

Pastor Francis Chan writes about visiting two of his former parishioners of whom he was particularly fond of. They had become very close friends. This couple once lived in southern California, but had to move to Ohio, because that is where work carried them.

When he saw them, it had rained for five or six weeks straight or something like that. He was joking, but not entirely. They had experienced the harsh winter of the Midwest and now this. The wife, Carol said, "Oh, it's okay. I like the rain."

It did not matter where they lived, they had contentment because of their relationship with Jesus and their love for one another. As Bishop Barren likes to say, "You have all you need to be content because you have love."

Paul learned to be content in abundance and in need. He was always thankful when parishioners provided him resources. But his joy was not just for the actual materials or finances, but for those individuals who gave.

When they learned to give from the heart for God, they would begin to understand all that God gives to them in their need. So, Paul was always thankful for the generosity of his parishioners. Those must have been very fine days for him.

I mean listen to what he said in today's reading, "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus." You'd think he had just won the lottery. Nope, not even close; he was writing this letter from prison. The Apostle Paul spent roughly one-quarter of his missionary career in prisons:

Roman imprisonment was preceded by being stripped naked and then flogged—a humiliating, painful, and bloody ordeal. The bleeding wounds went untreated as prisoners sat in painful leg or wrist chains. Mutilated, bloodstained clothing was not replaced, even in the cold of winter.

Most cells were dark, especially the inner cells of a prison, like the one Paul and inhabited in Philippi. Unbearable cold, lack of water, cramped quarters, and sickening stench from few toilets made sleeping difficult and waking hours miserable. Because of the miserable conditions, many prisoners begged for a speedy death. Others simply committed suicide.

In settings like this, Paul is chained as a prisoner in jail, and he's writing this letter about joy. This letter is about contentment from within. Now, imagine if you are in a prison cell by yourself, separated from your family, your friends, and everyone, and you can write a letter back to the church, what are you going to write about?

Telling everyone else to be happy? Telling everyone else to be content? I might say, "Please get me out of here!" It doesn't make any sense that Paul was somehow at peace in such circumstances.

But he was saying: I'm okay. I'm in a prison cell, I'm fine. I'm over here, I'm fine. Wherever I am, I'm going to be okay. If I'm in southern California, if I'm in Ohio, no problem. Paul is in total love of Jesus and because of that love, nothing can touch him. Wouldn't you want to have a piece of that peace?

Paul shows us that Contentment has nothing to do with our circumstances. The Bible nowhere speaks about a "happy" Christian; it talks plentifully of joy. Happiness depends on things that happen and may sometimes be an insult to the Christian life. (i.e. I rob a bank and get away with it, which makes me very happy.) Joyfulness does not depend upon external conditions, and a joyful heart is never an insult to the Christian faith.

+In his talk entitled "The Sense of an Ending," Jeremy Begbie tells a story about attending a worship service in a poor South African township.

I was told, immediately before the service, that a house around the corner had just been burned to the ground because the man who lived there was a suspected thief. A week before that, a tornado had cut through the township, ripping apart fifty homes; five people had been killed. And then I was told that the very night before, a gang hounded down a fourteen-year-old, a member of the church's Sunday school, and stabbed him to death.

The pastor began his opening prayer: "Lord, you are the Creator and the Sovereign, but why did the wind come like a snake and tear our roofs off? Why did a mob cut short the life of one of our own children, when he had everything to live for? Over and over again, Lord, we are in the midst of death."

As he spoke, the congregation responded with a dreadful sighing and groaning. And then, once he finished his prayer, very slowly, the whole congregation began to sing, at first very quietly, then louder.

They sang and they sang, song after song of praise—praise to a God who in Jesus had plunged into the very worst to give us a promise of an ending beyond all imagining. The singing gave the congregation a foretaste of the end.

Paul shows us that Christian hope isn't about looking around at the state of things now and trying to imagine where it's all going. It's not about trying to calculate the future from the present. It's about breathing now the fresh air of the ending, tasting of the feast to come. That is why we can sing at funerals. That is why Paul, in his most miserable conditions, rejoice. And just may VCU students during exams...

Hope has to do with God's promises that are still future and hidden, just as faith has to do with God's promises that are here and now. To the person who has believed for today but has not seen the answer come today, there comes the call to hope.

Hope says, "Tomorrow also is God's." We can always find something to rejoice in, because God is no distant deity but a constant reality, who is forever present now and our future. God will always be the final answer. And it is love that leads us there. Hope in that and rejoice in that. The apostle Paul did. While he lived, he drained every drop of joy out of every day that passed.