

## Nevertheless, Joy!

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NEVERTHELESS, JOY! is Ralph Blair's keynote address at the connection89 summer conferences of Evangelicals Concerned held in the states of Pennsylvania, Washington, and Wisconsin. Dr. Blair has been practicing psychotherapy for twenty years. He founded Evangelicals Concerned in 1976.

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During the Great Depression, one of the hit songs on Broadway was "Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries." Rodney Dangerfield rebuts: "Life is just a bowl of pits." A rational therapist might caution: Well now, isn't life really rather a *mixed bowl* of cherries *and* pits? After all, even Woody Allen says life's divided into *two* parts: "the horrible and the miserable." All these opinions are really the same. All except the rational therapist's. Each is cynicism about life. Tallulah Bankhead expressed cynicism when she said: "If I had to live my life again, I'd make the same mistakes, only sooner." Two hundred fifty years ago, playwright John Gay wrote for his own epitaph: "Life is a jest; and all things show it. I thought so once; but now I know it." Gay's cynical descendants put the same sentiment crassly: "Life sucks and then you die."

Hearing these ideas, maybe we don't know whether to feign a knowing smile or cluck our tongues and wag our heads. Like hearing a sick joke that resonates with our own warped wit, we're torn between emotions. We find the pessimism both uncomfortably funny and sad because it reflects our own defensively cynical hostility when we, too, so desperately desire something so much better to be true, but experience no real hope that it can be true. We want to live the pretensions of irrational optimism but we're stuck in the disappointment of irrational pessimism. And so we try to protect ourselves by concluding with Gay that life's a dirty little joke and with the songwriters, "Don't take it serious ... just live and laugh at it all." But as a writer of Proverbs knew long ago: "Even in laughter, the heart may be aching." (14:13)

There was a lot of laughter on Fire Island in the 1970s. Gay people were courageously emerging from dark closets of isolating fear to the relief of promised companionship. But poppers, pill punch, and parties that lasted all night did not really liberate the oppressed from the pain of isolation, insecurity, rejection and meaninglessness. Popular T-shirts of those summers read: "So many men, so little time." Oscar Levant put it: "So little time, so little to do." What was there really left to do with so many men? That lifestyle was conceived and delivered in boredom while basic sexual needs went unmet. No one seemed to notice that, in the words of Edna St. Vincent Millay: "It is not true that life is one damn thing after another—it is one damn thing over and over." And then as Malcolm Forbes laments: "By the time we've made it, we've had it."

Perhaps Scott Peck understates it when his first sentence in *The Road Less Traveled* is: "Life is difficult." Might it not be more as Jonathan Swift said: "Life's a tragedy." But maybe that wouldn't allow for 300 weeks on the Best Seller list. Jesus' brother James reminded the first Christians that their own lives were but vapors that appear for a little while and then vanish away." (4:14)

Those of us who are numbered among the most misunderstood and despised of underdogs might be glad to settle for the experience that Eric Bentley once called "the privilege of being no unhappier than other people." But we have no guarantees about that. In Jesus' day human tragedy was symbolized in the collapsed Tower of Siloam, the cruel Pontius Pilate and Herod, infant mortality and dreaded leprosy. Today the names are Bhopal and Chernobyl, Belfast, Beirut and the West Bank, Sheffield stadium, the USS Iowa and Tiananmen Square, Falwell and Gambino, abortion, crack, and AIDS. But these are headline tragedies. Most human suffering is so everyday common it's not news. The third most frequently prescribed drug in America is for anxiety and two others among the top seven are for ulcers.

Is life any better for Christians? Rigorous psychological research *has shown* that reliance on the grace of God is associated with emotional empathy and predictive of less personal distress and depression. But, of course, these findings pertain to averages. They don't insure against distress and depression in any *individual* Christian's case.

Earlier this year, an evangelical magazine featured an article entitled: "Do Real Christians Get Depressed?" We know that real Christians can get depressing, but the question posed was whether or not real Christians get depressed. Christians seem less prepared for this question than they are for, say, "Do real Christians get cavities?" That a leading Christian magazine can even ask this in all seriousness shows that some Christians must think they're entitled to a tube of Christian Crest for their brains. Of course real Christians get depressed. And some stay depressed. The psychiatrist who wrote the article said that "Neurotic Christians are especially hard to help, because they often mix self-pity and a tendency to blame others with some bad theology. They say their problems stem from being persecuted for their faith or from the fact that God 'hates' them." They seem to have no real sense of God's grace. They seem oblivious to what evangelical theologian Colin Brown reminds us: that "the Bible knows no single composite picture of wholeness consisting of health, wealth, and happiness as the birthright of every born-again Christian." As Duke University chaplain William Willimon says: "The notion that only good things happen to good people was put to rest when we hung Jesus on the cross." But even Christian psychiatrists can fail to appreciate this. In their book, *Happiness is a Choice*, two psychiatrists with Dallas Seminary promise happiness "within a few months, to anyone" using their seven guidelines. Of course, some of their guidelines presuppose one's having already in place a pleasing family life.

Depression has been the experience of millions of Christians, including some of the great ones. Think of the depressions of William Cowper, Augustus Montague Toplady, Ann Judson, Mary

Jane Graham, Frances Ridley Havergal, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Hannah Whitall Smith, Francis Thompson, Edward John Carnell, J. B. Phillips, C. S. Lewis.

