

# Death: Shall We Weep or Rejoice?

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When a Christian dies, shall those of us who remain weep or rejoice? The biblical answer is both, even simultaneously.

I saw this in a new place as I was memorizing my way through Philippians again. I had never noticed before the emotional contrast between [Philippians 2:17-18](#) and [2:27](#).

## An Invitation to Rejoice

In [Philippians 2:17-18](#), Paul is describing the possibility of his own death as “drink offering on the sacrificial offering” of their faith. He is willing to die in the service of strengthening and purifying their faith.

Then he says, if that happens, “I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise *you also should be glad and rejoice with me*” (verse 18). Not only does *he* rejoice at the prospect of his own death, but he tells *them* to rejoice with him.

He already told them why he rejoices at the prospect of his death: “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” ([Philippians 1:23](#)). Presumably, that is why he thinks they should rejoice also. They love Paul. So when Paul is “with Christ” that will be “far better.” Jesus spoke this same way to his disciples: “If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I” ([John 14:28](#)). The Father in splendor is greater than the Son in suffering. What a liberation was coming when the Son’s work here is done and he returns to the Father’s glory! So, he says, if you love me, rejoice at my departure.

## Experiencing Intense Sorrow

But that is not the whole story. Ten verses later in Philippians 2 Paul praises Epaphroditus because “he nearly died for the work of Christ” (verse 30). But then he did not die. And Paul is glad. Here’s what he says: “Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, *lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow*” (verse 27).

God had mercy on Paul, lest he should have sorrow upon sorrow. In other words, he did not let Epaphroditus die so that Paul would not have that grief on top of all his other burdens.

So when Paul said, “Rejoice with me,” at the prospect of his own death ([Philippians 2:18](#)), that was not the whole emotional story. Paul would have experienced “grief upon grief” if Epaphroditus had died. And this is not because Epaphroditus was unprepared to die. He was as ready as Paul: “Honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ” (2:30).

## The Complex Harmony

What should we conclude from this?

We should conclude that our sorrows at the death of a believer are *joyful* sorrows, and our rejoicing at the death of a believer is a *sorrowful* rejoicing. There is nothing hopeless about the sorrow. And there is nothing flippant about the joy. The joy hurts. And the sorrow is softened with invincible hope.

This is why one of the most common watchwords of the Christian life is “sorrowful yet always rejoicing” ([2 Corinthians 6:10](#)). Sorrow and joy are not merely sequential. They are simultaneous. This is not emotional schizophrenia. This is the complex harmony of the Christian soul.

Therefore, when a Christian dies, don’t begrudge the tears. And don’t belittle the joy in the lover’s eyes.

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