

Summer Thinking

Rise up, my love, my fair one,

And come away.

For lo, the winter is past,

The rain is over and gone. Song of Solomon 2:10

The above verse may seem inappropriate, seeing that now the summer is gone, and the winter fast approaches. This may be the case in our physical realm, but this fine piece of poetry is ultimately speaking of spiritual realities, and the potentiality of love to break through the snow and ice of our frosty souls.

For a long time, I dreaded winter. As a boy, I remember looking forlornly up at the gathering clouds in the late autumn sky, feeling winter's cold grip in the air, and intensely ruing the loss of warm summer days. This was in Michigan, where winter is a different thing than it is here in balmy Maryland. I later went to college in Minnesota, where my classmates brought their car batteries into the dormitory and lined them up under the coat rack next to their boots so that the bitter cold would not render them inoperable over night. The lake would freeze in October, and it wasn't till April that the ice, slowly receding from the shore, would break up into large chunks, finally giving way to spring's strengthening sun.

In Philippians 4, St. Paul concludes his letter with summer thinking. The ice has broken, and the snow is melting. He tells us to rejoice in the Lord always, and to be anxious for nothing (vv. 4-7). Rejoicing belongs to the spring, where crocuses peep out of the thawing earth to meet the warming sun, harbingers of good things to come. Anxiety belongs to the winter, where hope darkens the heart, and minds wonder about survival in the face of frozen earth. Reader, where is your heart right now? Is it in the winter or spring? Are you full of joy, or are you full of anxiety?

What are your anxieties? What freezes your heart? Are you worried that you have "missed out in life"? Have you ever read alumni material about your old school buddies who have been successful in business, ministry, and family, who live in expensive houses and freely travel wherever they please? Feel the freeze? Have you ever felt career or job anxieties? Is it hard to get up and go to work? Are you pressured to "perform"? Is it possible that you could lose your job? Do you feel the freeze? How about financial worries? What is the state of your soul each month when you are maneuvering to pay your bills? Feel the freeze? Do you have difficult and painful relationships with close family members whose frosty fingers find their way into the depths of your being? Is it noticeable to you now that you are aging? Can you observe your body slowly weakening, losing the luster of youth? Have you begun to count the years?

What do these anxieties do? They have turned the landscape of our souls to frozen tundra; they howl like lonely animals in the winter's darkness scrapping about for food! They seem huge, don't they? Well, the Apostle doesn't seem to think so! He tells us to be anxious for NOTHING! Rather, pray with a thankful heart! What is he saying? He is really saying that behind every anxiety is potential. They can drive us to God!

He is saying that anxieties can become the fuel by which we warm our hearts in prayer! He is saying that when you begin to feel the icy grip of anxiety around your throat, instead of succumbing to a wintry state, they can be the signal for prayer and thanksgiving, and for connecting with God. Make anxieties work for your own benefit; let them lead you to God in prayer! Do not let them control you. If they do, they will drive you deep into January! It is a strange paradox: that which the enemy would use to freeze you, becomes the very thing that drives us to God.

Jesus is inviting us; do you hear Him? Come away from your anxious thoughts. The winter is past. Where does He want to take us? Into the peace of God that passes all understanding, a peace that laughs in the face of anxiety, a peace that guards our hearts and minds from the terror of winter's death. "Peace" for Paul is the Hebrew *Shalom* – it means wholeness, well-being, contentment, no longer at odds with God, man, or nature. *Shalom* is becoming what we were made for. It is a spring and summer word!

The apostle now moves on to a most amazing fact about summer thinking in verses 8-9. The soul's summer is the result of controlling the weather within. I have lived in a number of places in my lifetime, but never have I experienced such disappointment than I have with the Maryland forecasters! Bless them! They have a difficult job determining whether the southern systems or the northern systems will prevail, or what precipitation will make it over the mountains from the West. The forecasters are at the mercy of the arbitrary weather movements. They cannot forecast with accuracy, let alone control the weather!

