

Is the Lord Nearby? Philippians 4:4 – 9

Imagine that you are a first-century Christian living in Philippi. You have heard the likes of Paul and Luke and Silas and Timothy speak about the Kingdom of God. Certainly, lessons that Jesus had spoken while He was on earth had been repeated. You had learned about the predictions of the prophets concerning Jerusalem and the Temple, about the very specific events described by Daniel covering a period of five centuries, culminating in the destruction of both Jerusalem and the Temple shortly after the Messiah. You were perhaps a bit concerned about warnings of those times, such as is recorded in Matthew 24:21 – 22 in which Jesus said, “For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened.”

By the time Paul wrote Philippians in the early 60’s, about which we have been learning this weekend, the Christians knew that they were entering into the worst decade in all of human history.

That is one of those bad news – good news things. It is going to be the worst time in all of history, but God will look out for you. I don’t know about you, but I would have been at least a little concerned about the fallout with which I would have to contend until God saw fit to cut it short. The problem is that God’s idea of ‘short’ and mine are not always the same.

As this ‘coming of the Lord’ grew nearer, as the first rumblings of disaster were heard in the distance, wouldn’t you find it just a little hard to be at peace? Rejoicing might be subdued by the approaching black clouds of devastation. Even if you were reasonably sure that your particular neighborhood would be spared, being in Macedonia rather than Palestine, you were so tied together with other Christians that your anxiety for them was real. Fellowship does that. Remember Paul’s description of the Macedonians nearly a decade earlier than the letter to the Philippians, in 2 Corinthians 8, “Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia, that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministry to the saints.” And from the tenor of this letter, it seems that the church in Philippi was maintaining that fellowship, that connectedness of spirit with all believers, and particularly with the saints in Jerusalem. So they would be hard pressed by the certain knowledge that those close friends – whom they had never met in the flesh – were at the threshold of the worst that the evil one could dish out.

If you had this network of both physical and spiritual family, wouldn’t you be planning? Wouldn’t you be preparing to stay out of harm’s way? Wouldn’t thoughts about these terrible and certain catastrophes occupy a significant fraction of your brain time? Do you think it might affect your mood?

Here’s an example of circumstance affecting mood. I don’t remember much from the days before I turned five years old, but one event sticks out. The neighborhood kids were playing ball in the street one Saturday afternoon and somehow this made Mr. Majors across the street very angry. I don’t remember what he said, just that it was mean and loud and we all ran home. Back in those days, neighborhoods were close and events like this just didn’t happen. Of course, I ran to my Dad and told him what Mr. Majors had done, I suppose expecting that he would tell Mr. Majors that he wasn’t being very nice. Instead my Dad said in a peculiar, husky voice, “It’s OK. His son’s in Korea.” I didn’t understand that answer for more than another ten years when another war came along. And I got to experience it myself year before last.

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Paul, the apostle in prison, wrote to Christians on the doorstep of disaster, “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice! Let your gentleness, your forbearance, your moderation, your reputation for reasonableness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Finally brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things. The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me (like when I was singing in the dungeon with Silas), these do, and the God of peace will be with you.”

“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice!” What was Paul getting at? The historical settings of the author and the original audience don’t seem to fit well with that perky little round we sing. How am I supposed to figure out what Paul meant when he said rejoice? When I asked myself that question, I thought a bit and decided that perhaps I could learn something by looking up all the passages that Paul wrote with rejoice or joy or derivatives thereof. Then I expanded the search to include Peter, James, and John. There were only 33. And a lot of them didn’t provide any help about just what rejoicing is supposed to be about. But of those passages that did, all (not just some but all) of the passages that give the reasons for rejoicing had remarkably similar sources for our joy. In this letter, 1:18, Paul rejoiced that Christ was preached, whether in pretence or truth. In 4:10, he rejoiced that the Philippian Christians had had another opportunity to show their care – and had taken the opportunity. In 2:2, Paul wrote, “Make my joy complete by being like-minded.” In Colossians 1:24, Paul rejoiced in his suffering because of the result it produced in the Colossian Christians. John, in 2 John 4, rejoiced that he had “found some of your children walking in truth.” In 3 John 3, he rejoiced greatly at the news of the truth that was in them. Peter noted that the Turkish Christians rejoiced because they were those “kept by the power of God through faith.” James wrote in 1:2, “Count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” There are several more. In each case where there is any context at all, their joy was derived from the success of the kingdom. Their joy in life was derived 100% from faith, both their own faith and the faith of others to whom they were connected. And, just as a reminder, Biblical faith, saving faith is acting on the impossible promises of God. It’s not a feeling; it’s not knowing certain facts; it’s looking at the promises of God, having absolutely no idea how God will ever pull it off, being convinced that it is absolutely beyond my ability, and setting out to do it anyway. The catch is that you need to know what those promises are, and there are hundreds of them in the New Testament, the most important ones being those that pertain to real, everyday life, not those that pertain to the great beyond over which you have no control.

