

Andrew of Chapel in the Pines, a fellow servant of the risen Lord whose kingdom knows no bounds, extends his greetings to Paul of Tarsus, whom Christ Jesus has called to be an apostle to the Gentiles and to lead the ancient church in Philippi. Grace and peace to you in the Spirit, which connects the body of believers across time and space.

I first thought of writing a letter to you not only because you used that form of address to the Philippians almost 2,000 years ago, but I share a similar love for my church—like you, “I hold them in my heart” and “thank my God for every remembrance” of their faith and generosity. And not only am I grateful, but, like you, I consider the people to be “partners in the gospel” or fellow ministers of the good news.

We began our study of your letter to the Philippians with the opening sentences, and I wish to write to you about the theme of joy. Joy actually flowers throughout your letter. In the fourth verse, after expressing gratitude to God for their partnership, you expressed your desire to “pray with joy” for the church.

In my time, the notion of thoughts and prayers can sound hollow and even serve as an excuse for pious inaction in the face of injustice. I wonder if a call for joy can also feel like an affront, for one thing remains constant across millennia—there is immense pain and suffering. How can we preach about joy in the midst of wars, rumors of wars, natural disasters, disease, famine, and political unrest? It’s like the question to a modern poet: How can you write about flowers at a time like this?

Joy flowers in your letter to the Philippians, yet you wrote your letter from a prison where you endured beatings and hunger. You also knew that your beloved congregation in Philippi suffered persecution. To write of joy, then, was either delusional, fantastical, or... what exactly?

Perhaps your recollection of your church’s “tender affection” lifted your thoughts from your chains in a moment of reprieve and temporary bliss. As one of our poets put it, “Joy’s trick is to supply / dry lips with what can cool and slake.”¹ But if joy is nothing more than a trick, then manufactured attempts, such as drugs and money, would always produce joy.

I believe there is something about joy that is beyond our control, more than our doing or thinking. Your Greek word for joy shares a close etymological relationship with the Greek word for grace.²

Yes, *grace*—possibly your favorite word! The word that defined your ministry and flowered every letter you wrote! As the apostle to the Gentiles, you preached the good news in Christ Jesus, bringing those outside the covenant with Israel into God's kingdom. Rather than nullifying the original covenant, God amazingly and graciously reimagined it to include all peoples. By grace, faith is no longer something to struggle to possess but free to receive and accept.

Grace is always present, it is joy that gives us a glimpse, a flash of eternity that illuminates time. Like what happened to you, this grace might come from a blinding vision on the road to Damascus. Or it might happen on a seemingly ordinary day through the power of joy. Here's a story about this kind of conversion.

The poet Ross Gay was walking in a city when a small man with a limp called to him, "It's a beautiful day."³ By his own admission, the poet had "learned to close my ears against the voices of passersby," particularly those like a bedraggled stranger who might be talking more to himself. But like a prophet, this man was insistent: "It's a beautiful day." And the poet reflects that this does not deny "the crick in your neck or the multiple shades of your mother's heartbreak, nor the father in your city kneeling over his bloody child, nor the five species of bird this second become memory." This stranger, this prophet, merely uttered the words, "It's a beautiful day," with the intention of drawing attention to grace. This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Paul, I think one of your enduring gifts to people of faith is that you preached and practiced naming joy even in times of suffering—as you put it later in your letter, "Rejoice in the Lord always." That can be misunderstood, but your point is that joy exists with sorrow and tragedy. Grace is always present. Something about joy is tethered to this blessed world, broken though it is. Joy lives in the world just as the Word became flesh and dwelt along us.

Joy was with you, Paul, while you were in prison and with the Philippians as they worried about your fate and suffered their own. Joy is with those in the rubble of buildings destroyed by hurricanes and wars; joy is with the orphans and widows; joy is with all of us as we face the unsettling and destructive forces of climate change.

Joy is with us because it flows from the fount of every blessing and flowers in the blessing of creation. Joy is with us because God is with us, the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Christ Jesus, who was crucified yet rose in victory, in joy.

Though I've studied your letters for years, I came across a Greek word I didn't know. You used it only once in all your letters. In Philippians 1:9, you prayed that the church might "abound more and more in knowledge and full insight." The new word in verse nine is "insight," but this translation does not capture your intended meaning, as it suggests a mental process. Rather, you were referring to sense perceptions—what we can see, hear, touch, and smell from the world around us.

We can't always think our way to joy; that risks manufacturing an impoverished sense of it. Rather, we must be open each day faithfully, moment by moment. It involves acknowledging our dependence on grace. It's a beautiful day; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Joy, whether sensed in a flash of inspiration or experienced in a sustained period of happiness, motivates us to work against the factors that limit or destroy joy. We grieve the suffering of the world. Joy teaches us that there is something more; otherwise, we'd accept pain and misery as the only outcomes of life. Paul, you teach us to protest suffering in God's name rather than accusing God of creating it. *Compassion is the other side of living joy.*⁴

I realize that my culture is vastly different from yours. However, if you were to visit Chapel in the Pines, I believe you would be grateful for our ministry. All week long, there were groups that gathered to study, pray, and sing. We collected donations of clothes for the unsheltered. We communicated with other churches devastated by the hurricane, and our youth helped to raise funds to support them—This is, as you put it, "to produce a harvest of righteousness."

And, as the saints of Chapel in the Pines were busy with all these things, you would have heard their laughter. It's not that we don't take problems seriously; it's that there is an openness to each other and the joy that comes, unbidden, a glimmer of the kingdom and a shining hint of what is to come. To God, be all glory and praise.

In living joy,

Andrew, your fellow servant of grace.

¹ Richard Wilbur

² *Chara* for "joy" and *Charis* for "grace"

³ Ross Gay, "Overheard"

⁴ Jorgen Moltmann