

Rejoice in the Lord Always!

Psalm 97:1-12; Philippians 4:1-23

September 5, 1999

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” After all that Paul has had to say about life and death, after all that he has had to say about imprisonment and trial, after all that he has had to say about division and partisanship, after all that he has had to say about risk and sacrifice, after all he has had to say about suffering and loss, still he comes down to this: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” And as he writes to the Philippians, so does he write to us.

“Rejoice in the Lord always.” This seems to be a high calling, but the very fact that Paul can and does exhort us to do this means at the very least that it is possible, for God does not ask us to do the impossible. And the fact that it is possible means that God has already done something to provide for its being possible. And it is this something that God has already done which is the good news hidden in this exhortation, the good news of the gospel, the always given prior reality in the situation which is of far greater importance and interest than our reaction, or lack thereof, to it. What is it that God has already done?

God has made us, and we are his, and for this we give him thanks. God has called us by name, and he has called us his very own, and for this we give him thanks. God has provided for our life and well-being, creating the world and all that is in it as an arena within which we are to live in relation with God, and for this we give him thanks. When we have wandered and strayed, God has spoken his word to us through his prophets, and for this we give him thanks. And in the fulness of time, God sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, to live with us, to die for us, and to be raised again so that we might live forever, and for this we give him thanks. Christ gives himself and his life for our nourishment and our life, as we shall recall around the communion table today. You are familiar with the full sweep of the gospel. This is what God has already done for us. This forms the basis of the possibility of rejoicing. In fact, this forms the basis of the imperative for rejoicing. The fundamental dynamic of the Christian faith is that God’s grace elicits our gratitude. So the basic attitude of the Christian is one of joy and thanksgiving. The Christian life is one of profound happiness. Is that of interest to you? This letter is written to

people who are already Christian, but it is based upon the very reasons for which they first became Christian. That appeal still reaches out to us today.

Note, of course, that Paul's exhortation is to rejoice "in the Lord." That is the key to it all. It does not say to rejoice in good luck or good fortune, which may or may not smile upon us. It does not say to rejoice in strength or wealth, for those may fail us. It does not say to rejoice in power or fame, for those may flee from us. It does not say to rejoice in political accomplishment or victory, it does not say to rejoice in intellectual arrogance, it does not say to rejoice in the stars or the moon or the turning of the seasons. It says to rejoice in the Lord. It says to rejoice in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the one in whom we rejoice. This is the one and the only one who provides us with what we need and who give us good reason to rejoice.

When are we supposed to do this? "Rejoice in the Lord always." Rejoice in the Lord all the time. Rejoice in the Lord morning, noon, and night. Rejoice in the Lord from the beginning to the end of our lives. Rejoice in the Lord in all circumstances, good and bad, when we feel like rejoicing and, yes, especially when we do not feel like rejoicing. This does not have to do, primarily, with feelings passing emotions. This has to do with deep seated affections, with the fundamental orientation of the self. Either we are turned toward God and drawn toward God and therefore rejoice in God, or we are turned away from God and toward self and there we know only death. It is the work of Christ the Lord to win us back for God, to reorient us toward God, to provide the basis for our life and rejoicing, and nothing can count against that. This is the reason we are to rejoice always. And just in case we did not catch it the first time, Paul says it again.

What is the result of such rejoicing? What is the consequence? What good flows out of it? At one level, rejoicing in the Lord and worshiping God are good in and of themselves, and they are not to be judged by any practical results. Nevertheless, they do make a difference in life, in lives, in families, in communities, and in the world. Paul writes, "Let all men know your forbearance." How fascinating that positive rejoicing also issues in the withholding of anger and refraining from revenge. As Christians, we are to let everyone know that we can take whatever they throw at us. We do not live simply on the razor edge of the present moment. We do not live in the frenzy of each gust of changing wind. We do not thrive on the excitement of each passing fascination, nor do we find our identity either formed or challenged by each attacker. We do, instead, live in the setting of eternity. We live in the confidence of the gospel. We live in the assurance of the victory. We live in the faithfulness of God. So, we are not undone by the threat or the reality of imprisonment or even execution. Let the Romans do what they will. It is God with whom we have to do.

Lest the Philippians forget why this is, or lest we fail to perceive the basis for such forbearance, Paul reiterates the reason: “The Lord is at hand.” God is near. The One who made us also sustains us and provides for us. The One who has started a good work in us will bring it to completion. Jesus Christ who has won the victory over sin, death, and evil is near, and he shall return to establish that victory in plain sight of all. Why rejoice? Why show our forbearance? “The Lord is at hand.” Remember that, hold onto it, cling to it, and then we can and will endure all things. As Paul writes elsewhere, “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Romans 8:31b).

There are other consequences: “Have no anxiety about anything.” This does not mean not to care about anything or anyone. Paul himself writes of being anxious about the Philippians. But it does mean not to worry. The victory has been won. The price has been paid. The powers of sin, death, and evil have been defeated. All else is secondary at best, and probably only tertiary or farther down the line. In the driven world in which we live, can you imagine the witness of a Christian community without anxiety? In the fractured society in which we live, can you imagine the witness of a Christian family without anxiety? In the hand-wringing, disaster-expecting, bad-news-consuming times in which we live, can you imagine the witness of a single Christian church without anxiety? You see, the Christian faith is not simply a matter of personal opinion or private preference. It has to do with truth and reality, and it has far reaching implications for the way we live and for the shape of the life of the society and world in which we live.

Paul continues, by way of contrast with the life of anxiety: “In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” It is not the case that Christian life will be without wants and needs. We are not called upon to endure simply with Stoic indifference. But it is the case that we are to communicate our requests to God in the constant context of thanksgiving, which is to say in that combination of gratitude for what God has already done for us and of full confidence that God’s faithfulness continues in the present and into the future. We endure within the context of a vital relationship with the living God, who loves us, cares for us, and has given his son for us. The life of rejoicing not only leads to, but also in large part consists of, prayer and thanksgiving, praise and worship. What we do together here sets the pace and the pattern for our prayers night and day, throughout our lives.

Rejoicing in the Lord is sufficient reward in and of itself. It is the goal and purpose of life, the reason for which we were made and redeemed. And yet, such rejoicing does not stand alone. There is a promise of even more. “Rejoice in the Lord always...And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Confidence in the gospel leads to

rejoicing, and rejoicing leads to peace beyond all comprehension, and that wonderful grace binds us forever, heart, soul, mind, and strength, together with Jesus Christ. Rejoicing in the Lord in all circumstances helps to shield us against the devastating temptations to give our hearts to another or to place our minds in the service of another. The peace of God made Paul brave even in the face of likely execution by the Roman Empire, and he wanted to urge the Philippians to both peace and courage. Are we brave today? Do we stand against the forces of government, the ideologies of society, the cowardice of the masses? Do you have an anchor in your life to hold you steady? The peace of God will keep you in Jesus Christ, protecting you from any who would snatch you away.

Hear these words from Paul. And hearing them, learn them and make them your very own. And having learned them, live them, now and forever: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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