

The Retreat from “Rita”

October 2, 2005

Philip. 4:4-8 (NKJV)

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! [5] Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand. [6] Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; [7] and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

[8] Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy--meditate on these things.

For the first time in my twenty-three years as the pastor of Elim Church we were unable to have a church service last Sunday because the power was off here at the church. I decided not to have a service in the dark.. I was afraid someone would say, “they are having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof”.

For the past week most of us have been sharing horror stories about what happened to us as we tried to obey the mandatory evacuation ordered by our city officials.

After the second call from the mayor’s office telling me that I needed to evacuate the city in order to keep my family safe, I packed my van with as many supplies as I could and Janet, Stephanie, Makayla and me started toward Centerville, Texas to seek the safety of Renee’ and Greg’s house there.

The trip to Centerville normally takes about two hours.

I knew that there was a gigantic traffic jam on I-45 North but Mayor White kept assuring us that the contra-flow lanes were about to open and that was going to get the traffic flowing.

It took us an hour to get from our house to downtown Houston and so I got the bright idea to get off the freeway and drive through downtown and get on the HOV lane heading out of downtown. It was a wonderful plan. For a few miles we sailed along past all of the “dummies” who were standing still on the regular lanes. But then it happened. We came to a complete stop and could not move in any direction.

The HOV lane is a single lane with concrete barriers on each side and with cars in front of you and cars in back of you, you cannot move. It took us another seven hours to get from Northline Mall to Greenspoint Mall. We sat in one spot for two hours without moving at all.

Finally, when I got the chance, I got off the freeway and came back to my house. I decided I'd rather take my chances at home than being stranded on the side of the freeway somewhere without any gas. And, as you know, it worked out great for me because the storm missed us and my lights never went off.

The best story I've heard was the story of Stacy and his family as they attempted to retreat from “Rita”.

They live in Baytown very close to the water and the smart thing was for them to head for higher ground. So Stacy put everything in his garage into the attic and hooked his horse trailer with his two horses to the back of his pickup. Debbie drove their van and Rhea Ann followed in her Ford Taurus. Stacy was going to go to Etoile, Texas where my mother has a small trailer and where there would be a place for the horses.

He was going to take the back roads to avoid the traffic on Highway 59 but they would not let him onto Highway 146. He ended up going all the way to Beaumont. But when he got to Beaumont the order had been given for the citizens of Beaumont to evacuate and so he got into a horrendous traffic jam heading north from Beaumont.

Everything was going pretty well however until a spider got into Rhea Ann's car. She tried to swat the spider and ran into the back of Debbie. They weren't going very fast and so it didn't do much damage. They kept going and it got later and later. In the wee hours of the morning, Debbie nodded off and woke up just as she was about to run into the rear end of two horses and a horse trailer. She thought she was slamming on the brake but actually she

hit the accelerator and slammed into the back of the horse trailer Stacy was pulling pushing the trailer into Stacy's pickup and pushing his pickup into a boat that someone was pulling in front of Stacy.

It almost knocked Stacy's back bumper completely off. But miraculously the horse trailer was still attached and they were able to continue on.

They finally made it to Etoile after 16 1/2 hours only to discover that the storm was now headed straight for them. So after a few hours of sleep, they headed for Centerville to stay with Renee' and Greg. All of that and they would have been ok had they stayed at home in the first place. One thing for sure, they will never forget their retreat from "Rita".

I'm sure all of us have stories to tell.

Perhaps the worst is what happened to our friends from New Orleans. They had to evacuate from New Orleans because of Hurricane "Katrina" and then had to evacuate from here because of Hurricane "Rita". At first, they were going to San Antonio but when they were unable to make any progress, they turned around and headed for Arkansas. They spent over thirty hours on the road.

The thing that amazed me was the message that Brother Alex shared with those of us who were here for church on Wednesday before everybody left town on Thursday. He talked about the blessing of God. He talked about how everyone had been so kind to them. He talked about how they had so much to be thankful for even though they had lost almost all of their material possessions they still had their lives and their families and each other. He told us to keep a good attitude regardless of what happened when "Rita" came ashore.

I have been thinking about what he said. And do you know what? Even though we can share stories of the hardships we faced in trying to evacuate, **all of us still have so very, very much to be thankful for!**

We stood around the front of the church on that Wednesday night before the storm and we asked God to spare us. We asked Him to cause the storm to weaken. We asked Him to direct it to a place where it would do the least amount of damage.

We asked him to spare our church and we asked Him to keep us safe until we could get back to our homes. And God heard our prayers and for that we are very, very grateful.

My text for today is the famous words of the Apostle Paul.... “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say rejoice.”