Carnell was a brilliant evangelical professor of apologetics at Fuller Seminary. He was even president of the school. But neither extensive psychiatric treatment, nor barbiturates, nor repeated electroshock therapy, nor his own strong Christian convictions could conquer his deep depression and chronic insomnia. Carnell confided that "Whenever I fall into seasons of depression, a cloud of futility hovers over my soul." When he was 48, a massive overdose of sleeping pills ended this misery.

Hannah Whitall Smith was the author of the classic *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life*. But as her biographer says, she went through "periods of great discouragement, doubt and even despair." For years, her co-evangelist-husband had extra-marital affairs and was finally caught in scandal, winding up disgraced and without faith. Four of her seven children died in childhood and none of them became a Christian. Her daughter Mary deserted her own husband and two baby daughters to run off to Italy with the art critic Bernhard Berenson and daughter Alys married the most outspoken atheist of the day, Bertrand Russell. Whitall Smith acknowledged her unhappiness in her book *Everyday Religion*: "The prayer which is answered today," she said, "may seem to be unanswered tomorrow. The promises, once so gloriously fulfilled, may cease to have any apparent fulfillment. The spiritual blessing which was at one time such a joy may be utterly lost. Nothing of all we once trusted in and rested in may be left us but the hungry and longing memory of it all." In 1906, five years before she died and the same year that her *Living in Sunshine* was published, she wrote to her daughter Mary: "I do wonder if a procession of all the people I have helped will come to greet me when I enter heaven! Or will they have discovered that I had everything wrong and only hindered them instead of helping and so come to try to persuade Peter to shut the gate against me!"

Describing his own experience of clinical depression, the Bible translator J. B. Phillips writes: "The colour, the meaning and the point of life simply disappears ... . We pray apparently to an empty heaven, and in our misery we torture ourselves by brutal self-condemnation." Elsewhere Phillips avers that God "will give us moments of wonderful perception, but will also allow us to endure terrifying darkness." A long-time friend of C. S. Lewis tells us that "All his life ... [Lewis] was subject to periods of depression." Francis Thompson, author of *The Hound of Heaven*, tried to cope with life-long depression and loneliness by resorting to opium, as William Cowper had done. One of the most moving of Thompson's poems concerns his remembrance of the little stranger with whom he once shared raspberry picking. The little girl's name was Daisy, but she was representative of a host of his losses. Years afterward, he wrote: "She went her unremembering way,/ She went and left in me/ The pang of all the partings gone,/ And partings yet to be. ... Nothing begins, and nothing ends,/ That is not paid with moan, / For we are born in other's pain,/ And perish in our own."

Life is not only tough and unfair for Christians and our victims, not only tough and unfair for gay men and lesbians and our oppressors, life is tough and unfair wherever we look. Wherever we're sensitive enough, we'll see it through the misleading cover-up of wealth, health, prestige, power, piety. Our own tears mingle with tears shed across the world; our own moans echo in moanings throughout the earth. And we have such an integral relationship to the rest of creation that the Apostle Paul can say, as Moffatt translates him: "the entire creation sighs and throbs with pain" awaiting liberation. (Rom 8: 22) The fox in the trap, the orphaned elephant calf, the poisoned ground water underneath, the depleted ozone overhead. All creation suffers the consequences of our sin.

But we can make the bad experience of life even worse. How we interpret what happens can make it far worse. For one thing, we can *awfulize* and *predict* the worst we can imagine. As Hannah More warns in *Belshazzar*: "Imagination frames events unknown,/ In wild fantastic shapes of hideous ruin,/ And what it fears creates." A promising young biblical scholar, recently killed, wrote: "The principle ... is well established in biblical literature. If one gazes too long upon the enemy and his might, the enemy grows in the mind's eye to gigantic proportions and his citadels reach up to the skies."

Another way to awfulize and thereby make it worse is to fail to see that as the fiendish demon Screwtape explained to his nephew Wormwood: "As long as [a human being] lives on earth, periods of emotional and bodily richness and liveliness will alternate with periods of numbness and poverty," what this elderly demon calls "the law of Undulation ... a series of troughs and peaks." A failure to take seriously that ordinarily all lives are just such mixed bags of ups and downs leads to exaggerated disappointment and even depression when the living is not one continuous "high." Screwtape instructs his junior tempter to make the most of this undulation experienced by all humans by realizing what use "the Enemy"—Screwtape's term for God—wants to make of the troughs. Screwtape has to admit that "It is during such trough periods, much more than during the peak periods, that [the human] is growing into the sort of creature He [that is, God] wants it to be."