Christians are not helpless like this! They can create the weather inside their souls! How? By controlling their thoughts, rather than letting their thoughts control them! By meditating on whatever is true. What is true? The Gospel is true - that God loves us and that we no longer belong to Adam's family with all its spiritual weaknesses, under the power of sin and death (Romans 6). We are heirs with Christ Jesus, and everything that is true about Him is true about us! St. Paul then commands us to bend our souls to whatever is noble. The Prophet Isaiah eloquently tells us that "a noble man devises noble things, and by noble things he stands (Isa. 32:8)! Nobility doesn't get stuck on the self; its thoughts range out into the greater purposes of God! Noble thoughts are magnanimous thoughts, thoughts full of the greatness and goodness of God. The list goes on: whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good report, if there is any virtue and anything worthy of praise, meditate on these things.

Brothers and Sisters! We have got to get a hold of our thoughts! For many of us, our thoughts control us! They rage in our heads like a blizzard, and we are so use to the

winter, that we think ice and snow is all that is real! It is crucial to realize that in Christ you can do this! We can control the weather within! We do not have to be blown about by every wintry blast! Listen to these earnest words of an old Puritan preacher:

I require thee, reader, as ever thou hopest for a part in this glory, that thou presently take thy heart to task, chide it for its willful strangeness to God, turn thy thoughts from the pursuit of vanity, bend thy soul to study eternity, busy it about the life to come, habituate thyself to such contemplations, and let not those thoughts be seldom and cursory, but bath thy soul in heaven's delights; and if thy backward soul begin to flag, and thy thoughts to scatter, call them back, hold them to their work . . . Say not, "We are unable to set our own hearts on heaven; this must be the work of God only." Though God be the chief disposer of our hearts, yet, next to him, you have the greatest command of them yourselves. Though without Christ you can do nothing, yet under him you may do much, and must, or else it will be undone, and you yourselves be undone through your neglect. (R. Baxter, *Saint's Rest*, Chapter 11)

Brothers and sisters, I tell you, in the name of Jesus, that the winter is past! Come away with Jesus who is inviting you out of the gloom into the warm glow of the summer sun.

Now we can control the weather within, but we surely cannot control the weather from without! Try as we might, we have little control of our circumstances. However, St. Paul now reveals to us the secret of spring (vv. 11-13)! Spring has nothing to do with our circumstances! Nature tells us: If your circumstances are favorable, you will experience spring. If your circumstances are unfavorable, then you will experience winter. We all know that this is a lie! How many people you know with favorable circumstances, and they are discontent? You say, what's the matter with them! They have it made? Why are they not happy and complain all the time? Why? Because circumstances have nothing to do with happiness and contentment! Nothing at all!

True spring and summer living transcends circumstances! This is the golden spring meadow Jesus is inviting us to. It is a place where outward circumstances are peripheral, where humiliation doesn't cause anger and dejection, exaltation doesn't cause pride, a full belly doesn't cause sloth and carelessness, and a hungry belly doesn't bring about complaining. You say, this is impossible! Who do you think I am, superman? St. Paul says, yes it is impossible for us working in our natural state and in our own power! But he doesn't expect us to behave like "mere men" (I Cor. 3:3). He says, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"! You see, Jesus is telling us that the winter is past, that our circumstances, no matter how difficult, do not have to drive us into winter's dark regions of despair.

On December 19th, 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote his very last letter to his family and loved ones. He knew that it was now just a matter of time before he was to be executed. He speaks of the peace he was experiencing of angelic presence in his confinement, and concludes:

Therefore you must not think that I am unhappy. What is happiness and unhappiness? It depends so little on the circumstances; it depends really only on that which happens inside a person.

The martyr knew that his outward circumstances were hopeless, but he heard the invitation of his soul's lover, Jesus, gently saying:

Rise up, my love, my fair one,
And come away. For lo, the winter is past,
The rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth;
The time for singing has come ...
Rise up, my love, my fair one,
And come away!