It’s human to talk about the hardships and the trials rather than to rejoice in the midst of suffering. Yet, Paul commands us to rejoice. Paul was a man who had somehow learned to put life into perspective. He knew better than any of us that life can be difficult. He had been beaten for his faith, shipwrecked, imprisoned. But he knew that Christ was greater than any adversary, any painful emotion, any remembered hurt. He was not rejoicing because he had read a book about the importance of a positive mental attitude. He was not rejoicing because he didn’t want to face reality. He was rejoicing because he knew that God was in control. He was rejoicing in the Lord!

He said, “Rejoice **in the Lord**, always.” It’s not about rejoicing because you’re having to sit in traffic for 24 hours. It’s about rejoicing because you know that the Lord is with you.

Paul said....

Philip. 4:4-5 (NKJV)

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!

Then he said....

[5] Let your **gentleness** be known to all men. The Lord is at hand.

The word “gentleness” is the Greek word “epieikeia”. Other translations of the Bible translate epieikeia as patience, softness, modesty, forbearance, magnanimity.

Philip. 4:5 (NLT)

Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon.

Philip. 4:5 (NASB)

Let your forbearing spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near.

Paul must have been thinking about those who were caught in that horrific traffic jam when he wrote these words.

He said, “I want you to rejoice even though your in that traffic and in that heat and I want you to let everyone see how patient (gentle, forbearing, modest) you are.

I wonder how we did with that assignment?

When you were sitting in that traffic without moving did everyone around you take note of your patience and your gentleness?

I didn't do so well.

I called the mayor's office on my cell phone wanting to give him a piece of my mind about getting us all out there without thinking about how we were going to get gas and food and use the bathroom, etc.

But there was a lady behind me who did a great job with showing gentleness and patience. She took time to help a dog that had gotten loose from its owners and was about to have a heat stroke on the freeway. Actually, I did pretty well with that. I gave the dog a bottle of water and picked it up and helped it over the concrete barrier and tried to help it as much as I could.

But I tell you what, it wasn't easy to remain positive in that heat and traffic.

How do you do it? How do you rejoice when you have to endure something that is very unpleasant?

You do it by focusing on the big picture. You have to focus on more than the hardship of the moment.

Yes, everybody was uncomfortable. But if that hurricane had hit Houston thousands would have been killed. So enduring the hardships of getting out of town was a small price to pay for keeping our families safe.

Now notice what Paul says next.....

Philip. 4:6 (NKJV)

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with **thanksgiving**, let your requests be made known to God;

The next thing you must have is an attitude of gratitude.

You have a choice. You can focus on the negative or you can focus on the positive.

We have so very, very much to be thankful for!

We are here today having church. Our beautiful sanctuary is not damaged. Our families are safe. Our homes are safe. Our city was spared. The list goes on and on.

Paul gave some very good advice when he said.....

Philip. 4:8 (NKJV)

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy--meditate on these things.

In other words, count your blessings! Don't complain about not having electrical power for a few days. Be thankful that you have it now! Don't be bitter about having to sit in traffic for a few hours. Be thankful that everyone is safe and things are back to normal.

You say, Pastor Ron, that's easy to say now after it all turned out o.k. But what if the storm had made a direct hit. What then?

Even then, there would be something to be thankful for.

Paul said, "If there's any virtue and if there's anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. Find something to be thankful for. Keep focused on that. Talk about that.

Finally, Paul wrote this letter to a church. A community of believers.

We can rejoice in the middle of a storm because we have each other.

It was a great blessing to have brothers and sisters who were there to share what they had. Some people had electricity others did not. It was wonderful to have a brother or sister in Christ say, "Come on over to our house. We still have air conditioning, etc."

What a blessing it is to have friends and a church family to help in the time of a crisis.

There's an old story about a man who had been out of church for a long time and his pastor went to visit him. When he got to the man's house there was a fire burning in the fireplace and the pastor began to talk to the man about how important it was for him to stay connected to his brothers and sisters in the church. As they talked the pastor pulled a log away from the other logs on the fire and they both watched as the log gradually cooled until it no longer glowed at all. The pastor said, "That's what happens to us when we are away from the community of faith."

Someone has said, "Misery loves company, but joy requires it."

That is so true. Joy requires company, community, connectedness. Think about those really happy moments in your life. Were you alone or did you share that event with someone else? Almost certainly you were with others.

We can have satisfying experiences by ourselves, but to experience joy we almost have to be in the company of at least one other person.

I am so glad that I'm a part of the family of God! Aren't you?

So as we look back at the experiences of last weekend let's remember to rejoice because of the faithfulness and the goodness of God! We have so very much for which to be thankful!

Give invitation.