Another way to make our lives more miserable is by *coveting*. We can *visualize* to our ruin through "if only" fantasy. We irrationally predict how very wonderful it would be if only we had this or that, him or her, and when we don't get it we assume that we've missed out so badly. We suffer regret. We don't understand what Oscar Wilde learned the hard way: "In this world, there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it." That's the way Dorothy L. Sayers described hell: getting our own way forever. In addition to awfulizing and coveting, we can make things worse for ourselves by *personalizing*. That is to say, we explain the acts and opinions and even the tastes of others—and even *impersonal* circumstances—in terms of our own sense of self. We explain our lives as though we're the very center of the universe, as though everything really does revolve around us and our own narcissistic desires. Like infants, we fail to make a sufficient distinction between us and not-us. When someone does not respond to us as we tell ourselves she has to for our own good, we

irrationally believe that she responded as she did because of what we don't like about ourselves. We confuse our own self-evaluation with her own evaluation of her own version of us. Trying to protect ourselves from the bad effects of personalizing, we can make it still worse for ourselves by demanding that we be perfect. Such perfectionism, of course, is based merely in terms of our own imperfect ideas of perfection and is no indication what anyone else's expectations might be. Since whatever we have in mind about our wished-for perfection is, by definition, an ideal to which we cannot attain within the realm of everyday experience—what we have in mind is a fantasy—we unintentionally set ourselves up for failure, frustration, and neurotic guilt. Such is the only possible outcome of these efforts at self-justification. We forget that we are under the *grace* of God. If that means anything it means that we cannot do anything to make ourselves the least bit worthy, let alone perfect. It is not our job to earn approval or acceptance. Self-judgment cannot be countered by a defensive self-justification that is simply excuse. Acceptance in others' eyes is their story, not ours. Acceptance in God's eyes is the story of God's grace, God's doing, not ours.

At the end of a relatively shorter or longer life span on this earth, sooner or later, all the pains of living give way to the pains of dying. Every year we all celebrate birthdays. We've put our birthdate on forms we've filled out ever since grade school. But there's another day that rolls around each year: the day that marks the other end of our time on earth. Nobody knows which of the 365 days is his or her very own deathday. But each of us has one.

Every antique shop is silent testimony to dusty death. Someone didn't take these things with her, did she? The former owner is gone and the things remain to be bought by others who also one day will be forced to leave these same things behind. The things that were owned outlast their owners. While their owners' bodies decay in the ground, these things go on commanding higher and higher prices at Sotheby's or the Salvation Army.

We've all been dying for years. Some people cannot agree when what they call life begins. But surely we know that from the very moment that the sperm hits the egg, a precarious trip on the thin edge of biological extinction has begun. And even if we make it through all the dangers of intrauterine life, and all wars and muggings, and even if we escape HIV infection, the inherent limits on the number of times our cells can divide and the inevitable, accumulating errors in reproduction and repair of DNA, spell inescapable death for each one of us. Even after Jesus miraculously restored Lazarus from death, his friend eventually got sick again and had to go through the terrible ordeal of dying all over again. No wonder C. S. Lewis called Lazarus, not Stephen, the first Christian martyr! At sometime after every miracle cure, every cured person dies. Even after a cure for AIDS is found, every person to benefit from that breakthrough will die. And try as we do to ignore this fact, even with dark humor, we cannot ignore it for long: We're all dying.

Andy Rooney puts his tongue in his cheek and asserts: "I do not accept the inevitability of my own death. I secretly think there may be some other way out." To avoid death, Sophie Tucker advised: "Keep breathing." But "some of these days" finally came and Sophie, too, was gone.

Even short of death and dying, though, some Christians have trouble admitting to having trouble. Their lives may be lemons, but they pretend they're lemon-fresh Joy. It won't wash. Hannah Whitall Smith's biographer says that "Because she did not receive the blessings that seemed due such a great Christian, Christian publishers have shunned doing her biography." In the introduction to the 1952 edition of *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life*, the publishers spoke of the author as being "never ... despondent ... Life to her was no dismal journey." But that was a lie calculated to sell books. It was, in fact, *in* the suffering of her own life, what she called "God's shaking process," that she learned to trust only in God. *This was her life's secret*. But unrealistic Christians find it hard to learn that.

Even though we're supposed to believe that God is in control of everything, we can find it especially difficult to admit, even in the midst of trouble, that we're disappointed with our "omnipotent" God. Phil Yancey has written an excellent new book called *Disappointment with God*. He acknowledges that God can seem unfair, silent, and hidden. But this is too uncomfortable for a fundamentalist reviewer of the book. She says she was "disappointed in the title." She demands: "How can anyone say that he or she is disappointed with God?" Well, maybe we can say that by being honest, like the writers of some of the Psalms—by having faith. In the Foreword to C. S. Lewis' book on his grief following his wife's death from cancer, novelist Madeleine L'Engle expresses her appreciation for Lewis' "having the courage to yell, to doubt, to kick at God in angry violence." Such, she notes, "is not often encouraged." Lewis, she says, "gives us permission to admit our own doubts, our own angers and anguishes, and to know that they are part of the soul's growth."

It does seem though; that we'd often rather be Stoic wimps and lie to ourselves and others: "I'm fine, thank you." "There, there. It's all right." No! That won't do. It's not all right. Not *now*.

Since suffering has been the universal experience throughout history, there have, of course, been many proposed solutions. The most ubiquitous solution for millions of Americans this year comes in four little words from Bobby McFerrin: "Don't Worry, Be Happy." It was the winner of the most prestigious Grammys of 1989. Now there's even a *Don't Worry, Be Happy* book, with twenty new verses we can whistle in the dark. Try that on an empty stomach over a vent outside Bloomingdale's "Don't Worry, Be Happy" boutique. Try humming it in any trouble more serious than Yuppie fever. (By the way, I'm not advocating turning it around to "Don't Be Happy, Worry.")

