

Were Longfellow, Elvis, and Lennon Right?

Longfellow writing in the midst of the Civil War, despaired of peace on earth and good will to men; Elvis writing about 100 years later had a blue, blue Christmas without his girlfriend, and Lennon did the postmodern thing of saying everything and nothing by stating, “So this is Christmas.” We’re these secular prophets right? Is the lighting of the pink Advent candle the one for joy mocked by all that is and is not going on this year? Well either they’re right or St. Paul is.

According to Paul, this right here and now is the result of God’s will inside Christ into you. That’s what Paul literally says when you pay attention to the particular noun and prepositions he uses. He says you must always rejoice; pray without letting up, and inside all things you must give thanks. Then he tells you why: Because this – this right here and now– is the result of God’s will inside Christ into you personally. Note carefully. This isn’t that heretical idea that you must thank your way into God’s blessings. No, in whatever situation, condition, position you find yourself, you must rejoice because you know this is the result of God’s will at work inside Christ shot arrow-like right into you. God’s will inside of Christ is only ‘yes’ for you (2 Cor. 2:10). “In Christ,” Paul says, “There is no condemnation” (Rom. 8:1). He doesn’t say, “not much”, “some” or ‘a little’ but “none”. Here’s what God in Christ says in the OT. “For I know the plans I have for you; plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jer. 29:11). Whether you’re sick or dying even, fearful or terrified, hopeless or despairing you are not outside the results of God’s will for you inside of Christ.

Doesn’t that make your head spin and your heart skip? O I know it’s confusing but whenever the distant triumph song steals upon the heart in the midst of trials it doesn’t make sense and if you try to explain it to one who can’t hear it, won’t hear it, or doesn’t need to listen for it, you won’t be able to. So, the next imperatives about prayers without ceasing characterized by ‘giving thanks’ only makes sense if you hear the song. Only Paul uses the word translated here ‘continually’. The first time it’s in Romans. There he refers to how “unceasingly” he makes mention of them in prayer (1:9-10). The next 3 times Paul uses the word are all in 1 Thess. In 1:3, Paul says he always gives thanks for all of them. He makes mention of them in prayer “unceasingly bearing in mind” their work of faith, love, and hope. Then in 2:13, Paul says he unceasingly thanks God that they received the Word not as man’s word but as it is the very Words of God.

Having confidence that where you are now is not outside of Christ and is the result of God’s will for you in Christ, calls for rejoicing and prayers of thanks. Unbeknownst to anyone else outside of Christ, invisible to the naked eye, nay, contrary to what you can see, God in Christ has been busy working out His good and gracious will concerning you. It’s what the OT sang of when the unbelievable happened. Their nation was returned from captivity. Listen and see if it doesn’t capture Paul’s mood: “When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy...The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy” (Ps. 126:1-3).

I’ll tell you why we’d rather not light the pink candle but wallow in our blue Christmas, hear the bells of Christmas as mocked by a pandemic of despair, and leave us to ask, “So this is Christmas?” The fear that I’m living in the *Decameron*. Written during the plague of the Black Death in the 14th century, it’s about 10 young people who flee plague-stricken Florence. They distract themselves in the country by telling a 100 tales of love and loss. I fear this is that what Paul does in our text. Modern prophets of secular culture like Nick Offerman’s *Gumption* or Yuval Harari’s *Homo Deus* flat out say that. Christianity is at best a fairy tale for kids or at worst an antiscientific flight from reality. And yet here we are. We tell each other tales: Of 3 men in a fiery furnace unburned and unsinged. Of a Jesus who heals lepers. Of Creeds centuries old that 21st century prophets tell us no longer apply. Could they be right? Are we just telling each other 1st century fairytales to forget real 21st century fears?

Paul deals with these fears too. The Spirit can’t fail to light my fire. Without any merit or worthiness in me, from childhood, I heard the Scripture and was thrilled, comforted, relieved. But what happened? Again and again, I quenched the Spirit’s fire. The Thessalonians were doing that too. That’s why Paul says, “Don’t continue to put out the Spirit’s fire.” Yes, the Spirit fires joy in me that Jesus has come once to bear my sins and the damned death I deserve for them. The Spirit lights a flame of thanks that He is certainly returning for me and that I am to be confident that the results of God’s will for me in Christ can never be frustrated. This big bonfire of the Spirit’s confidence, boldness, peacefulness and hope blazes away until another pundit of unbelief ridicules the faith. And poof I quench that fire.

