

Forgetting

Essay 13 in the series “Ode to Joy”

Now, you will remember, that Paul talks often of joy in the Philippian letter. Often his heart almost bursts with joy. The letter itself we have called an “Ode to Joy.” And his main theme in this letter is “Joy in the Lord.” Now it’s not that everything goes well for Paul. He is, after all, under arrest in Rome as he writes this letter. He faces trial before the emperor Nero who is increasingly paranoid, suspicious and demented. More than that, there are those who preach Christ out of selfish ambition, even trying to stir up trouble for Paul by their preaching (1:17). A friend falls ill and almost dies (2:25-27). And always there are his opponents who undermine gospel and grace by their insistence on law (3:2-3). Paul calls them “mutilators” and “dogs.”

In fact, there is always this dialectic to life, this point and counterpoint, this ebb and flow, this coming together and falling apart, this coming together again and this falling apart again. And yet through all the falling apart, all the bad times, there is still a baseline of joy. Behind the clouds, up above the clouds, even above the hurricanes and tornados, either the sun still shines or the night sky blazes with the glory of God.

Now in Philippians 3:12-14 Paul draws on a way forward, a way back to unshakeable joy. He writes (in verse 13), “But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on” And this is such an important life principle: forgetting what is behind, I press on. Often in life, that’s exactly what we need to do. We must let go of certain things in the past: certain memories, certain failures, certain grudges and resentments, certain voices that belittled us or taught us to be fearful. Only by letting go of them can we find our way back to joy.

There are stories we keep telling ourselves that keep making us miserable. There are stories we keep telling ourselves that make us fearful. And for sure there are stories in our past that fuel our resentments. Quit telling those stories. And all of this is important. And it’s good to know all this. The way back to joy often begins with forgetting what is behind and pressing on. And Paul is drawing on this as he writes this text. This is a fundamental principle in life.

For Paul, however, this means something very specific and important. So while there is great truth in forgetting what is behind, while there is great strength in forgetting what is behind, the greater truth and the greater strength is in the details here, specifically in what Paul is saying. Paul has just written about the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord (Philippians 3:7-11). Compared to this, everything else he considers garbage. Everything else! What he wants now is to gain Christ and be found in him, be found in the realm that is Christ. Can you begin to imagine this? That our there beyond all the trouble, beyond all the distractions, beyond all the things that worry us and steal our joy, there is a realm that is Christ, a glorious realm where all is put in perspective? So Paul wants to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and even what it feels like to share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, because now he knows it’s all Christ and it’s all good.

Now he aspires to know Christ, not to know about Christ but to know Christ, Christ as present with him in every breath he takes, above him, beneath him, before him, behind him, beside him, surrounding him, as if in the higher dimensions all around him, as close as the air he breathes, present in the food he eats, in the people he meets, in the work he does, in the words he speaks, and in the struggles he faces. And he aspires to know the power of his resurrection, and the deep sense that comes with it that we are loved and cherished and that in the end we have nothing to fear, and that now we have a mission to live in that light, to do what we can to change the world, to dispel the darkness, to instill hope in those that despair, to tell them that there is a God who knows us and loves us deeply. And with this we have everything we need to endure, to thrive and to flourish.

Now in Philippians 3:12-14 he writes something remarkable. First he writes, “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made complete.” How realistic, how honest, is that? Knowing Christ, gaining Christ and being found in him, knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection – all so amazing! So we stand on the threshold of this, we catch a glimpse of this, and we know that this is, to use Paul’s words, surpassing great. It’s incredibly great. Herein lies joy, joy that can never be taken from us. And now we can endure anything and thrive and flourish.

But we get distracted, don’t we? We have good days and bad days, maybe good years and bad years, maybe a lot of bad years in a row. And Paul knows all this and grants that he himself hasn’t already obtained it, that he himself hasn’t already been made complete. But he presses on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of him. It’s all Christ, Paul writes. Christ has always been in pursuit of us. Stop and look and see. In our brightest days and darkest nights, through loss and tragedy and great triumph, there was always something Christ intended for us – a consciousness, a calling, a life: to know him, to gain him and be found in him, to know him and the power of his resurrection. And Paul grants that even he hasn’t mastered all this.

But one thing he does: He forgets what is behind. He forgets his former life, his ethnic identity, his once high status in rabbinic circles in Jerusalem, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee of Pharisees, his faultless observance of Torah. He forgets all he once held dear. He forgets all this, but then, I think, maybe he has some other things he has to forget too, like that day he was part of the mob that dragged Stephen out of the city of Jerusalem and stoned him to death (Acts 7:54-8:1) or the way he would go from house to house in Jerusalem dragging Christian men and women off to prison (Acts 8:3). But whether it was his own substantial accomplishments or his own shameful memories, he now presses on. He now strains forward. He pictures himself as a runner whose every muscle and every breath is focused on the goal. He can’t be distracted by anything. Now he presses on, now he strains forward, to win the prize for which God has called him heavenward in Christ.

Yes, there is a sense in which this will not completely happen until he is resurrected, but it’s also clear that for Paul it’s not the resurrection per se that most entralls him. It’s the final glory, the highest glory: to know Christ Jesus his Lord, to gain Christ and be found

in Christ. It's this consciousness. It's to know Christ, this Christ of love and grace as present with him in every breath he takes, above him, beneath him, before him, behind him, beside him, surrounding him, as if in the higher dimensions all around him, as close as the air he breathes, present in the food he eats, in the people he meets, in the work he does, in the words he speaks, and in the struggles he faces. Christ everywhere and Christ within him.

Therein, in this pursuit, in this straining forward, lies joy.

– Dale Pauls