The more literate among us may turn these days to supposedly more serious self-help books with titles such as *You Don't Have to Suffer* and *How to Stubbornly Refuse to Make Yourself Miserable About Anything—Yes—Anything!* The publisher of the latter book, written by a proud

atheist, promises: "This book can work miracles in your life!" The title of yet another book is *Super Joy*. Its ads ask: "Are you ready to say 'Yes' to Happiness? [with a capital H] Are you discontent? Still looking for a fulfilling, committed relationship? ... you crave Super Joy. ... *Super Joy* shows you how to ... tap into your own joy response with ... [an] easy-to-use, step-by-step program. ... Learn how to face and overcome any problem—no matter how big—without stress. ... transform down days into joyful days, and much more." If all this Super Joy fails, one can always go out and buy a bottle of booze advertised as Absolut Joy. And we don't even have to go out for it. We're told we can call toll-free 1-800-CHEER UP and have Absolut Joy delivered.

When we suffer, our most immediate question is "Why?" But as Eberhard Juengel of Tübingen cautions: "Veracious theology can only take this [question] seriously by *not* attempting to satisfy it. It can only take this question seriously by admitting there is *no answer* for it. ... Suffering is not understandable. Even the Christian faith cannot understand suffering. ... At the most we can comprehend suffering's incomprehensibility, but nothing more." So let's not overdose each other with fatuous words of "comforting" explanation.

The gospels don't speculate on the causes of suffering; they take it for granted. As Otto Piper of Princeton says: "suffering is the inescapable lot of the Christians." There are over twenty Greek words for suffering in the New Testament—most designating psychological distress, though some refer to physical pain as well. "Unlike many Jews of His day," notes Ruth Edwards of the University of Aberdeen, "Jesus declined to accept a systematic connection between sickness or accident and sin." Jesus is remembered by the Gospel writers as having shown compassion to sick, hungry and confused people. They record his healings.

One might think that if there ever was a place and time to get sick it would have been in Palestine during Jesus' ministry. But every day of that three-year ministry, more people got sick than Jesus healed. Every day more people suffered than were relieved. Does this have any bearing on our own perspective on suffering and sickness? Jesus refused to interfere in his own experience of suffering and the very symbol of our reconciliation with God, of eternal life for us, is an instrument of cruel execution: a cross. In Flannery O'Connor's words: "grace must wound before it can heal." Does all this raise any reasons for revising our own aspirin-popping assumptions about suffering? Does this call into question our hyperinterventionist mentality?

As we read through the letters of Paul and other New Testament writers, some helpful insights may be gleaned for experiencing suffering as something *besides* suffering.

Paul was on death row in a Roman prison when he wrote the letter that has been called "the Epistle of Joy." He was addressing his congregation in Philippi, an assembly begun several years earlier around a nucleus of Jewish women. In this letter he informs them that he may well be facing imminent execution. He writes sadly that all of his co-workers except Timothy seem to be so wrapped up in their own concerns that they don't really care about the interests of Christ. (Phil

2:19f) He rejoices, though, with these dear Philippians, telling them he continually thanks God for their partnership in the Good News. Here is Paul, attacked as a hopeless liberal antinomian enemy of God by so many of his fellow Jews, treated as a boring and unskilled imposter, as unspiritual, by Corinthian Christians, the object of all sorts of unfair criticism from self-styled conservative and liberal Christians, deserted by his friends, under state arrest with the cruel possibility of capital punishment hanging over his head, having experienced flogging, mob attacks, shipwreck, overwork, sleeplessness, hunger, homelessness, and still suffering the painful distractions of his cryptic "thorn in the flesh"—in short, in his own words, made the "refuse of the world," *nevertheless* writing this "Epistle of Joy." As Moishe Silva of Westminster Seminary puts it, there is nothing "more characteristic of Philippians than Paul's juxtaposition of joy and adversity." How could Paul *do* that? What was his secret?

Well, he didn't do it by masochism. As he wrote to the Colossians, self-inflicted suffering is worthless (2:23). And he didn't do it through psychological denial. Paul was a realist. And he didn't do it through ivory tower theologizing. Paul's tower was a dungeon.

Perhaps we have the most significant clue as to how Paul did do it, in what he emphatically states is his profound personal conviction about life itself. And about death. If we were to ask Paul to define life, he'd tell us what he told the Philippians: "*To me, life is Christ.*" In the Greek of this sentence, it isn't possible to distinguish the subject from the predicate. He could be as well saying that Christ is his life as that his life is Christ. But either way, to Paul, living and Christ are inseparable. To Paul, there was no living apart from Christ. Then, after saying that to him "life is Christ," Paul adds, "to die is gain." As J. B. Phillips translates: "For living to me means simply 'Christ,' and if I die I should merely gain more of him. I should find it very hard to make a choice. I am torn in two directions—on the one hand I long to leave this world and live with Christ, and that is obviously the best thing for me. Yet, on the other hand, it is probably more necessary for you that I should stay here on earth." (1:21ff) Paul wrote to the first Christians in Rome: "Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's." (Rom 14:8)

