

"My Joy And My Crown"

"... Wherefore, my brethren beloved and longed for, my joy and my crown, so stand fast in the Lord, my beloved" (Phil. 4:1). The adversities of Paul did not dampen the joy he had found in serving Christ. It had been about 30 years since the day he was confronted by Christ on the Damascusan road the subsequent three days of turmoil and anguish of spirit when he came face to face with the realization he was "*the chief of sinners*" (1 Tim. 1:15). During the intervening years "*the many things he must suffer for my name's sake*" had been a veritable mantle he wore through the years (Acts 9:16). Yet whatever the severity of conflict he found himself in, there was always the latent joy which was his because he was Christ's. Without dispute Paul's prison years bore down heavily upon him; yet the letter written in the midst of them demonstrates his spirit. Some call this "the epistle of joy." It is filled with words like "*joy,*" "*rejoice,*" and "*glory.*"

Paul addresses these as "*brethren beloved,*" a not unusual expression with him. He calls the Roman brethren (most of whom he did not know) beloved brethren (1:7). The Corinthian church vexed him in many ways, yet he calls them also "*beloved brethren*" (1 Cor. 4:14), and often in his letters he spoke of some individual Christian as a beloved brother. Yet while "*beloved brethren*" is a common phrase with him, it is only of the Philippians and Thessalonians he identifies as his "*joy*" and his "*crown*" (1 Thess. 2:9).

These two churches were started immediately one after the other (Philippi first; Thessalonica second); yet neither was the first nor the last of the churches fathered by Paul. Paul had labored in early years in Arabia, Syria, and Cecilia and we can hardly conceive that he met no success at all in these years. Still, any churches begun in that period of his life remain unknown to us. We know Paul labored on Cyprus at both Salamis and Paphos and doubtlessly left companies of believers in each place. Furthermore, one sees churches in Antioch, Lystra, and Debre when his first journey was done. And, even after the beginning of Philippi and Thessalonica, the noble church of Berea, the large, flourishing congregation in both Corinth and Ephesus were results of Paul's labors. But again, none of these were called by him in his letters, "*My joy and my crown*" except Philippi and Thessalonica.

The feelings Paul had for Thessalonians can be seen in his two letters to them. He said to them "*we were well-pleased to impart unto you, not the gospel of God, only but also our own souls because ye were become very dear to us*" (1 Thess. 2:8). The Philippians were his joy as well. My Crown. Paul had urged Philippians to hold fast the word of life "*that I may have whereof to glory in the day of Christ, that I did not run in vain, neither labor*

in vain" (Phil. 2:16). In Paul's first Corinthian letter he wrote, "*But if any man buildeth on the foundation, gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, stubble; each man's work shall be made manifest, for the day shall declare it, because it is revealed in fire; and the fire itself shall prove each man's work of what sort it is ...*" (1 Cor. 3:12f).

In the day of Christ, when Paul (as we) is called to account for his life and the abiding fruit which came from his hands, he can point to the Philippians (and Thessalonians) and say, "Lord, these were abiding works, genuinely converted to you. They were not wood, hay nor stubble. They were gold, silver and costly stones!" Each preacher (and Christian) should so labor that in the judgment each may point to those who came to Christ by our labor and say, "*These are my joy and my crown.*"

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