

Thanksgiving with Joy

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“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” Most days I have a pretty hard time with that one. I don’t think I’m alone...

I have a friend in the ministry who, for the past half-dozen years or so, has been battling cancer. On more than a few occasions, he and his doctors have come close to concluding that he was in complete remission. But then, just when it came time for his last scheduled full-body scan, the cancer would pop up in a new and unpredicted place. And so, another series of invasive procedures would have to be scheduled, more painful treatments would need to be endured, and my friend and his family would once again be thrown onto the wild emotional roller coaster ride that is the life of people who are staring death in the face.

I wonder what my friend would think, and how Paul’s words from Philippians 4 would be received, if I phoned him up and shared with him: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” To be sure, my friend has a solid faith and a keen mind. He knows there’s a difference between being joyful and being happy. Happiness depends, almost exclusively, on externals: our health, our relationships, how we happen to “feel” at any given moment, what we have or can obtain, how much money, influence, and fame, etc. we’ve acquired. When any of these are under attack or taken away, we immediately turn into “unhappy campers,” and our natural inclination is to become very self-centered and preoccupied with getting them back. That’s what “happy” can do to us.

But Paul was in prison when he wrote his letter to the Philippians. He was growing older and weaker and probably looking ahead to an untimely, violent, and painful death. And still he wrote, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” How could Paul rejoice? How could the Philippians, who were living in an anti-Christian environment? How could my cancer-ridden friend? How can we?

The secret to the kind of joy Paul is talking about is to be found in the very next verse where it says, “The Lord is near.”

More than likely, when Paul wrote this he had in mind a temporal/eschatological understanding of “near.” Jesus would come back soon and usher in his kingdom. Everything that hurt or hindered his people would be seen for what it was: completely inconsequential when compared to knowing and seeing Christ face to face. “That joy is near!” Paul is saying. “That joy will soon be upon us, and death and disease and danger will be swallowed up in Christ’s victory forever! So, ‘Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!’”

Paul was most certainly saying all that, but I can’t help but think that he may have had more in mind than just a *temporal* understanding of the phrase, “The Lord is near.” Might Paul, who valued and extolled the use of the word and the sacraments, have also had in mind a more spatial understanding of that phrase? After all, when we hear the gospel in all its truth and purity, when we receive the very body and blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in, with, and under the bread

and the wine, is not that same Jesus near us? Next to us? In us? When two or three of us gather together in the name of Jesus, and through the mutual conversation and consolation of the saints, we hold each other up, we help each other, we disciple and discipline each other, is not the Lord “near” in that action and activity?

And I will venture to go even further. It is not uncommon for Christians of sound mind and disciplined temperament, to have had very primal, unexplainable, yet very real experiences of the Holy. The answer to a prayer comes at just the right time. The incurable is cured. What was lost is found and restored. That which was beyond all hope actually happens. The impossible comes true.

None of these so called “experiences,” it must be unequivocally stated and maintained, is ever promised by God, nor should they ever be granted a kind of authority that is rightly reserved only for the revealed word of God as it is written in the sacred Scriptures. But these experiences do happen! Christians do have them. And we certainly cannot say that they aren’t real.

The point of all this is that in predictable, promised, and proven ways, God shows up! And sometimes, in unpredictable and unpromised and unprovable ways, God shows up! He shows up for us! He shows up for our good! He shows up for us and for our salvation. God always shows up. He is always near!

Which means, of course, that no matter what is going on around us, and whatever is happening to us, we are always operating from a position of strength, because the Lord is near. We are always in a “no lose” situation, because the Lord is near. We are always going to come out fine, because the Lord is near. And because ours is a God who always shows up at just the right time and just the right way for us, we “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”