Here we have what I think is Paul's psychologically sound basis for his experience of deep Joy in the midst of deep trouble: *Paul's life has its total meaning in relationship to Christ.* To Paul, nothing is as important as his relationship with Christ. Christ *is* Paul's life, his whole life. Christ is his everything. There is, therefore, really nothing in his possession—including biological life itself—that matters as much as Christ does and so there's nothing really to lose if he keeps his relationship with Christ. As he wrote to the house churches of Corinth: "dying we still live on; disciplined by suffering, we are not done to death; in our sorrows we have always cause for joy; poor ourselves, we bring wealth to many; penniless, we own the world." (II Cor 6:9f)

Now naturally, friends did matter to Paul. He fondly greeted so many of them, each by name, when he wrote to his young churches. And naturally, his health and safety mattered to him. But in the most basic perspective that his real living was equivalent to his relationship with Christ, even his valued and warm friendships escaped indulgent possessiveness and the selective



memory of nostalgia. Even health—and whatever else—was of secondary importance and dispensable.

Paul was *in* the world but not *of* it; he was realistically related to his friends and his circumstances but he did not cling relentlessly to them. He saw that his life was not *defined* in terms of *these* relationships but by his relationship with Christ. Paul's Joy was deeply rooted *outside* himself and his circumstances, beyond merely earthly existence, within the wider community of the reign of God both in the present and in the future. As fine as human happiness can be, Paul's Joy was rather to be found in the living Christ of the New Age now dawning upon him. To Paul, nothing in all of creation would ever separate him from the Joy of that loving, lively relationship; death would bring only its increase. To someone obsessively tied to this world, this world's losses and dying itself would mean too much of a loss. But dying meant to Paul that faith to faith communion with Christ would become face to face communion. He saw death to be a great advantage over continuation on earth. In the double comparative of the original Greek, this man who had met the resurrected Christ here says that it would be much, much better to depart. He here uses a term that literally means finally pulling up anchor and sailing home. As Glasgow's William Barclay points out, "It is the word for solving problems. Death brings life's solutions." In this centennial year of the death of Bishop J. B. Lightfoot of Durham, we note his comments on this text: "After all, death is true life" to Paul.

A word of caution should be inserted here. It's been very easy for preachers to pervert this text and say that "All *you* need is Jee-zuss!" While they themselves run after much besides. But our Creator knows we have all sorts of needs as the creations we are. After all, as Jesus himself put it, in *first* seeking the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, there are all sorts of additional needs we really do have and need fulfilled *after* that. (Matt 6:33) In the lyrics of a U2 song: "You broke the bonds/ You loosed the chains/ You carried the cross/ And my shame/ You know I believe it/ But I still haven't found/ What [all?] I'm looking for."

In practical everyday terms, when Paul says that to him life is Christ he means that his whole life is alive in relationship to the risen Christ. Everything is subordinated to Christ and Christ's priorities. Paul was putting into practice his Lord's view of discipleship, preserved by Luke: "Whoever comes to Me without prizing far less dearly his father and mother and spouse and children and brothers and sisters, yes even his own life, cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry his or her own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. ... So with anyone of you who will not part with all he or she has, you cannot be My disciple." (Luke 14:26f and 33) We who would follow Jesus are summoned to a common life in solidarity with the Christ of the cross.

Does this exchange, this subordination of everything to Christ, seem to be too much for us? A deprivation? We must weigh this question seriously. But really, on the contrary, the exchange results, in Isaiah's words, in "beauty for ashes and the oil of joy for mourning." (61:3) We show no grasp of the counter-productivity of conflicting loyalties and no real understanding of where

life is to be found—our life—if we look for it within the limits of our own self-designed lives, if we seek it anywhere but in Christ's cross and Christ's resurrection life. It's inevitable that, sooner or later, we will be separated from all the good and useful human relationships and possessions of the present. We've been here at our summer conferences for ten years. I say "we" loosely. Never before and never again after this conference will *all* of us be together in one place on this earth. One by one each is lost to us. Good and rewarding as they may be, these gifts of each other simply have no basic life in themselves. We have no life in ourselves. Jesus invites disciples to be willing to let go voluntarily of what someday will have to be let go of even involuntarily so that we can be loved now and forever, and find each other again, in arms that never will let go. In the poetry of the blind Scottish hymnwriter George Matheson: "O Love that wilt not let me go,/ I rest my weary soul in Thee,/ I give Thee back the life I owe,/ That in Thine ocean depths its flow may richer, fuller be. "

Everything we're to prize less than Christ *can* be, and so frequently *is*, the very *focus* of our anxiety, fear, envy, anger, jealousy, disappointment, hurt, frustration, sorrow, pain and grief. And though it can also bring wonderful delight and the thrilling enjoyment the Creator surely intended for us, it can for that pleasure be terribly painful when in jeopardy or lost to any degree. Even our own meager faithfulness to Christ can be such a source of disappointment to ourselves and to others. Only Christ in us, Christ with us, only *Christ's* faithfulness, can be relied upon through it all. Only our life in Christ's life is deep enough and wide enough and strong enough to meet our very core needs now as well as always.

