

Question: *How can we face the harsh realities of life and not be stressed by anxious worry? (Part 1 of 2)*

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples to “not worry” about their basic needs in life like food and clothing. He said that just as the Heavenly Father feeds the birds and clothes the flowers, he will take care of us (Matthew 6:25ff). Paul the apostle believed it was possible to do what Jesus said. In a letter to his friends in the city of Philippi, Paul wrote, “Rejoice in the Lord always” and “Do not be anxious about anything” (Philippians 4:4, 6). We may find it difficult to believe that the one who gives this kind of advice understands life in this world. It sounds shallow and unrealistic.

However, investigation of the life of Paul as a servant of Jesus Christ reveals that he had fully faced almost every fearful experience that any human could know. A study of the second half of the book of Acts reveals that during his missionary journeys Paul knew what it was to be separated from beloved friends, stripped, beaten and thrown into jail. Later he was attacked by a mob in Jerusalem. After he was rescued by Roman soldiers, Paul’s Jewish enemies plotted secretly to kill him. He was carried under guard on a dangerous and long sea journey to Rome for trial before Caesar. On this journey at sea, Paul and his fellow-travelers faced two weeks of a severe storm that resulted in a shipwreck on the shores of the Island of Malta. While helping to gather firewood on Malta, he was bitten by a snake. Upon arrival at his destination in Rome, Paul was placed under house arrest for two years. In later years as a prisoner, his dear friend Epaphraditus came from Philippi to bring help and to minister to Paul in behalf of his friends. However, Epaphraditus became ill and almost died (Philippians 2:25-30). In a letter to the Corinthian Christians, Paul listed additional dangers he had faced (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). The admonitions to “rejoice” and “not worry” were not careless words of some naive and inexperienced braggart.

What enabled Paul to face all of this with such a joyful and confident attitude? His faith in the presence, power and activity of God in his life. During his imprisonment in Rome, Paul wrote: “Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel” (Philippians 1:12). The Bible reveals that every time Paul suffered some loss or harsh treatment it brought him into another opportunity to tell

someone about Jesus Christ, often prominent government officials as well as common people. He knew he could rejoice because God was always present and powerfully at work in his life. Obviously, Paul's faith in Christ did not prevent him from facing suffering and loss; but he learned that God does some of his greatest work in our most fearful and trying experiences.

With this knowledge from life's experiences and with his faith in God, Paul said to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy-- think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me-- put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:4-9).

Because of limited space, I invite you to read more about this in next week's column. We will look at six admonitions that Paul gave to the Philippians to help them cope with the worries and persecution that they were facing. Paul did not deny the realities of life, but he did provide some principles that can help anyone deal with the problem of worry if he/she is willing to turn to Jesus Christ in obedient faith.

[Send questions or comments or request for a copy to University Church of Christ, 801 N. 12th, Murray, KY 42071, phone 270-753-1881 or email richardy@murray-ky.net] 2011/07/15