Being Thankful When Your World Is Crashing Down

It was Sunday and a beloved leader was preparing to announce the monthly prayer emphasis: Thanksgiving. At that moment he learned that two of his pastors had just been martyred in a country where believers face great persecution. He prayed, “Lord, what do You have to say to Your people? How can we continue with thanksgiving? Can we praise You for these murders and martyrdoms? Can we praise You for the injustice? For these families who have lost fathers and husbands?”

He answered his questions this way: “Of course not. How can we praise Him for bad things? We do not praise Him for evil things, but we can praise Him because He is sovereign over whatever happens. Revelation 19:6 says, ‘Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns.'”

He added, “The situation does not dictate to us what to do. People around us are not the ones directing; it is not enemies who determine what we can and cannot do. What a pitiable person operates like that. We have disciplined ourselves to see martyrdom as does God. When we look through the eyes of God, then we no longer have difficulties. We don’t look from down here to up there, but up there to down here. We don’t focus on the surrounding difficulties, but to what God says.”

Up There

That’s the same spirit reflected in Psalm 97—one alive with the contemplation of God and the fundamental confidence that “the Lord reigns” (v. 1).

Too often in our chaotic world, it appears He does not. Just look at the headlines on any day for evidences of evil.

Events in our own lives spin so easily out of control. We are

either unsure of what decisions to make, or choices are made for us against our own will. We often live with the downside effect of others' actions and decisions.

Is there any sanity in this world? Any design? Anything for sure? Yes. "The Lord reigns." What relief and joy!

But the evidences of His reign are not all that easily observed by sight. The marks of His rule, described in verses 2–5, are visionary in quality. You cannot see them now with physical eyes.

Oh, I have seen clouds and thick darkness, but not His throne. I have witnessed fire and lightning—but not as a component of His immediate presence. I have seen mountains—high and hard with stone and earth compacted—but I have never seen one melt as wax.

When my faith seats me with Christ at the right hand of the Father (Eph. 2:6), I see all these things, including that Day when the invisible becomes visible (2 Cor. 4:17, 18).

Out There

Through spiritual vision we look into the future when "all the peoples see his glory, and all who worship images are put to shame" (vv. 6, 7). Only those who dwell in Zion and the villages of Judah, God's people, know already that He is Most High above the earth (vv. 8, 9).

Are you in one of those "villages in Judah" today, a place where you feel disconnected from the mainstream or exiled from where you would rather be? Has the news reached your heart that Jesus is Victor—even over the difficulties in your life? In your small spot on this planet, do you have the big picture that the Lord reigns over all the earth?

Down Here

Christians are like prisoners of war who know that their side has won and that it's only a matter of time until release. While waiting, we aspire to live in a manner consistent with our status as citizens of heaven—"Let those who love the Lord hate evil" (v. 10).

I admit I have not always hated evil. Sometimes evil comes to us disguised as light and we are not perceptive enough to see that behind the facade, the mask, is the face of Satan himself. We need the Lord's help not only to recognize evil, but deplore it—especially in ourselves: "Light is shed upon the righteous and joy on the upright in heart" (v. 11).

Notice the sequence in this psalm. It does not begin by amplifying life's difficulties, but by magnifying the Lord. Too often we begin our prayers by describing the maze we're in, rather than getting into the spiritual helicopter provided by the Bible and the Holy Spirit. The Lord wants to get us first above the pain, the sorrow and the questioning by inviting us into His presence.

This psalm and the other songs of Scripture are earphones given to us by the Spirit to let us listen to the music above, to ponder and apprehend truth beyond our immediate experience. The less I listen or enter in, the greater becomes the sorrow in my life. Then, I find it difficult to do what this psalm asks, "Rejoice in the Lord" (v. 12). You are not a happy person when you feel defeated.

But when I am "up there," beyond earth and space, I see "out there" to the furthest reaches on the horizon of time.

Everywhere I go, up and out, I see God. There's no place "up there" or "out there" where He does not rule.

Finally, I came back to my "real" world of pain and need. But I see things differently. I've learned the truth expressed by

the Christian leader in the country where his fellow pastors have been martyred—that I must see things from heaven's rather than earth's vantage point. Through this psalm, I've been above where they're singing praises to the risen Christ, and the joy of that world has moved into mine.

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