Great promises fall flat when the focus fails to remain on faith. So the question we need to keep before us when considering this or any other passage is, “What does this teach me about faith?” Or, to reword an old advertising slogan, “Where’s the faith?” Or, its sequel, “Faith, it’s what’s for dinner.”

Rejoice in the Lord always. Joy is found in faith done well – or even medium rare. Paul, James, Peter, and John expressed only one foundation for joy – the success of faith as it is played out by believers to whom we are eternally connected.

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In contrast, where do most good, church-going people today get their joy? Don't focus on those who treat the assembly like Facebook, a social networking opportunity, rather those who find joy in family or good works or other really nice things.

I've asked this next question in a number of places to different Bible classes for various age groups, "If you lived in some abysmal Third World country under a repressive regime with no hope of freedom, economic stability, or a better life for your kids (which describes a majority of the world today), could you be happy, delighted, joyful, exceedingly glad with your life on earth?" A lot of them think not. One of the more creative dodges I have heard was to try to separate our word happy from the Biblical word joy. It doesn't work. The few times in the Bible where happy appears, it's the same word as is translated blessed – like in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven." So, people are saying that the Beatitudes flopped, people in desperate situations cannot be happy, Jesus lied about all that high-sounding stuff, but you can still have this intangible joy that has no relationship to life as we know it. Another creative excuse to take the focus off of faith, "They can be joyful in their situation because they don't know any better." That one gets to me because it insults some of my closest friends. And, Of course, this means that capitalism and democracy are the road to enlightenment.

No, Paul is reminding a people on the downhill slide to the worst time in all of history that faith is the only thing that's real. Other things can look mighty good – if you just don't look too closely. Everything else has a down side somewhere. Getting really excited – rejoicing – over the successes of faith is what makes life on this earth worthwhile.

Four years ago, Ghana won another big game in the World Cup, and Brittney told me about the response in Kumasi. Horns honked and people shouted for hours. The entire city was deafening. Brittney said, "Next time someone is baptized, I want to get that excited." Unconnected to that, around that same time, Jeremiah and his high school students were writing a short movie based on the plotline of the last living stone, the last possible covert, at which time the Lord would come. One of the scenes had a girl being pursued by several armed men in black suits. The guns were toys, of course. But an unexpected onlooker didn't know that and called the police. So, Jeremiah, the cast, and the film crew were rounded up and put in jail while they sorted all this out. And, you guessed it, entirely unrelated to the other two stories but at the same time, someone wanted to be baptized. Call it God's sense of humor. This being West Africa, Brittney was understandably stressed with her new husband in jail. But she rejoiced – perhaps not as loudly as did Kumasi at the scoring of a World Cup goal, but she gave it her best shot.

After two years of debating the relative merits of the Koran and the Bible, or Mohammad and Jesus, I rejoiced when I read the line, "Do we need a preacher man to be baptized?" And what is so impossible here is that they live in the middle of Pakistan with Taliban neighbors.

I mentioned last year that a Christian school had been started in Fulton. In that brief year, the administrator not only quit, but left faith entirely. I rejoiced when a young lady stepped into the void and pulled it out. She had been a Christian only about a year. Sharon and I had been studying with her and her husband a year and a half at the time. We didn't suggest that she take this on. They just saw what faith would do and did it. As John put it, "I rejoiced when I saw some of your children walking in truth."

Another example, a young man I have mentioned before, with whom I had studied several years, who asked if being a financial advisor was an appropriate job for a Christian, chose the location for his office based on its proximity to the congregation, not the best target market. And he is taking a larger and larger role in the congregation and the school.

