

Fellowship of Joy: A Study in Philippians, 1:21-26, Preached @ Harambee Church by Pastor Michael Gunn on July 27th, 2008

*"The glorious company of **apostles** praise thee.
The goodly fellowship of the **prophets** praise thee.
The noble army of **martyrs** praise thee."
Te Deum Laudamus, St. Ambrose AD387¹*

"Never does a soul know what solid joy and substantial pleasure is, till once, beaing weary of itself, it renounces all propriety, give itself up unto the author of its being, and feel itself become a hallowed and devoted thing, and can say, from an inward sense and feeling: 'My Beloved is mine!'"

Henry Scougal²

"As the deer pants for water, so my soul pants for you O' God"

Psalm 42:1

Intro:

We spend most of our time in our lives searching for meaning and purpose, and often, by the time we find it, they are pronouncing us dead. In a huge universe with many crazy things going on around us, we sometimes struggle to believe there is a real purpose for us in the first place. But what if there is a real God, who created everything in the universe, and is in control of everything that happens (Even when we can't understand why), and has called out a people to glorify Him while living here on earth, as well as in eternity?

This is the story of the gospel from Genesis to revelation. God created everything that exists, and has orchestrated directly and indirectly everything that happens to culminate with His creation bowing down in unison with praise and worship! In today's passage we see the ramification of a life that is centered on the gospel, and the person of Jesus Christ, and how this continually ends in joyous applause in spite of its author's pain. My prayer today is that you'd find this Jesus, and believe the truth that we have been made free to worship that which we are created to worship!

From the Head...

Dying is Our Gain When Christ is Our Life (Philippians 1:21)

This verse is not only key to understanding this letter (Philippians), it is the key to understanding our purpose here on earth! This point is foreign to anyone who ever lived! This was not something that ancient Israel understood, and welcomed. As a matter of fact, Israel was looking for the restoration of their physical kingdom, much like the church is looking forward to the "Rapture" and their subsequent newly perfected kingdom. As humans, we will always default toward comfort and pleasure. Our myths expose our greatest desires to find our legendary Shangri-La; a place of comfort and perfection. Martyrdom, death and suffering are never part of these stories. This passage places Christ as the center of Paul's universe, which is Christ's rightful place, and the key to truly understanding joy and contentment. I believe that our myths expose the deep desires of our hearts (Comfort, peace, fulfillment, worth, etc.), and that they will never be fully realized unless Christ completes our stories. God's story offers us rest and comfort, but they are not found in anything on this earth. Even Paul's life *"Is Christ!"* **Dying is our gain, when Christ is our life!** Having more of Christ is never going to be a gain to any of us, if our life is not consumed with Christ here on earth. Paul knows that being absent from the body is being present with the Lord (**2 Corinthians 5:8**). The opening quote from the Te Deum reminds us that dead people are praising God, which gives us great hope for the afterlife, and the reason why we should not mourn like those that don't know Christ mourn (See **1 Thessalonians 4:13**).

Paul's Dilemma is the Dilemma For Anyone in Christ (Philippians 1:22-24)

There ought to be a real dilemma in everyone who is in Christ! I believe Paul's tension is a real tension for anyone who desires to have more of Jesus in their life. There is nothing inherently wrong with having desires for the good things of this earth, and I think that they help us understand Paul's dilemma, yet his desires have been shaped around the gospel of Jesus, and not around the things that bring pleasure here on earth. He finds himself in tension between God's mission and God's presence in his life. This tension ought to be real, because we are all called to mission here on earth, and to proclaim and live the gospel of Jesus Christ to a broken and dying world. You can't lose with this perspective on life. If you are living, you are compelled to live your life for Christ's glory, which gives you purpose and meaning, and if you die, you are ushered into the presence of the Lord; therefore whether by life or death Christ is exalted (See **v. 20**).

