

Power

Essay 12 in the series “Ode to Joy”

We now come to one of the truly great passages in Scripture. It’s so great it really shouldn’t be over-analyzed. It should just be read and read and read again and taken into our souls until we break forth in praise and worship. Philippians 3:7-11 reads:

“But whatever was to my profit
I now consider loss
for the sake of Christ.
What is more,
I consider everything a loss
compared to the surpassing greatness
of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord,
for whose sake I have lost all things.
I consider them rubbish,
that I may gain Christ
and be found in him,
not having a righteousness of my own
that comes from the law,
but that which is through faith in Christ
– the righteousness that come from God
and is by faith.
I want to know Christ
and the power of his resurrection
and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings,
becoming like him in his death,
and so,
somehow,
to attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

So Paul says: Everything I once valued, everything I once depended on, even – no, especially – my religious identity, my ethnic identity, my tribal identity, my rabbinic standing, my excellence in keeping the law, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. Once again we are up against the question: What does Paul know about Christ that we don’t know or only partly know?

He goes on: What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things, my career in Jerusalem, my family, my home town, my safety, my reputation, all my personal comforts, all I once held dear. I consider them all rubbish.

Paul’s feelings run deeply here. The word translated “rubbish” is a vulgarity referring to excrement. So the KJV has “dung.” You may think of other words. And rubbish is in fact what all these things, including many, many good things, can turn out to be. Even the greatest accomplishment can leave you feeling empty. I think of the final scene in the

movie *Zero Dark Thirty*. After Osama Bin Laden is taken out and the mission is complete, Maya, the CIA operative (played by Jessica Chastain) who had discovered Bin Laden's whereabouts, breaks down in sobs. When she boards the plane and is asked by the pilot where she wants to go, she responds at first with stunned silence that slowly gives way to tears. The screen goes black. All this after a decade of ruthless pursuit of Bin Laden. And now she has no idea where to go in her life.

With Paul, in contrast, it comes back to this notion of knowing Christ, not knowing about Christ but knowing Christ, of knowing Christ – the Christ of love and compassion, of peace and understanding, of grace and forgiveness – as present with us, in every breath we take, above us, beneath us, before us, behind us, beside us, surrounding us, as if in the higher dimensions all around us in which we live and move and have our being, as close as the air we breathe, present in the food we eat, in the people we meet, in the work we do, in the fun we have, and in the struggles we face.

This completely changes everything! This turns our darkest nights into our brightest days. This gives us the power to endure, well, really anything, seeing now that in our sufferings we share in Christ's, becoming like him in his death. This gives us the power to thrive, to flourish, even in the most difficult of circumstances. And so Paul aspires to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. The result is that there is nothing stoical about Paul. He's not just "slugging it out in the trenches." He lives in the light of the resurrection. He of course had seen the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus. And now Paul can throw himself in life, right into life's troubles, into sharing in Christ's sufferings, with joyful abandon. It's all Christ. It's all good.

All because of the power of the resurrection. I think today of the many, many people who report on Near Death Experiences, who were thought clinically dead and then resuscitated and tell what happened to them: how they come back from such an experience with a deep sense that they are loved and cherished and that in the end they have nothing to fear, but that now they must live in that light and do what they can to change the world, to dispel the darkness, to instill hope in those who despair, to tell them that there is a God who knows us and loves us deeply. And they come back on a mission, knowing that wherever they go, however hard life might get, whatever loss they might suffer, heaven now goes with them, and they never feel alone again. They know now that nothing can separate them from the love of God. It is love. It is all love. And everyone has to know this and start acting like it.

I don't know what all to make of these experiences. But what I do notice is that what these people are saying sounds a lot like what Paul is saying, Paul who was himself once "caught up to the third heaven." So toward what are you living? By what light are you living?

Paul is reaching out across the centuries inviting us, directing us, past all the stuff in our lives, past the troubles that haunt and distract and preoccupy us, past even the things we hold dear, all things he now calls rubbish, to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. He calls us to know Christ, know Christ – the Christ of love and

compassion, of peace and understanding, of grace and forgiveness – as present with us, in every breath we take, above us, beneath us, before us, behind us, beside us, surrounding us, as if in the higher dimensions all around us in which we live and move and have our being, as close as the air we breathe. And he calls us to live in the light of resurrection.

He calls us to that deep sense that we are loved and cherished, that in the end we have nothing to fear but that now we must live in that light and do what we can to change the world, to dispel the darkness, to instill hope to those who despair, to tell them all that there is a God who knows and loves them deeply. He calls us to a mission. But now as we go, wherever we go, heaven goes with us. Now we know that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Of course the response to this can only be joy.

– Dale Pauls