform lowly human bodies (3:20-21) set the immediate context for this reference to his friends as his joy and crown. Paul's emphasis on the future victory of Christ in this passage made the present suffering full of meaning and purpose. He presented a dynamic polarity between the present experience of Christ and the future consummation in Christ.⁷⁸ The Philippians were his joy and crown. He invited them to be like him and stand firm in the Lord (4:1).

⁷⁵ Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, p. 302.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

⁷⁷ Bruce, *Paul Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, p. 142.

⁷⁸ Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, pp. 243-244.

8. Paul's Exhortation on Genuine Christian Life

8.1 Rejoice in the Lord Always

Grounded on the faith in Jesus Christ's resurrection and his redemptive suffering on the cross which is the source of joy, Paul exhorted Philippians to rejoice in the Lord like him. Anticipating the imminent coming of the Lord in glory when Christians would be crowned for their faith in him, the Philippians were to be filled with interior joy and persevere even in time of suffering (4:4-5). Joy filled Paul's life because he lived in the Lord (v. 4) and loved the brothers and sisters in the community. In Paul's view, joy was not so much a feeling as it was a settled state of mind characterized by peace, an attitude of looking at life with a calm attitude, despite all the ups and downs. It is a confident way of looking at life, rooted in faith in the living Lord (1:25; 3:1; 4:4, 10).⁷⁹ For Paul, joy made it possible for one to accept both happiness and depression, to accept with creative submission events that brought either happiness or frustration, because joy allowed one to see beyond any particular event to the sovereign Lord who stands above all events.⁸⁰

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). These are the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in a Christian's life. Paul urged the believers to "let your gentleness to be evident to all" (4:5a). Christians are called to respond to opposition with gentleness to all.

79 Hawthorne and Martin, ed., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, p. 713.

80 *Ibid.*

That is, be gentle not only to their friends and family, but also those who oppose them. Paul recognised that suffering for faith in Christ would be a test of the quality of gentleness.⁸¹ Therefore, even in prison, Paul was full of joy. He urged the Philippians to also be full of joy in their present suffering in the face of opposition. Paul realized and experienced that the most important life goal for him and the Philippians was to rejoice in the Lord through participation in Christ's suffering.

8.2 Pray with Thanksgiving

Paul reminded Philippians that he “always” gave thanks for them when praying for them with joy (1:3-4). His prayer was often tied in with his thanks to God for them (vv. 3-6, 9-11). Whatever else the Philippians meant to Paul, they were for him a cause of great joy. Whenever he thought of them in prayer, he was always grateful first. Paul's prayer for the Philippians and his pastoral instruction demonstrated that the needs of the Philippians included more than just material things. Paul prayed that their love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight (v. 9).⁸²

Paul told the Philippians not to be anxious (4:6), indicating that his readers were habitually anxious. He gave this exhortation: “In every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving” (v. 6). In every situation that included fret and worry, believers in “the Lord” ought to submit their case to God in prayer, accompanied by thanksgiving.

⁸¹ Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, p. 289.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 322.

In addition, Paul encouraged Philippians being specific in prayer to God. Paul said “present your requests to God” (v. 6b).

Therefore, Paul invited the Philippians, and certainly us the believers as well, to have a sense of what we need, to be conscious that we need God's help and be willing to let our requests be known to God. He bids us to give voice to the specific desires of our hearts and open our hearts to share with God. To do so is to admit that we are totally dependent on God, while expressing our complete trust in him.

Prayer orients our lives to God. We are encouraged to pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests (Eph 6:18a). The continuous positive focus of praying with thanksgiving to God in everything breaks and replaces the habit of worry. By expressing our specific needs and desires to God, our openness to God help us grow closer to him.

8.3 God's Grace and Peace

Paul sent Christian believers greetings of “grace to you and peace” (1:2) from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. “The traditional greeting in the Hellenistic world was *chairein*...meaning simply ‘Greetings!’... In Paul's hands this now became *charis* (‘grace’), to which he added the traditional Jewish greeting *shalom* (‘peace,’ in the sense of ‘wholeness’ or ‘well-being’).”⁸³ Thus instead of the familiar “greetings,” Paul saluted his brothers and sisters in Christ

83 Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 70.

with “grace to you—and peace.”⁸⁴ Grace, as Paul stated, came from God the Father and Jesus Christ. Therefore, in a profound sense, this greeting well represented Paul’s wider theological perspective. The sum total of God’s activity toward his human creatures is found in the word “grace”; God has given himself to his people bountifully and mercifully in Christ.⁸⁵

Peace in the biblical sense is “nearly synonymous with messianic salvation.” Through the Messiah, God will bring the condition of peace: reconciliation with God and harmony in all relationships.⁸⁶ Peace does not only refer to a subjective peace, but more importantly, the objective reality of God’s rule through the Messiah.⁸⁷ God loves, accepts and forgives us human beings not based on anything we do, but in spite of what we do. The sum of these benefits experienced by those who accept God’s grace is “peace,” God’s eschatological shalom, both now and to come. The latter flows out of the former; both together flow from “God our Father” and have been made effective in our human history through our “Lord Jesus Christ.”⁸⁸

Hansen affirms that “The promise of the presence of the God of peace (4:9) explains the promise of the peace of God (4:7): when the God of peace will be with you, then the peace of God...will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”⁸⁹ Only the presence of God can

84 Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, p. 70.

85 *Ibid.*

86 Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, p. 303.

87 *Ibid.*

88 Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, p. 71.

89 Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, p. 304.

bring his peace. When the God of peace is present, the peace of God rules in the hearts and minds of his people.⁹⁰

9. Conclusion

Joy is how we believers who know Christ and with a future guaranteed by Christ respond in face of present difficulties, not because we like to suffer, but because our joy is “in the Lord.” But joy is not a feeling, it is an activity. Paul urged his audience to “rejoice in the Lord” (3:1; 4:4). Above everything else, joy is the distinctive mark of the believer in Christ Jesus; and in this letter it comes most often as an imperative. We believers are to “rejoice in the Lord always” (4:4), because joy has nothing to do with our circumstances but with our relationship with the Lord; we are to rejoice both on our own and together with others (2:18).

Suffering is not inconsistent with God's plan for salvation. As Christians, we do not earn or deserve the future resurrection from the dead. It is a result of knowing the present power of Christ's resurrection and participation in his sufferings. We do not gain our own righteousness based on our achievement of keeping the law; righteousness comes from God on the basis of faith in Christ. Our salvation is in Christ. Without Jesus suffering on the cross, there would be no resurrection, no redemption, and no new life in him. Following the way of Christ will bring us peace, which is the grace of God. We suffer with him, we rejoice in him.

90 *Ibid.*

We ought to be willing to forfeit our worldly rights for the sake of Jesus. We might not always like the circumstances we face in life, especially if it would involve great sacrifice. But in admitting our weaknesses, we can trust that “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (1:6). Paul in his letter to the Philippians gave us evidence that prayer, thanksgiving and joy go together in a kind of indissoluble union. Even in trying circumstances, we can depend on Christ. Righteousness is from God, we can thus rejoice in the Lord. From his prison cell, Paul wrote to urge Christians who suffer for their commitment to Christ to develop a cheerful attitude in every circumstance. Joy ought to be the dominant theme in Christian life. The fulfillment of all other goals in the Christian pilgrimage flows out of the practice of rejoicing in the Lord. The simple phrase “rejoice in the Lord” provides the essential key in every circumstance. Our relationship with the Lord is so important and decisive in our lives. May we have faith in Christ, live with enthusiasm and entrust our lives to the Lord, so as to know him and rejoice in him.