

THINK ABOUT THESE THINGS: THE MIND AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Isaiah 35: 1-10 Joy of the Redeemed

35 The desert and the parched land will be glad;

the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.

Like the crocus, ² it will burst into bloom;

it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God.

³ Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way;

⁴ say to those with fearful hearts,

“Be strong, do not fear; your God will come,

he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution

he will come to save you.”

⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened

and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.

⁷ The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

⁸ And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way.

The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it.

⁹ No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there.

But only the redeemed will walk there, ¹⁰ and those the LORD has rescued will return.

They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads.

Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Philippians 4:4-9 Final Exhortations

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, 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. ⁹ 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.

Matthew 6:25-34 Do Not Worry

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

²⁸ “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

MESSAGE:

Today I’m going to encourage you...**to think!** Maybe it would be more accurate to say that the Holy Spirit is encouraging you to think. As Paul writes in today’s Epistle lesson, *“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 these things.**”* (Phil. 4:8) It’s been said that human beings are the only creatures on earth that can think about thinking. All other creatures operate on what we might call “instinct thinking.” Some of them think in a rudimentary way—even to the point of using simple reasoning—but the peach tree doesn’t stand in the field and deliberate about whether or not to push out a peach. The tiger doesn’t have a committee meeting to discuss the best hunting practices. Only we humans have the ability to be self-reflective, to think about our own behavior and beliefs. And that can lead us in some intriguing directions, as well as down some rabbit holes

For example, those who spend a lot of time thinking about thinking will tell you that there are different styles or modes of thinking, such as Concrete, Convergent, Divergent, Creative, Analytical, Linear and Holistic. That’s pretty abstract (which is also a mode of thinking) so I took a few online quizzes to find out what kind of thinker I am. The “Top Brain/Bottom Brain” quiz said that I think in the “Situational Adaptor Mode,” which means that I am *“...open to being absorbed by local events, action oriented and responsive to situations, but context dependent.”* (Does your brain hurt yet?) The ProProf’s Quiz told me that I am a Wishful Thinker—a dreamer in moderation with reality, and that having a positive mind is more important to me than just about anything else. Who knows if these quizzes really mean anything but one thing they do signify is that a lot of different kinds of thoughts go on in any given person. God has given us the power of self-reflection and He wants us to use it wisely. In Paul’s terms, “using it wisely” means paying attention to what we think about.

To back up a step, let’s be clear about something: God does want us to think, to use our minds; he doesn’t want us to check in our brains at the door. We are saved by faith it’s

true, and not by our ability to reason things out, but God wants us to use our minds as well—especially in regard to our relationship with him and our relationship with each other. When Jesus was asked, “*What is the greatest commandment in the Law?*”—he answered, “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your **mind**.*” (Matthew 22:37) And in his *Letter to the Romans*, Paul invites us, to “...*be transformed by the renewal of your **mind**, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*” (Romans 12:2) And so by God’s own Word, it’s good for us to use our minds, and, according to Paul, one of the ways we should use them is to focus on things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy To follow God’s will in this—as in all other things—will bring blessings. To fail to do this may well bring curses. How so?

Now, more than ever before, you and I are engulfed in a tsunami of bad news and negative influences. And, incredibly, we welcome this tsunami into our lives—voluntarily. Whether it’s the internet, television, radio, smart phone, social media—you name it, we live with these channels wide open because for some reason we seem to feel that we must. But a growing number of voices are questioning the wisdom of occupying our minds with a constant barrage of bad news.

One such voice is a man by the name of Rolf Dobelli, the author of a book entitled, *How to Think Clearly*. In a chapter about unplugging from the constant news cycle he writes: “*News is toxic to your body. It constantly triggers the limbic system. Panicky stories spur the release of cascades of glucocorticoid.*” Glucocorticoid is a class of steroid hormones that can cause impaired digestion, nervousness, stress, and even susceptibility to infections. So if you think you feel bad after watching the news, it’s because from a physiological standpoint, you may well be.

Dobelli continues, “*Thinking requires concentration. Concentration requires uninterrupted time. News pieces are specifically designed to interrupt you.*” And he has much more to say. The point is not that network news is the singular cause of our problems, but that what we think about has a direct effect on us. When you give something access to your mind, it can become a matter of health, and it’s not going too far to say that it can become a matter of life and death. I think we are all aware of the potential that stress has to trigger physical maladies. When we begin to spend a lot of our time concentrating on the stressors and problems that orbit our lives, it can create a dangerous cycle that becomes increasingly difficult to escape.