In 1976 I was in the mountains of New Mexico in March as a member of squad of 4 soldiers on maneuvers. All we had were jungle fatigues. One night it got down to 25 degrees. We had nothing but ponchos. We put 2 on the ground and covered ourselves with two as we ‘spooned’ one another for warmth. In the midst of the dark and cold, I hear Bob

Mayer quote a song, “Momma said there’d be days like this.” And I smiled to myself. That was true. Misery was to be expected given the fallenness of this world. But God not momma has told us there would be days when scorners would deny the Lord that bought them. There would be a great falling away from the faith. Men would only listen to those who told them what they wanted to hear. But I scorn those prophets of God, and as a result I cast off the good and don’t avoid the evil. I have doubts and uncertainty about all things God but toleration and open mindedness towards all things human because that’s the hallmark of sophistication in these latter days. Don’t fear God but what men think of you and what men say to.

We could quit now; someone go and turn off the bells. They don’t need to be pealing any day let alone on Christmas. But Longfellow came out of his despair and we will too because “God is not dead, nor does He sleep.” And Paul goes here. The problem is the ‘mays’ he uses give the air of doubt. “May God sanctify you”, but who knows if He will? “May all of you be kept blameless till the coming of Jesus” but who knows? What’s translated is a rare NT Greek optative. It was often used in Classical Greek, think Homer, so when it’s used in later Greek it is done with purpose and understanding of the particular force of the Greek optative. When pagan Greeks prayed to their gods they didn’t know if they would be answered, they expected to barter with, or even be rebuked by them. Christians expect to be answered. God will most certainly do what Paul says. The optative here expresses Paul’s complete certainty that God will sanctify you through and through and keep all of you blameless at the Second Coming. The “may” only expresses Paul’s humble attitude toward God when he prays (Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 480-1).

These optatives are the answer to quenching of the Spirit’s fire and scorning of God’s prophesies which lead to a joyless, thankless grappling with the reality we find ourselves in. Yes, it appears devoid of God’s presence and power. Yes, it appears as the internet prophets of unbelief say: it’s all random. No plan, no purpose, and if you see one it’s made up and to be laughed at. But it’s Paul’s turn to laugh. The God who declared a unilateral peace on earth and goodwill to fallen men at the birth of Christ, here promises to sanctify you through and through, and then Paul makes it even more detailed: part by part God in Christ will do this.

Sometimes your heart is bold and confident standing on the promise of God that He has more grace in Christ than you have sins, but your mind has fears and what if’s. Here Paul promises that the God of peace will sanctify all of you. He doesn’t say, “Sanctify yourself.” You are not to think justification, being saved, is God’s part, but sanctification, being holy, is my part. Paul employs the rare Greek optative to let you know that sanctification is all God’s doing too. Where did Paul at the beginning say the results of God’s will for us was? Inside Christ. Hear 1 Cor. 1:30, “But by God’s doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and *sanctification*, and redemption.” That’s what we say in the Explanation to the Third Article of the Creed: We confess our inability to believe or come to Jesus, and then say, “But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, *sanctified* and kept me in the true faith.”

Whoa did you hear that? Confessional Lutherans confess to believe what Paul says here. That God is the one who sanctifies us. The fearfulness, the joylessness, the hopelessness you feel will not prevent the God of peace from sanctifying every part of you. He sent His Son in a Body to redeem your body, every part of it, and the redemption He purchased for you on Good Friday, He distributes to your body by means of things that touch your Body. He sanctifies your flesh by Baptismal Water. He sanctifies your ears by absolving Words. And He sanctifies you through and through by His Body and Blood that you eat, drink, and digest. Not only will the God of peace sanctify you but He will keep you blameless from here to when eternity is revealed at the coming of Christ.

Longfellow, Elvis, and Lennon are wrong; God is neither dead nor asleep but He is achieving His will in your life today. So rather than being blue this Christmas in Christ joyful prayers of thanks can spring from your mouth. True, left to ourselves, we can only quench the Spirit and scorn His prophesies. But that’s Paul’s point. You’re not left to yourself. No, God Himself in Christ will sanctify and keep you till kingdom come. So, *this* is Christmas. Amen

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Third Sunday in Advent (20201213); 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24