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Two weeks ago, a storm came through Fulton and took the top of the steeple off. The next day, I was at a baby shower at the building and a reporter showed up to cover the story of the steeple. And, being the only man at the baby shower, which is in itself another one of those rejoicing opportunities because of our relationship with the expectant mother who doesn't have a husband. But that's another story. So, in making conversation with the reporter, trying to drag him kicking and screaming into a discussion of faith, I mentioned our far-flung brood: a soldier, a music professor, an engineer, and a missionary. He was surprised, and asked if we all had much in common. Yes. Faith is our common thread and faith is what binds us together even when many thousands of miles apart. And, for me, that's a lot better than winning a soccer game. That's the supper than fills you up. And I could return to the baby shower rejoicing.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice! Let your gentleness, your moderation, your forbearing, your reputation for reasonableness be known to all men. That word is difficult of translation, so various versions read differently. I think if you roll all the suggestions together you'll get pretty close. But remember, the point is not to dissect Paul's word choice so that we can achieve the command; the point is faith. This is not Paul sending the Philippians in search of a unicorn, demanding that they suck it up and act right even if they don't feel like it. Paul is reminding them to look at faith, at what the Lord promised, at the surety we have. The result will be like the eye of a hurricane, the calm in the middle of chaos. They are about to be facing the absolute, guaranteed worst times in all of history; Jesus said so. People would ask how they could be reasonable in unreasonable circumstances.

But what if it's not working? What if I am not performing acceptably? That's an interesting word study in itself, chasing down what God calls acceptable. But that's not what Paul says to do here. Are my edges getting frayed because of the ridiculousness around me? What do I do? Paul told the Philippian Christians, "The Lord is at hand." I think Paul's immediate reference is to Jesus' coming shortly in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple as He outlined in Matthew 24 and as John described figuratively in Revelation. Paul's point here was that line in Matthew 24:12, "And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened." Jesus promised. Those days will be shortened.

Although we do not live in such a time as they, we can take comfort in the same principle, like 1 Corinthians 10:13, "No temptation has overtaken you except as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it." The Lord was at hand for them in a very physical way, in the fulfillment of a series of prophecies about Jerusalem and the Temple that would be one more massive proof that Jesus is the Messiah, a proof that resulted in a huge influx of Jews into the faith. Those unbelieving Jews believed Daniel, that the Temple would stand until after the Messiah. So if it fell, the Messiah must have come. The Lord was at hand; the proof was just around the corner; their rescue from the worst of times was in the bag. Rejoice in the Lord; the Lord is at hand.

Although Paul's immediate point concerns Jesus' promise that those awful days would be cut short, we can also look at this in a broader sense, "The Lord is at hand." The figure of speech can also be used to mean "nearby." And I do not think Paul was unaware of the nuances of language. By faith the Lord is near. The impossible promises of God are happening all around.

For many church goers, the promises of God are not real because, for them, God is remote, far off; the Lord is not nearby. For many church-goers, the promises of God are like a shell game played with wooden nickels. You know that con man shell game, where he hides a

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small object under a nutshell in the old days, or perhaps a cup today. He shifts the shells left and right, back and forth, and then you get to guess, for money of course, under which shell the prize is hidden. In the warm-up, he shows you the prize once in a while, a quick look at a dried pea under the shell just to convince you that you can really follow it. But now it's replaced with a wooden nickel – because a pea at least has some nutritional value. And for you younger folks who don't know about wooden nickels, it's an old saying that developed in the late 1800's from the MidWestern carnival or circus. The carnival would come to town and the tent would go up. They would hire local youths to sell peanuts to the crowd seated in the big top. Of course, the local boys had never seen those marvels of the carnival before, either, so they spent more time watching the show than watching the money. Unscrupulous people would slip them nickels made of wood in payment for the peanuts, and the boys would never notice, until it came time to settle up. Thus, the saying arose, "Don't take any wooden nickels," as a reminder to keep your head in the game in this dishonest world.

