

Lost Your Joy?



Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast. (Psalm 139:7-10)

We tend to forget that Christianity was formed in the womb of Judaism. Born into first-century Hebrew culture. Received and interpreted to us by apostles and evangelists who knew Jesus in the context of His Jewishness. Yet most of us know the Christian faith as it has been passed through the vocabulary, culture, and mindset of Greco-Roman culture. So what?

One of the major "so-what's" is the difference the two mindsets take toward material things. The human body in particular. And pleasure.

Greek religion and philosophy separate material and spiritual, body and soul in a way foreign to Judaism. Hebrew thought sees persons as "living souls" in their totality. The invisible, spiritual part of a person is not trapped in a body (i.e., the

Greek idea), but is made real and functional by means of it. Thus the goal is not to escape or to chastise the body but to direct its energy God-ward.

Pleasure is not wicked. Laughter is God's gift! But, that is hardly the notion most non-Christians reflect back to believers. They see us as a pretty joyless crowd. Rather stoned-faced. And more inclined to scowl than to laugh.

We seem to have worked hard to create that unhealthy — and, I might add, uninviting — image. Our "saints" tend to be dour, rather than smiling. They look austere, rather than lovable. They often appear rigid and forbidding, rather than humane and merciful. What a pity!

Jesus went to parties. He enjoyed life so much that His critics tried to make Him out to be a drunk and a glutton. He had friends. Enjoyed being with people. And made people feel comfortable around Him. I have no problem whatever in seeing Him raise a glass to say, "L'chaim." To life!

A long list of negatives is a poor way to define the gospel. The very idea of "redemption" is less about going to heaven when we die as it is making life here something positive and holy. Paul says Jesus "gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age" (Galatians 1:4). Peter reminds Christians "that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you" (I Peter 1:18).

Steak, sunsets, music, sex, money — not one is unholy. All are given by God to meet human needs. Directed toward Him, each is both a celebration of His goodness and a participation in His fullness. Divorced from Him, both pleasure and pain become vulgar. Not the act, but its God-ward direction makes it holy.

If your life has more tumult than stillness, more crash than tranquility, God has not abandoned you. He beckons you to cry out to Him, and He will show Himself to you. Amidst the noise, you will find Him with you in the middle of it all.

In a world of wrinkled brows and wringing hands, one has to wonder if the rediscovery of godly joy might be our best advertisement for the faith we profess.

“For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer” (I Timothy 4:4-5 TNIV).