

Sorrowful Yet Always Rejoicing

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Paul's instructions are unambiguous: "Rejoice always" (1 Thess. 5:16).

Really? *Always*? Are there not times when it is OK *not* to rejoice? Are there not times when the pain is simply too intense, the burden too heavy, the sorrow too deep? Did he really mean to say "*always*"?

I know a man who is dying. By the time you read this he will probably be gone. For 20 years he has battled skin cancer. The cancer was manageable for a while, but required multiple surgeries—not just 15 or 20, but over 200, mostly involving parts of his face, head, and neck. Painful skin grafts from other parts of his body were applied to cover some of the damage, but most of his right ear, all of his left ear, part of his nose, and large portions of his scalp were simply cut away. At one point the cancer invaded the bone of his skull. His body was too weak to withstand anesthesia, but surgery was necessary anyway. Using a hammer and a chisel, the surgeon chipped away with brain-rattling strokes until the cancer spot was removed.

Even when he was not under the knife (or the hammer and chisel), the man was required to apply a cancer-killing ointment, the burning sensation from which was nearly unbearable and lasted for days. Eight years ago, due to radiation treatments designed to destroy the cancer, his kidneys failed and he was consigned to dialysis treatments for the rest of his life, three times weekly, in addition to the ongoing surgeries to combat the ever-advancing cancer. On one occasion, complications from dialysis nearly ended his life. Even when things were going "smoothly," the downward drag on his physical wellbeing was persistent and obvious.

Despite his heroic efforts, the cancer has now prevailed. His doctor, a noted skin-cancer expert, recently recommended that no more surgeries be done. Further cutting would only add fruitless pain and suffering. With about 50 tumors growing out-of-control on his head, chest, and back, and with reason to believe that it has now invaded his lungs and wrapped itself around his spinal cord, the man has decided to decline any further medical intervention.

Recently he was being wheeled out of the hospital, with little or no hope of physical improvement, let alone recovery. One of his three daughters was at his side when the nurse pushing the wheelchair said, "I hope you have a good day today." He looked up at her and said, in a weak but confident voice, "This is the day that the Lord has made. I will rejoice and be glad in it." The nurse said she knew a song with those words, one she learned while at a summer camp as a teenager. The three of them began to sing as they walked, "This is the day, this is the day that the Lord has made, that the Lord has made. I will rejoice, I will rejoice and be glad in it, and be glad in it."

What basis could there possibly be for this kind of rejoicing in the face of such dire circumstances? Hadn't this man just learned that he had lost his twenty-year battle with cancer? Wasn't he downcast and discouraged after eight years of wrestling with the effects of kidney failure? Hadn't he just discovered that all his fighting and suffering was for naught? Why *would* he—how *could* he—rejoice at a time like this?

I know his secret. In Philippians 4:4 Paul puts the command to rejoice like this: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!"

Note the words, "in the Lord." The man I know had determined to rejoice *always*, in every earthly circumstance, because he knew that he was safe and secure "in the Lord." Though his body was nearly dead, though his suffering has been intense at times, he would *always* be joyful and thankful in Christ, his Savior. He could rejoice despite his physical discomfort because he knew his name was written in heaven. He knew that he would one day experience "fullness of joy" in the presence of God (Ps. 16:11), and this assurance colored every aspect of his life with happiness of the deepest sort.

Rejoicing *always*, as Paul meant, does not rule out sadness, mourning, and other normal expressions of grief. I have seen this man grimace with pain. I have seen him express frustration, weariness, exhaustion, and longing for physical health. Through these past 20 years, he did not always have a smile on his face. He was not always cheerful. His family members are comforted by the fact that he will soon pass out of suffering into bliss, but they are also sorrowful.

His daughters will soon lose the first man they ever loved. His wife will be without her companion of 53 years. Nevertheless, they, like their father and husband, have learned the secret of rejoicing "in the Lord"—the secret that enabled him to rejoice even through the worst of his suffering. Unlike others who have no hope in Christ, they have every reason at a time like this to be "sorrowful yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10).

Christian, take Paul's command to heart and rejoice *always*, even in your deepest sorrow!

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself. (Phil. 3:20-21)

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