The religious con man gives you a quick peek at the wooden nickel as he shifts the empty shells, hoping you will lose track of where the wooden nickel is. But he does give you a quick peek at the wooden nickel at times, promising that your difficulties will end if you just believe, that your finances will straighten out, that your health will improve, that your relationships will heal. And he gets you to bet your eternal life on finding that wooden nickel. Usually, if the con man is any good, you get nothing. But even if you pay close attention and guess correctly, all you get is a wooden nickel. Paul is writing to Christians on the edge of catastrophe. A shell game played with wooden nickels isn't going to work for them. They need a major paradigm shift. Rejoice in the successes of faith. Count it all joy when you fall into various trials knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. I rejoiced greatly that I have found some of your children walking in truth. Make my joy complete by being like-minded.

“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice! Let your gentleness, your forbearance, your moderation, your reputation for reasonableness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand. The promises are real. So – be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

Be anxious for nothing. How does that work? More importantly, what does this teach me about faith? If the Lord is at hand, if His promises are real, then I am confident that He can and will handle whatever is bearing down on me. But we are not accustomed to thinking in those terms. Take major surgery as a comparison. The prospect of major surgery can make you anxious. Do you not have confidence in the surgeon? Of course you have confidence, or you would get a different one. Are you afraid it will hurt? No, they have lots of drugs for that. Are you afraid that you'll get a secondary infection in the incision and spend six months fighting off something you didn't have before? Oops. Anxiety. Lots of things in this world promise peace: modern conveniences, advances in medical care, government of the people, by the people, and for the people – all these are promises with holes, and the holes produce anxiety. That's why our joy is found only in the successes of faith.

After a satisfying meal at which you probably ate too much, you have peace until thoughts of weight gain, cholesterol, salt, and acid reflux are all hidden sources of anxiety. How do we make that major paradigm shift to faith, it's what's for dinner? Paul says by prayer.

Again, the shell game masters pass off a wooden nickel on so many. Their prayers are formalized, toothless, and sterile. Read some of David's prayers in the Psalms. (13) “How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever?” (10) “Why do you stand afar off, O Lord. Why do you

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hide in time of trouble?” (22) “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Many of David’s songs start out positively, but some, like these, let us know that David had some major anxiety at times. His response? Take it to the source. By prayer and supplication. Like David, make your case. Tell God what you are thinking, not for His benefit since He already knows what you are thinking, but for yours. Clarify your anxiety so you know why you feel this way. Then, like David, resolve the issue by remembering faith, by remembering and invoking the promises of God.

And one more essential part, with thanksgiving. So many people have been taught to thank God for what they can see – which is walking by sight, not by faith. I liked the sentiment expressed in a movie we saw once. A crusty old widower farmer was leading the blessing before a meal, “Thank you Lord for this food, which I planted and raised and sweated over and fought for. So I’m not sure why I’m thanking you, but Katy said I should, so here it is.” There’s a lot of truth in that. If we have faith or not, we’re still going to get paid at the end of the week. Being good and honest and upright may make us better employees, but that’s not faith. God manipulates the physical things of this world – in ways He doesn’t let me in on – to make His promises come out, but He doesn’t micromanage everything. We make real choices and we make things happen, unfortunately both good and bad. I think the thanksgiving Paul is recommending has to do with faith. Thank God for handling those sources of anxiety that you have identified – before He fixes them. As I have said before, if you see an answer to prayer and thank God, you’re late. That’s walking by sight, not faith. Thank God for fulfilling His promises when you ask it, before you see it. That’s the prayer of faith and the cure for anxiety. The Lord is at hand. Are we afraid to put in our requests? Will God think our requests are stupid? Get over it. They probably are stupid. David said, “Why do you stand afar off, O Lord. Why do you hide in time of trouble?” Are we afraid that what I want is outside of the will of God? Get over it. He’s heard it before. And the Spirit that dwells in us reprocesses our prayers so they will fit into the will of God. It’s a promise in Romans 8:27.

And what’s the result of accosting God with what we perceive, at least at the time, as God’s failures? Are we then able, like pagans bringing sacrifices, to manipulate God, to guilt God into doing what we want? Paul doesn’t go there. He doesn’t even bring up that God has the option of saying, “No.” Paul says that “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” This is the promise that needs to be real in order for faith to work.

There are at least four really interesting word studies from that one verse: peace, understanding, heart, and mind. I’d recommend ‘guard’ as well, but it’s the only place in the New Testament where that particular word is used, so you wouldn’t be able to gather much information.

