

Handout: Philippians Lesson 4

The constancy of the Philippians is Paul's joy, both for the present and for his future crown. For when his disciples are victorious in the contest, the master rightly receives the crown.

Ambrosiaster, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 4.1

In 4:1-9, Paul uses a series of admonitions that look to Jesus' Second Coming (cf. verse 5, *the Lord is near*) that he mentioned in 3:20-21. His instructions include a plea for unity, joy, prayer, and the Christian outlook on life in general.

4:1 Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, beloved. Paul refers to the Philippians as "my joy and crown." He used the "crown" imagery in other letters when writing about completing the "race" of one's faith journey and receiving the victor's crown of eternal salvation (2 Tim 2:5). It was the common practice in Hellenistic society to award a wreath-like laurel crown to those who achieved victory in sporting events (1 Cor 9:24). Sts. Paul, James, and Peter wrote that the "crown" is God's gift of salvation for completing one's journey of faith and crossing the "finish line" from death to eternal life:

- *Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one* (1 Cor 9:25).
- *I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who have longed for his appearance* (2 Tim 4:7-8).
- *Blessed is the man who perseveres in temptation, for when he has been proved he will receive the crown of life that he promised to those who love him* (Jam 1:12).
- *And when the chief Shepherd is revealed, you will receive the unfading crown of glory* (1 Pt 5:4).

4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!

The adverb "rejoice" often signaled the close of Paul's letters (2 Cor 13:1). In this verse, it supports Paul's theme of joy that he expresses throughout the letter.

4:8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence [virtue/arête] and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. The Greek word *arete* means "goodness" or "moral virtue." The term only appears four times in the New Testament (Phil 4:8; 1 Pt 2:9; 2 Pt 1:3, 5). St. Peter used the word to describe the wonderful deeds of the Lord: *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises [virtues/aretas] of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light* (1 Pt 2:9). St. Peter also used the word twice to testify that God's power works in us to produce lives of virtue through grace (2 Pt 1:3, 5). Paul uses the word *arete* to challenge the Philippians to focus on all that is virtuous to drive out every impure and unworthy thought. The way Paul and the other New Testament writers use this word implies a close relationship between contemplation and conduct. The goal is for wholesome meditation/thoughts that can be an inspiration for Christ-like living (see Wis 8:7 and CCC 1803). →over

4:13 *I have the strength for everything through him who empowers me. 14 Still, it was kind of you to share in my distress.*

The RSV translates verse 13, *For I can do all things in him who strengthens me.* Paul has confidence that no matter what he faces in his faith journey that he can do all things or survive all circumstances because God lends him His strength. The saints, like St. Alphonsus, encourage us to always put our faith and trust in the Lord: “The proud person relies on his strength and he falls; but the humble person, who puts all his trust in God, holds his ground and does not succumb, no matter how severely he is tempted” (*The Love of God*, 9).

4:18 *I have received full payment and I abound. I am very well supplied because of what I received from you through Epaphroditus, “a fragrant aroma,” an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.*

“A fragrant aroma” is liturgical language that, in the Old Testament, referred to God’s pleasure in receiving a holy sacrifice from His people on the fire of His Temple’s altar of sacrifice that rose up to Heaven in the smoke (Lev 1:9, 13, 17; 2:2, 9, 12; 3:5; etc.). Paul accepts their donation on God’s behalf as a holy sacrifice from a holy covenant people: *Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have; God is pleased by sacrifices of that kind* (Heb 13:16). Paul uses the language of Temple liturgy concerning the activities of the Christian community with the understanding that the Church, as the Body of Christ, is the new Temple prophesied by the prophets in the Age of the Messiah (Ez 40-48).

The brothers who are with Paul in 4:21 include Timothy and Epaphroditus, and they may also include the same brothers Paul names in his letter to Philemon (Phlm verse 23):

1. Epaphras founded the church at Colossus and also perhaps the churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col 1:7; 2:1; 4:12-13).
2. Aristarchus was a native of Thessalonica and missionary companion of Paul’s (Acts 19:29; 20:4; 27:2).
3. Mark was Barnabas’ relative and the son of the Jewish-Christian Mary of Jerusalem and a Roman father (Acts 12:12-16; Col 4:10). He accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:13) and accompanied Barnabas on a mission to Cyprus (Acts 15:39). Bishop Eusebius records that Mark became St. Peter’s secretary in Rome (1 Pt 5:13; *Church History*, 2.15; 3.39), and the Church Fathers unanimously testify that Mark is the writer of the Gospel of Mark. In Rome, he was reunited with Paul and stayed with him in prison (Col 4:10; 2 Tim 4:11; Phlm 24). Later, St. Mark was sent to Alexandria, Egypt and was the first bishop of the Church in Alexandria (Eusebius, *Church History*, 2.16, 24) where he suffered martyrdom.
4. Demas was a resident of Thessalonica and a disciple of Paul’s (Phlm 24; Col 4:14) until he abandoned Paul. He was apparently afraid he would share Paul’s fate in martyrdom (2 Tim 4:10).
5. Luke is Paul’s “beloved physician,” a Gentile convert, a missionary companion, and the writer of the Gospel of Luke and Acts of Apostles (Col 4:11, 14; 2 Tim 4:11; Phlm 24). Eusebius records that he was born in Antioch, Syria that was Paul’s home church (*Church History*, 3.4). The Church Fathers unanimously attribute the Gospel of Luke and Acts to St. Luke.

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