

Rejoice in the Lord? ... Yes, Rejoice in the Lord!

I think that last pastor's page on snow might have been a mistake.

Perhaps God took it as a prayer for more snow; or maybe He desired to demonstrate His excellent sense of humor. Whatever the case, I've been doing a whole lot *more* shoveling ever since I *wrote* about shoveling.

On the upside, I find that shoveling snow offers an excellent opportunity for praying and pondering.

The prayer time is always welcome, of course. But also the time to ponder. And what I've been pondering specifically is the phenomenon of Christian joy.

The Bible is clear that Christians should be joyful.

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, rejoice!" says Paul in Php. 4:4. Looking forward to Christ, Isaiah proclaims, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation; He has covered me with the robe of righteousness" (Isa. 61:10).

Ps. 97:12 calls us to joyfully worship: "Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous, and give thanks to His holy name!" And Ps. 64:10 calls us to rejoice that God will soon destroy His and our enemies: "Let the righteous one rejoice in the Lord and take refuge in Him! Let all the upright in heart rejoice!"

We can understand each of those calls to rejoice. They *make sense* to us.

But then we come to those calls to rejoice that seem a bit more ... difficult.

Habakkuk resolutely declares: "Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail, and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation" (Hab. 3:17-18).

What?!?

Or again, consider Paul, writing to the church at Philippi from his imprisonment in Rome. He has just noted the possibility that he will be "poured out as a drink offering" when he declares, "I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise, you also should be glad and rejoice with me" (Php. 2:17b-18).

Then he tells them how he hopes to send his faithful servant Timothy to them, even as he already has sent his beloved fellow-worker Epaphroditus, who nearly died in serving the Lord. Paul is ensuring that the church is strengthened, even if his life is stolen from him. And he warns them against their enemies – evildoers who would replace their true strength in Christ with false worship and confidence that rests in men's deeds. But first, Paul emphasizes once more: "rejoice in the Lord" (Php. 3:1).

In the midst of such circumstances; in the face of such enemies ... *how* could the apostle so emphasize the church's calling to *rejoice*?

Look at church history: the martyrs who sang psalms while the flames devoured their bodies; the Christians who rejoiced to confess Christ as the lions rushed at them; the Godly ones whose songs of praise continually rose up from their damp cells. How could they *rejoice* in the midst of such *pain*?

How could the Covenanters sing God's praise when they had to worship in swamps, swords at their sides, always awaiting an attack by their enemies? How can God's people *rejoice* when the world opposes them?

How could our forefathers on the prairie rejoice while enduring day after backbreaking day of breaking sod and living alone? How could they sing God's praises when the world turned white and their sod houses became caves, buried deep under the endless drifts of snow?

How could they *rejoice*? How could they sing God's *praise*?

The answer: our *joy does not depend* on our *circumstances*.

I'm afraid we're not *naturally* very good at rejoicing. I know that *I* am not very good at it. My default is mere *optimism* – an expectation that things will get better; that this too shall pass.

But mere optimism is no match for the martyr's flames; the church's foes; the pioneer Christian's endless isolation. The joy to which we're called is a *greater* joy – a joy rooted *deeper* and able to *overcome* the storms of this life.

The joy to which we are called is the joy of knowing that we sit on the throne – *even now!* – with Christ. It's the joy of knowing that our bodies may be mistreated, and our names be misused – but *perfect* bodies await those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. Ours is the joy which knows that pain and toil, persecution and sickness last but a moment – and each serves to prepare us for a glory greater than our most glorious dreams of heaven.

The joy to which we are called, brothers and sisters, is the joy which always recalls that this life is meant to prepare us for eternity. The joy to which we are called arises from knowing that the God who loves us enough to send His Son for us – He is guiding every step, every event, every experience; using all of it to perfectly mold us into the image of Christ.

That's a good thing to remember when you're shoveling the sidewalk for the 387th time, and you forget the wind direction and get a face full of snow. It's a good thing to remember when you're struggling to get through

the day's chores with an illness, or with the aches and pains of many years, or with frustrations piling atop one another and making the hours stretch out into days.

Rejoice *not* that this too shall pass. Rejoice, instead, that this too is from God, and is for your good! Rejoice that this too is making you to reflect Christ!

And rejoice that the One who loves you more than you can begin to comprehend soon will return ... will survey what you have done through faith with what He has set before you ... and will declare, with great joy: *Well done, my good and faithful servant!*