Have you ever constructed your own word study? I really enjoy doing it. You probably will not learn anything that will revolutionize Christianity, but it will give you a much more accurate picture of what the various writers were saying. My observation is that the weirdness we see in Christianity today is primarily due to taking more out of verse than God put in. And this word study approach helps to limit those flights of fancy that eventually cause division or just obscure faith. The technique does not require a knowledge of Greek or even the ability to recognize Greek letters. Your Strong’s concordance has compiled all the necessary information. You look up a word in your concordance. Let’s use ‘peace’ as the example. You scan down those little numbers that are next to the citations. Those numbers tell you which Greek word in the dictionary was used in that place. You don’t need to know what the word is, just its number.

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You probably will find that several Greek words were translated ‘peace.’ In fact, there are five. But only one of them is the kind of peace you are interested in right now, like the peace that surpasses all understanding. This shortens your look-up list. Then look in the dictionary for your number. At the end of the entry in the dictionary, after all the funny shapes, is a list of all the English words that were used to translate this Greek word in the King James Version. And while you are there, you should look at surrounding words in the dictionary – which are given in English letters – for similar words, words with the same root, like the noun and verb forms of the same word. Include the closely related words in your list. Now you need to look up all those other English words that you found in the dictionary in order to add to your list those passages that use your Greek word of interest. Then, look up all the passages and try to generate a definition from all those contexts. All the passages need to fit your definitions, not just some. The method does not guarantee that you will find all the relevant passages, but you will have a lot. The method prevents drawing too much from a verse, because your conclusion won’t work with some other verse. And sometimes, it broadens your understanding of just what the author had in mind. If you are interested in trying it and my brief explanation was too brief, let me know. I have a handout that walks you through the process with examples.

Back to the point at hand. ‘Peace’ is used about 30 times in the New Testament. It describes our relationship to God when we are forgiven, but it’s more than a just a release from judgment. Peace is the opposite of confusion, which seems to fit here. In addition, peace is the opposite of darkness and the shadow of death. Peace is a gift from God, yet also we pursue it. Peace describes the relationship between Christians, overcoming discord caused by issues that might seem important at the time, but, by comparison to brotherly love, are not.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Our mental processes will be straightened, clarified, by our certain knowledge of our deliverance, from Judgment, from confusion, from darkness, from death. It’s a gift that we pursue and it maintains like-mindedness in the church.

‘Understanding’ is used only about six times. It’s our intellect, our thought processes, our logic. Paul is just repeating the thought from 1 Corinthians 1; the wisdom of God is so far beyond the wisdom of people that it makes us look silly. So don’t sweat it, just trust it. ‘Heart’ is used 156 times in a multitude of figurative ways encompassing thoughts, motives, loyalties, attitudes, and intentions. The peace of God straightens out all those combinations of facts and emotions that tie us in knots.

‘Mind’ is only used a half dozen times. I think the best contrast is with 2 Corinthians 3:14, “But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ.” This peace of God allows our thought processes, our intellect along with our emotions, to come to a profitable conclusion. Have you ever wondered why the natural man of 1 Corinthians 2:14 cannot understand the things of the Spirit? His logic still works. His intellect still works. If it didn’t we would have no way to reach unbelievers. The problem is the natural man does not have the peace of God which lets the facts and emotions gel. The constant agitation from the natural anxiety of the world never lets thixotropy do its job of connecting us all together and setting our priorities. Without the priorities of faith, without the guaranteed promises, we’re unconnected and at the mercy of the MixMaster.

“Finally brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things. The things

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which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.”

Practice conscious thought control. Wait a minute. This sounds like a sound bite from a motivational speaker. Where’s the faith? I have observed that many of the recommendations of motivational speakers do come from the Bible. Their problem is that they take it out of its context, so the power source is disconnected. Taken out of its context, Paul’s recommendation to think about good stuff becomes no more than a Pollyanna attitude. It has no power beyond what I put in it. But in its context, God has organized our success such that some action on our part is required. He does the heavy lifting. We just need to be on the same page.