Paul had disentangled himself from the trap of overattachment to anything, no matter how lovely and good in itself. Everything Paul was and had he placed at the disposal of the One who gave *his* everything for Paul. The Apostle wrote to the Roman Christians: "Therefore, with eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers and sisters, as an act of intelligent worship, to offer up to God your bodies—your very selves—as a living sacrifice, set apart to God and acceptable by God. Don't let the world around you squeeze you into *its* mold, but let God remold your minds from within." (Rom 12:1f) He confided to the Philippians that he considered "everything as complete loss for the sake of what is so much more valuable, personal knowledge of Christ Jesus. For Christ's sake," Paul tells them, "I've thrown everything away; I consider it all as mere garbage, so that I may gain Christ and be completely united with him. ... All I want is to know Christ and to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death, in the hope that I myself will be raised from death to life." (Phil 3:8bff) Paul told the Romans that he saw that "what we suffer at the present time cannot be compared at all with the bright glory that is going to be revealed to us." (8:18)

Incidentally, Paul's Christian lifestyle instructions contain a helpful prescription for employment satisfaction. He taught his young believers what, in effect, could lift even daily drudgeries to new experiences of freedom. When he had written to the Corinthians about their great personal freedom in Christ, he had said: "Whatever you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." (I Cor 10:31) Whatever you do. He followed up with this comprehensive

exhortation to the Colossians: "... with joyful hearts in whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (Col 3:17) Whatever you do—with reference to Jesus. Everything. Then he turned his attention to the slaves in the Colossian congregation and said to them: "Whatever you do, put your whole heart and soul into it, as into work done for the Lord, and not merely for men—knowing that your real reward, a heavenly one, will come from the Lord, since you are actually employed by the Lord Christ, and not just by your earthly master." (Col 3:23) Whatever slaves were told to do, they had to do. They had no choice in the matter. But they could choose to do whatever menial chores they were assigned heartily as unto their true Lord. We may have to report to stupid and selfish bosses. There are things we all have to do at work that are drudgeries—and we're not slaves. But these can be made more than tolerable when done as thankful expressions of the dignity of Christian discipleship. Even these chores matter to our Lord. We do whatever we do in Christ's presence, as a thank-offering to him.

Paul was preaching what he practiced. He was living out the greatest commandment as this was represented by his Lord who answered a scribe's question about the greatest commandment by quoting from the very familiar Shema, the morning and evening watchword of Israel: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength." Jesus adding: "and with all your mind." Then Jesus cited a much neglected commandment from among the 613 statutes of the Torah as the one essential companion to the keynote creed: "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Deut 6:4f and Lev 19:18) He said: "There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:30) Paul and other New Testament writers drew on this Jesus tradition, for this is the one Torah text most frequently cited in the New Testament. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says that the Torah is performed when we do the loving thing with each neighbor we find in our lives. (Rom 13)

We have in all of this, a mindset for an active Christian life. There is here no idle passivity, no pathological disengagement from everyday life, no distaste for this earth, no hair-shirt holier-than-thou hypocrisy or naivete, no ascetic withdrawal from life's challenges, responsibilities, and opportunities. Paul is completely engaged in living. But that living in this world is lived with Christ, wholly in terms of the priorities of Christ: love of God and love of neighbor.

Living with Christ means living where Christ is living. And Christ is living with our neighbors; Christ is here in our neighbors. How can we say we live for the Christ we don't see if we refuse to live for the neighbor we do see? In Mother Teresa's words: "Each [person with AIDS] is Jesus in a distressing disguise."

In his Philippian letter, Paul has the perfect response to the "Don't Worry, Be Happy" school of coping. Paul says: "Don't worry over anything at all." (4:6f) But he doesn't simply issue an arbitrary order that we should not worry. He doesn't command a feeling. He puts this imperative within the divine indicative as these two always exist side by side in scripture: the indicative of

God's active mercy always precedes the imperative of our response to mercy. Paul writes: "Don't worry over anything whatever: tell God every detail of your needs in earnest and thankful prayer." We read over the shoulders of our Roman forebearers that even when we can't articulate the details of our needs, even when we don't know how or what to pray for, even when our suffering is too deep for words, when all we can do is groan,—the God of all grace understands completely even these desperate groanings. (Rom 8:26)

And what will be the result of such a transfer of groans to grace? Paul here uses a remarkable expression found nowhere else in the entire New Testament: "the peace of God." He seems to be saying that what comes to us in such gratitude is God's very own peace. He says that "the tranquility of God's own eternal being" (Caird), "the peace which God himself has" (Barth), "the calm serenity that characterizes [God's] very nature," (Hawthorne), a peace that is "almost personified" (Ralph Martin) and that "transcends human understanding and explanation, will keep constant guard over your hearts and minds, over your very deepest feelings and thoughts, as they rest in Christ Jesus." (Phil 4:6) How can the cheap advice "Don't Worry, Be Happy" stand up next to Paul's invitation that instead of a restless and wasting worry we might have the quieting of a personal conversation—even just a cry—with the supreme Person of the universe? How can mindless yellow Smiley Faces begin to compare with that which even the depressed Cowper called God's hidden "smiling face ... Behind a frowning providence?"