Knowing this, God has presented us with a plan for a healthy and stress-free mind. It is outlined for us in this passage from *Philippians*. Our theme verse is an important part of this plan, but we have to back up just a few verses to get the full impact.

Paul begins by saying, “*Rejoice in the Lord always; I will say it again: Rejoice!*” Now it’s worth pointing out that when Paul says “*Rejoice!*”—he is using the imperative form of the verb. He is not merely *encouraging* us to rejoice, he is *commanding* us to. Moreover, “*Rejoice in the Lord!*” isn’t a human suggestion—it’s a command from the Holy Spirit of God. But since it is a command, it also means that it is something within our ability to do. So, says St. Paul, this is something you should set your mind about doing and then make sure you do—not something that you plan to get around to doing whenever you find the time to do it.

Now just to be sure we’re clear, Paul is being specific here. He is choosing his words very carefully. He does not say, Rejoice in your happy circumstances or rejoice in your

possessions or rejoice in your good health. On the other hand, he doesn't command us to rejoice in unhappy circumstances or the loss of possessions or when we're sick. He says, "Rejoice **in the Lord—always!**" Focus your rejoicing on the Lord Jesus, not on yourself or your circumstances. You set your thinking straight by intentionally rejoicing in Jesus Christ, your Savior.

What that means, in practice, is calling to mind on a regular basis what Jesus came to do and what it means for you. Consciously calling to mind his birth, his temptation, his teaching ministry, the parables he told, his agonizing death and burial, his resurrection, his ascension, and his promised return. It was all for us! Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and His victory over death—what those two things mean for us is the source of all our Christian joy. We rejoice in the Lord by taking our thoughts and directing them toward Him.

This can often take the form of inserting "Yes-but" into your thinking. "*I'm facing a scary diagnosis*" "*Yes, but a living Lord who conquered death and the grave goes with me.*" "*I feel lonely and unloved.*" "*Yes, but Jesus was the most unloved of all—unloved in life and in death. He knows exactly how you feel and He is walking with you every step of the way!*" This last week I visited a couple I've been taking communion to for the last few years. To put your minds at rest, they are not members of Hope. The woman has just been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and her skin is literally yellow from jaundice. She will go in for surgery this coming Thursday. I encouraged her by recounting examples of healing miracles I have witnessed during my career as a pastor. Then I added something I heard Pastor Mann say once to this congregation during a worship service. He had asked for prayer requests and someone asked him to pray for God to heal a member who was extremely sick and close to death. He said he would be happy to do that, but then he added, "*You know of course that if she dies, she is healed.*" Death, for a believer, is God's ultimate way of healing one of his own. I can't tell you how much the woman was encouraged by hearing this.

Rejoicing in the Lord is really a matter of simply preaching the Gospel to yourself.

The next step in God's plan for a healthy mind is very simple. It is to pray. And not just to pray every now and then when the idea happens to enter your head or when things go south, but to pray every day with your mind fully engaged in your prayers. Paul writes, "*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 minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" Did you hear that? "*...guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*"

A healthy mind is a praying mind. Did you notice that Paul teaches us to thank God **before we have presented our requests to him!** Did you catch it? Isn't that interesting? Normally we wait for our requests to be granted before we say, "*Thank you.*" We even teach our children to do that—urging them in a stage whisper to say "*Thank you,*" after their requests are granted. But Paul says, when you pray—thank God **before** you make your requests! Does that seem illogical or strange to you? Then listen to these words of Jesus from his Sermon on the Mount: "*...your Father knows what you need before you ask him....So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*" (Matthew 6:8, 31-33) As we teach our confirmands, when we pray "*Give us this*

day our daily bread,”—it is not because we need to pray to receive it but because we need to pray to remember who gives it to us.

Paul concludes this section with a marvelous promise. He says that when you have finished your thankful prayer to God, He will send a transcendent peace to descend upon you that will guard your heart AND MIND in Jesus. Why? How? Because you trust Him. You trust him to make the right decision. And the more you pray, the more this trust in Him will grow in you and the more this trust grows in you, the more peace you will have. A man named Joseph Scriven absolutely nailed it when he wrote these words: “Oh, what peace we often forfeit/Oh, what needless pain we bear/All because we do not carry/Everything to God in prayer.” A healthy, peaceful mind is a praying mind.

And so, once again my friends, *“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 these things!**”* And just think: what is truer, nobler, more righteous, purer, lovelier, more admirable, excellent or praiseworthy—that our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ?

And so may the peace that transcends all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.