

The Sunrise of Eternity

*Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! (3:1a)
Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice. (4:4)*

C. S. Lewis once said that joy is the serious business of heaven. Like many of that sage's remarks, I must chew on his words for a while before I begin to understand what he meant. I do not think he was speaking primarily of glory and our yearning for it, albeit joy has that dimension. He was referring to heavenly joy invading our earthly toil, aches, and pleasures and transforming them while we live in this present order. That transformation has an attitude, a behavior, and a testimony to it.

First, joy has an attitudinal dimension. This involves choosing to see a fallen creation as it is—fallen, but with surprising visages of beauty and glory. I am not so perplexed by the pain associated with my fallenness as I am to explain the pleasure that still comes to me despite it. God is no cosmic killjoy, but the source of true pleasure and delight. Enjoyment is the invention of a Creator who has lavished gifts on the world.

Thomas Hardy was noted for his inclination to focus on the less attractive aspects of a scene. For instance, if he encountered a lush meadow on a beautiful spring day, his attention would be drawn first to the dung heap in the distant corner. My tendency to vividly espy what is wrong with things, exposes my presumption that they should be right, even in this admittedly imperfect world. Whatever gave me that idea? Why should I expect the world to be right, true, and fair? When I see these qualities around me, I am witnessing God's good grace and sustaining power shining through the fallen order.

Second, joy has a behavioral dimension. Jesus emphasized that joy is linked to love and obedience (Jn. 15:9-14). The completion of joy that He promised in the Upper Room discourse (Jn. 15) is connected to an abiding relationship with God (Jn. 15:4-7) that obeys His command to love others (Jn. 15:12) with the self-sacrificing example of Jesus Himself in the crosshairs of its sights (Jn. 15:13). This kind of living is the product of the transforming Spirit that He promised to send (Jn. 14:16, 26; 15:26). Indeed, the apostle Paul identifies joy as one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22).

Obedience is the product of God's grace; we cannot discipline our unruly nature to achieve what only God can give. We must bring ourselves to the spiritual anvil and voluntarily put ourselves in the place where God can work on us. Joy is fully realized when that truth is internalized and applied consistently in my daily actions and decisions.

Third, joy has a testimonial function. No one demonstrated this better than G.K. Chesterton. The apologist to Europe's lost generation after World War I sensed intuitively that a stern prophet rarely breaks through to a society full of religion's "cultured despisers". He preferred the role of the joyous jester.

The jolly prophet of ample girth and ample mirth cheerfully engaged in public debate with the agnostics and skeptics of his day. That was a day when a debate on faith could garner an audience. Chesterton would invariably arrive late, peer through his spectacles at his disorderly notes, and proceed to entertain the crowd with his absent-mindedness, his hearty humor, and his thoroughly good-natured disposition.

Following the debate, he typically hosted his opponent at the nearest pub, showering him with compliments. One of his debating opponents described the experience: "To hear Chesterton's howl of joy ... to see him double himself up in agony of laughter at my personal insults, to watch the effect of his sportsmanship on a shocked audience who were won to mirth by his intense and pea-hen-like

quarks. joy was a sight and a sound for the gods. ... [A]nd I carried away from that room a respect and admiration for this tomboy among dictionaries, philosophical Peter Pan, this humorous Dr. Johnson, this kindly and gallant cherub, this profound student and wise master which has grown steadily ever since."

Yes, Heaven testifies to itself by the clear manifestation of its sunrise in our lives. May God surprise me, surprise us—with joy, with the delight of the serious work of heaven in our souls.