This peace is what Jesus promised to leave behind for us, his followers: "I give you my own peace, my own Shalom, and my parting gift is nothing at all like the peace of this world. Therefore, set your troubled hearts at rest and don't be afraid." (John 14:27)

The big embarrassing question for Christian apologists has always been: How can an all-powerful and all-loving God permit even a guilty world to suffer so much? Whatever unbiblical assumptions may be lodged in this question, it can be, of course, a very sincere question arising from the terrible experience of suffering. On the other hand, it can be a merely idle and even prideful argumentative speculation. In any event, however, the Bible, as we've said, gives no answer to this question as framed. But the Bible does tell the story of God's own Suffering Servant, the sinless Jesus of Nazareth, suffering on behalf of all of us. Do we so quickly ask: How can an all-powerful and all-loving God permit the innocent Jesus to suffer for all of us? Here, biblically, something can be said. How the all-powerful and all-loving God can permit the innocent Jesus to suffer on behalf of all of us is: at unimaginable cost in suffering to God. That's how. (Perhaps that's the best response to the former question as well.)

Knowing that the One to whom we pray—even in groans, is the One who suffers *with* us, can be empowering. As the 39-year-old Dietrich Bonhoeffer scribbled on a scrap of paper in a Nazi prison just before he was taken outside and hanged: "Only the Suffering God can help." In the heavy crush of our own suffering we trust that this must be true. Only the Suffering Servant of God can help, the one who was "despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and familiar with grief," in Isaiah's words (53:2f). Only the God the Psalmist and Prophets cited as saying "I am

with you" can help. Only Emmanuel, God with us, can help. Only the God of the Incarnation, God enfleshed in a body that can ache and bruise and bleed, can help. Only the Empathic God, living a human life, can help. J. B. Phillips cautions that "Sometimes we forget how fully human Jesus was. We live on the other side ... of his triumphant rising from the dead." But he asks us to "remember that the unseen, but very real God, was himself a man once. He knew temptation. He knew difficulty. He knew ingratitude. He knew disappointment. ... So he understands your heart and mine—fully." Phillips ends with these poignant words: "He knows, you know."

Empathy. It's an indispensable part of all effective psychotherapy. It's necessary to identify a client's feelings and thoughts by observing their manifestations, realizing in a rather remote and intellectual way the client's experience without personally experiencing exactly what she is going through. But however similar the therapist's experience, it is—in the end-- not the client's. Thus, all talk of getting inside the other person's skin, so to speak, is really off the mark. At best the therapist's own experience is analogous. Not even close friends or lovers can really ever truly say: I know just what you're going through.

Paul urged his congregations to have empathy, to be in solidarity with each other and with all outsiders, to "rejoice with those who rejoice, to weep with those who weep." (Rom 12:15) We're all called to do this. But at most, we weep alongside. From outside. The other person's pain is not our own.

It's different, though, with the God who is always with us *within*. No one else can be with us *within* our lives. Because God loves us, God went through the suffering and death of Jesus—*within* the pain. As Paul puts it: "God was *in* Christ, reconciling the world to Himself." (II Cor 5:19) Paul, too, repeatedly speaks of *our* being in Christ and of Christ being in us. God is in Christ. We are in Christ. Christ is in us. Christ, the Mediator between God and us. God, in Christ, goes through our suffering too. He takes our sin and suffering into himself. God carries our suffering because, as Peter said, God really does care about us. (I Pet 5:7) We really do matter to God. God loves us enough to go to the cross for us. (Cf. John 3:16) That's incredible! It's all so incomprehensible. It can seem even *corny*! In fact, Paul calls it *crazy*! (I Cor 1:21 and 25) But that's the grace of God! And as Karl Barth put it: "Only when grace is recognized to be incomprehensible is it grace." Both suffering and grace are incomprehensible.

In Jürgen Moltmann's words: "God weeps with us so that we may someday laugh with him." In our suffering today, can we know something of that best laughter of those who laugh at last? Well, in some sense, that future age of Joy is already breaking into our present age of trouble. Jesus declared to his disciples: "You who have nothing now are nevertheless fortunate, because the reign of God is yours! You who now are hungry are nevertheless fortunate, because you shall be satisfied! You who are weeping now are nevertheless fortunate because you are going to be laughing! And you whom people hate and exclude and insult because of me: Be glad when that happens because you have a great reward in heaven." (Luke 6) Jesus told his disciples: "your sorrow will be turned to joy. ... you now have sorrow, but I will see you again, and your heart

will rejoice, and no one takes your joy from you." (John 16:20bff) Even while we are being drained in suffering, we can know something of that Joy that Barth called the "defiant 'Nevertheless.'" (re: Phil 2:17; 4:4)

But we must understand clearly that this Joy is not happiness or pleasure or what South called "that trivial, vanishing, superficial thing that only gilds the apprehensions, and plays upon the surface of the soul." As James D. G. Dunn of Durham states: biblical Joy "is not to be conceived of merely as frothy feeling of delight, but as the confidence of God which can be sustained even in persecution." (cf. e.g. Matt 5:12; Rom 5:3ff; II Cor 7:4; I Thess 1:6; I Pet 1:6) Down underneath even the deepest emotions, at times seemingly flooded over by pain, lies the preserved gift of faith, the even deeper trust in God. This produces an appreciation, a sensibility,—though it is not itself emotion. This Joy is the *comic relief* of Good News. It's *the sense of humor* which is the gospel. Christian Joy is the gift of a perspective of faithing that focuses beyond appearances. It is an awareness that the risen Christ is on his way back for us, a consciousness that we are en route to him, a sensing that no matter what happens during the journey, we will arrive safe at last at our Father's house.