Practice conscious thought control. Is this an indictment of conservative talk radio? Here’s an observation from a member in Fulton who works with several other members at a carpet store. They listen to conservative talk radio at work quite a lot. His observation is that it puts them in a bad mood. Think about it. Don’t we already know that the world is messed up? That government doesn’t work as well as it should? That leaders don’t always have the best of motives? This is not to say that we should be willfully ignorant. We have to make decisions, especially in business, in light of the current political climate. If we had no understanding of the issues, we could not be informed voters. But we can’t make Paul’s admonition of no effect by what we perceive as the necessities of life. Here’s an example. During a potluck one Sunday noon two years ago, several people were discussing enthusiastically (because they were all on the same side) the merits of various political candidates and policies. At one point they turned to me and asked, “What do you think?” My answer was, “Background noise.”

So how do I strike a balance between knowledge of current events that may just help me communicate with the lost, versus meditating on the good stuff? I look at it like when I walk into my lab. There are vacuum pumps running all the time and instruments doing their thing all the time, not to mention electronic gear, every piece of which has its own fan. After a while, you just tune it out. But let a bearing begin to howl or an autosampler or high pressure pump miss a click, and I’ll hear it. It’s bad news – and I need to fix it before it takes the next thing with it on the way down. The balance is not found in limiting the time you listen to the negative effects of life on this planet. Rather, it’s how you process it. Bad noises mean something needs to be fixed. I don’t sit and contemplate the expense of the repair or the havoc it will wreak with my schedule. It just needs to be fixed – and soon.

Turn the bad stuff into positive action items. How will this political issue help me get the attention of the lost? How will it make me a better ambassador? How will this natural disaster affect the church? What does faith tell me to do. And, by the way, if you want to help out with the devastation in Pakistan, I know 23 men who are actively collecting funds from their friends and neighbors, Muslim neighbors, purchasing boxcars worth of relief supplies, and going with the supplies to hand them out, each box with a tract in Urdu written by them discussing what the Koran has to say about Jesus. We have a secure method of funds transfer. No Westerners show their faces. All the Pakistanis see are Pakistani Christians helping while the Muslims fight among themselves and line their own pockets. One of them is planning to go to Crimea in the fall to help teach Muslims about their own Koran, so they can then compare it to the Bible and be stunned by the stark contrast.

Back to the point at hand; meditate on the good stuff. This is not just a remedy for not being depressed by the way the world works. It’s a method for seeing the good news in everyday objects and occurrences.

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Think about this. If a normal person were to read the Bible, I am quite sure that the person would come away with the impression that the author, whom we all agree is God but I'm not assuming that for my hypothetical reader, that the author is fond of symbolism. That's how Jesus taught. All of God's symbolism has to do with putting the invisible in concrete terms, because the invisible, the realm of spirits, is the existence that matters. The spiritual is eternal. The physical is temporary. But how are we, with earth-bound mentalities, to understand the things of the spirit? Understanding the symbols is the most important thing. That's where the performance-based folks miss the boat. They are concerned about performance on earth instead of the invisible. They are living in a literary device instead of in the Spirit.

“Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things.” Where do we find this good stuff? If it's on earth, you always have to look at it with one eye closed if you are ever going to call it good. No, this good stuff is spiritual stuff, the pure stuff, the 100% praiseworthy stuff in which we rejoice.

How did Jesus come up with all those symbols? That's an important question, too often sloughed off as, “Well, He was God.” Jesus' spirit was God. His mind and body were human. He was tempted in all points just as we are. How did He keep His focus? He meditated on good stuff, spiritual stuff. I think that, because His mind was constantly turning over these spiritual concepts, He kept seeing them in everything around Him. Agricultural practice became a parable about the spreading of the Word of God. Livestock management became a parable about leadership. Housework became a parable about priorities. Business affairs became a parable about effectiveness. Family affairs became a parable about forgiveness. If we meditate on spiritual stuff as we go about everyday life, we will start to see representations of the spiritual in that everyday stuff, and be more effective as ambassadors in explaining the unseen to the natural man. Look around the tent and rejoice in faith done well.

It's all about faith.

Joy happens when the spiritual invades the physical world, when faith opens the portal. The peace of God settles the turmoil of our thoughts and emotions and lets us think clearly. It's not about being tough enough to withstand this world. It's about connecting, through faith, to what is important. Jesus befuddled His disciples when He told them at the well of Samaria after they returned from buying supper, “I have food to eat of which you do not know.” Faith, it's what's for dinner.