God's Mission Is the World's Gain (Philippians 1:24-26)

What's important here is that Paul sees the worth and the need for physical presence here on earth, in spite of his *"Desire"* (*Epithumian* **v. 23**) to be with the Lord. He places his main desire (Being with the Lord) in subordination to the mission God had given Him. Our motivation and our being should "Desire" God in this way. The word here (*Epithumian*)

¹ Current scholarship questions this authorship, however it is a very early Christian hymn

² Henry Scougal, The Life of God in the Soul of a Man, pg. 72

literally means “Over-Desire,” which if placed in anything or anyone else will enslave us, and come up empty (Like Buddhism). We are created to praise God, and to place the object of our affections solely on Him. There is nothing wrong with having desires in this world, and we can enjoy the things that God gives us (Unlike Buddhism), but those desires must always take a back seat to knowing and worshipping God through Christ Jesus.

Paul appears to be saying that he is control of his “Choices” here like he is contemplating suicide or life. This is not the issue here, nor is his issue in verse 25 that he is predicting anything. As a matter of fact context shows us that he wasn’t sure what God was going to do (See **1:20, 27; 2:17**), but what he is saying is that he has settled in his own mind to subordinate his ultimate desire to be with Christ for the sake of God’s mission in this world; which should alert all of us to God’s desire to redeem His creation, and not just take His people away from suffering. There are far too many people that use verses like **1 Thessalonians 5:9** to mean He wouldn’t allow His people to suffer or go through horrible times. Instead, we must trust that God will use us and our horrible circumstances for His glory; and we can be ok with that since our ultimate desire (Epi-Desire) is Christ, and to be in His presence! We are most useful here on earth when we connect to God’s desire to redeem His creation through the gospel proclaimed by His church!

...to the Heart

Pastor and theologian John Piper on commenting on the Te Deum in relationship to Philipians 1:21 writes this:

The noble army of martyrs are praising God with us this morning because they all said, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." They all said, Christ is worth more than life. Christ is worth more than falling in love. Christ is worth more than marrying and having children. Christ is worth more than seeing my children grow up and become independent. Christ is worth more than making a name for myself. Christ is worth more than finishing my career. Christ is worth more than the dream spouse and the dream house and the dream cruise and the dream retirement. Christ is worth more than all my unfinished plans and dreams. All the martyrs said, "It is better to be cut off in the midst of my dreams, if I might gain Christ."³

The gospel cannot be loved because of the blessings it brings us here in life; the gospel must be loved because it brings us closer to the one who blesses us! Our soul will never be made full from the blessings we have here on earth, they will only be filled when we search for God, like the deer who pants for water on a scorching hot day!! It is there that we will find an endless stream of water for the weary soul (**Psalm 1:3; John 7:37-39**).

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Te Deum Laudamus⁴

We praise thee, O God
we acknowledge thee to be the Lord
All the earth doth worship thee
the Father everlasting.
To thee all the angels cry aloud
the heavens and all the powers therein.
To thee cherubim and seraphim do continually cry
Holy, Holy, Holy,
Lord God of Sabbath; heaven and earth
are full of the majesty of thy glory.

The glorious company of apostles praise thee.
The goodly fellowship of the prophets praise thee.
The noble army of martyrs praise thee.

The Holy Church
throughout all the world doth acknowledge thee;
the father of an infinite majesty;
thine honourable true and only Son;
also the Holy Ghost the comforter.
Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ.

Thou art the everlasting Son of the Father.
When thou tookest upon thee to deliver man,
thou didst not abhor the Virgin's womb.
When thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death,
thou didst open the kingdom of heaven to all believers.
Thou sittest at the hand of God in glory of the Father.
We believe that Thou shalt come to be our Judge.
We therefore pray thee, help thy servants,
whom thou hast redeemed with thy precious blood.
Make them numbered with thy saints in glory everlasting
O Lord save thy people
and bless thine heritage.
Govern them and lift them up for ever.
Day by day we magnify thee;
and worship thy name, ever world without end.
Vouchsafe, O Lord to keep us this day without sin.
O Lord, have mercy upon us, have mercy upon us.
O Lord, let thy mercy lighten upon us, as our trust is in thee.
O Lord in thee have I trusted let me not be confounded.

³ John Piper,

www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/34/840_The_Noble_Army_of_the_Martyrs_Praise_Thee/

⁴ Thought by many to have been written by Ambrose and Augustine for the Augustine’s baptism around AD 387.; others have attributed it to Nicetas, Bishop of Remesiana during the late 4th century.