How we interpret what happens to us can or cannot produce happiness. Christian Joy is both deeper and beyond what happens with its consequent happiness or unhappiness. Christian Joy is our stance in our circumstance—our stance beside our suffering Savior, even in our unhappy circumstances.

Christian Joy is confidence that we are going to see at last how all things will have worked together for good, the hope that finally our every tear will have been wiped away forever. (Rom 8:28; Rev 7:17; 21:4)

There is always, in Christian Joy, a looking forward to what is not yet very fully experienced, if—at times—at all. Phillips puts it bluntly in speaking of his own dark depression. He says: "And where, you may well ask, does the Christian faith come into all this? The answer is that probably emotionally it is of little help at all. It is only at the very centre of our being that, despite any negative or evil attack, we can rest on the eternal and unchanging God. We may well have to learn to trust this living God without any comforting feeling whatever, and this is no easy lesson to learn."

The Bible makes it plain that sin and death are still very much in operation today—as if we couldn't figure that out on our own. What we learn from the New Testament is that Christian Joy is coupled now with trouble. But isn't that just where we need it? And even though we can, at times, thrill to the wonder of God's grace, and that wonder wells up in wonderful emotion, there are other times—and they may be terrible times—when all we seem to be able to *feel* is doubt and pain and isolation. As James Rutherford of Dublin once said: "I have rather smoke than fire; and guessings rather than assurances of Christ's love." There are times when we cannot grasp what Paul means when he testified: "we're pursued, yet nevertheless not forsaken; we're

sorrowful, yet nevertheless always rejoicing." (II Cor 4:9ff; 6:10) At other times we may indeed grasp what Paul and James and Peter are trying to tell us when they say that trouble can produce endurance and patience and the evidence of our hope without illusion. (Rom 5:3; James 1:2; I Pet 4:13f) But our circumstances don't necessarily change for what we'd easily call "the better." Our circumstances can change for what we can easily call "the worse."

We remember the words of Jesus: "I have loved you *as* the Father has loved me. Now you love each other, therefore." The Father's love is expressed in *suffering*. Jesus' love is expressed in *suffering*. Why do we expect that our love for each other will not have to be expressed in suffering? We're all in this together: Our Father, Our Savior, and each of us. We're invited to be in on the suffering that Paul knew to be empowering. Jesus said he told his disciples of this suffering and love trinity "so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." (John 15:11) Christ's Joy is not a feeling but a faithing. His own Joy is not the warm-fuzzies. It is not what we might expect to feel like. We may feel terrible. Nevertheless, we sense something else, too. Someone else.

In one of his latest ballads, Bob Dylan reminds us that while going through all the even deadly suffering we have to endure, we can nevertheless sense that even "Death is not the end: When you're sad and when you're lonely and you haven't got a friend/ Just remember, that death is not the end./ When all that you held sacred falls down and does not mend,/ Just remember that death is not the end./ When you're standin' on the crossroads that you cannot comprehend ... and all your dreams have vanished and you don't know what's up the bend,/ Just remember that death is not the end./ For the Tree of Life is growing where the spirit never dies/ And the bright light of salvation shines in dark and empty skies./ When the cities are on fire with the burning flesh of men,/ Just remember that death is not the end."

In summary. Life's tough. It's tough enough, though, without making it worse by irrational awfulizing, coveting, personalizing, and perfectionism. We gain nothing by cheap and unbiblical optimism and denial. Because suffering is our inescapable lot on earth, we'd better have something more powerful than a flip "Don't Worry" with which to face it. And for that there is nothing as powerful or as empowering as the Good News that the Suffering God was in the Suffering Christ reconciling us and the whole world to God. This is the comic relief of the gospel. This is the Joy that Christians can know in the midst of suffering, when only the Suffering God can help. But we must realize that Christian Joy is not the emotion of happiness. It is the deep core sense that God's own eternal love and life will be victorious beyond all our imaginings. It is the gospel sense of humor, the Christian's defiant Nevertheless. We faith that by the grace of God we who will laugh at last will laugh best for the laughter will be face to face with our Savior. Something of this Joy can be our practical experience even now as we learn more and more to do whatever we do in relationship to our Savior, when we see our relationship with Christ and his priorities to be the total meaning of our life. When we let go of any ultimate

reliance on anything but Christ. When we refuse to over-possess or be over-possessed by anything but Christ. When we say with Paul: For me, living is Christ and to die is gain. For us, life on earth means close friendship with Christ and death will mean inexpressibly closer intimacy with the One who even now calls us friends. We're alive for Christ's sake and for Christ's sake we'll never die. Suffering that is now unspeakable except in groans will one day be transformed into what Peter calls "joy unspeakable and full of glory." (I Pet 1:8)

We have word of a God, wiser and more merciful than any wisdom or mercy we can imagine. And we have word that this very wisdom and mercy was somehow enfleshed for us to see in Jesus. Somehow, he was this very word of wisdom and mercy—reaching out, at all costs, for each one of us, bringing us home to his Father and ours. Trusting him in this, really counting on him in this,—is Joy too deep for words.

Life is no sick joke. That kind of humor is anger and despair. But as Carlyle realized, the essence of true humor is love. And there's no greater love than the love of God declared to us all in the comic relief of the Resurrection—God's everlasting punch line.