

Joy is Not an Option

Happy New Year is an expression that many of us will hear near the beginning of a new year. The word *happy* evokes visions of driving the right car, meeting the right person, living in that dream house, or vacationing in an exotic location. Mankind makes a lifelong pursuit out of chasing this elusive ideal of happiness—spending money, collecting things, and searching for new and exciting experiences. If happiness depends on circumstances and “everything going our way,” what happens when the toys rust, when loved ones die, when health fails, when the money is gone, and the party is over? Often happiness flees and despair sets in.

Joy stands in contrast to happiness. Joy does not depend on circumstances or outward happenings, but rather has its springs deep down inside. Joy is the quiet, confident assurance of God’s love and work in our lives, the certainty that He will be there no matter what. As someone has said, “Happiness depends on happenings, but joy depends on Jesus.” In John 15:11, Jesus said, *“These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.”* Jesus had just spoken about the importance of abiding in Him and bearing much fruit, using the analogy of the vine and the branches. The only true source of lasting joy is a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Joy is a major theme of the New Testament. The word “joy” occurs 63 times and the word “rejoice” occurs 77 times. The word translated “greetings” in the New Testament literally means “joy be with you.” Joy is one expression of the fruit of the Spirit. In 1 Thessalonians 5:16, we are commanded to *“Rejoice evermore.”* The prophet Habakkuk, in spite of the losses he experienced, was able to declare with confidence, *“yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation”* (Habakkuk 3:18). Each day we are confronted with the choice, and with the obligation to rejoice in the God of our salvation. Joy is not an option.

The book of Philippians is Paul’s letter of joy. The letter was written while he was a prisoner in Rome, and it was sent to his fellow Christians at the church in Philippi. One of their members, Epaphroditus, had been sent to Rome to bring a special offering to Paul and to help him in his time of need. Paul’s letter to the Philippian church is an expression of his gratitude and love for them, but it is so much more than that. It also emphasizes the joy of the Christian life. At least 17 times in the four chapters, Paul mentions joy or rejoicing. The letter radiates joy, culminating in the command of Philippians 4:4, *“Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice.”*

There appeared to be no reason for Paul to be rejoicing. He was a Roman prisoner and his case was coming up shortly. According to verses 15-17 of the first chapter of Philippians, the believers at Rome were divided; some supported him and some opposed him. In fact, some of the Christians even wanted to make things more difficult for the Apostle.

Yet, in spite of the danger and opposition, Paul overflowed with joy. What was the source of this joy? The answer is found in another word that is often repeated in his letter. It is the word *mind*. The word is used ten times; the word *think* is used four times, and the word *remember* (or remembrance) is used one time—a total of 15 references to the *mind*. There is a close connection between Christian joy and the attitudes of our minds. Warren Wiersbe describes four attitudes of the mind that are essential for experiencing joy in the Christian life.

1. The Single Mind

The single mind signifies the attitude of single-hearted devotion to Christ. This is expressed by Paul in verses 20 and 21 (of Philippians 1), "*. . . Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, . . .*"

Paul's highest priority in life was serving Jesus Christ, and as a result, the difficulties he encountered did not rob him of joy in the Lord. Throughout chapter one, Paul discusses the difficult circumstances he faced. He was a prisoner in Rome (he was in chains) and some of the Christians there opposed him and even tried to stir up trouble for him. Yet, in the midst of all of those circumstances, he could write at the end of verse 18, "*I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice.*" Paul viewed his circumstances in relationship to the priority of serving Christ. In verse 14, Paul wrote that because of his bonds, many of the brethren were encouraged to speak the Word of God more courageously and fearlessly. In verse 17, Paul views his upcoming trial as being set for the defense of the gospel. Paul rejoiced in his difficult circumstances because they encouraged other believers to be bolder in their witness for Christ, and enabled him to defend the Gospel before the courts of Rome. Because Paul possessed the single mind of wholeheartedly serving the Lord, he viewed the circumstances of life as working for him and not against him, and therefore, he could rejoice in the Lord no matter how great the difficulties he faced.

The reason why we are so often distracted by the difficult circumstances of life and fail to experience the joy of the Lord is that we do not cultivate "the single mind" as we should. James 1:8 says, "*A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.*" We will not experience the joy of the Lord when we are trying to live for Christ and pursuing our own self-fulfillment at the same time. Oswald Chambers wrote, "*Joy comes from seeing the complete fulfillment of the specific purpose for which I was created and born again, not from successfully doing something of my own choosing.*"

Surrendering our own personal goals and ambitions to the authority of the Lord may seem to be too restrictive and confining to some people, but Jesus said, "*He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it*" (Matthew 10:39). Jesus teaches us to measure our lives by losses rather than gains, by self-sacrifices rather than self-preservation. A secular psychiatrist once remarked, "The greatest secret of mental health comes down to us in the words, 'Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will save it.'" He added, "I forget who said that, but it is a great truth." Actually, he missed an important phrase. Jesus said, "*Whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life **for my sake** shall find it*" (Matthew 16:25). Not only is that the greatest secret of mental health, but it is also the secret to experiencing the joy of the Lord.

We may tend to think that devotion to Christ involves a big heroic decision of life, like going on the mission field or doing something really big for Christ. Sometimes devotion does involve that. But for most of us most of the time, our devotion to Christ involves decisions in the everyday events of life. It may involve a commitment to sacrifice more of our personal time to Christ in order to serve in some form of ministry in the church, such as teaching a Sunday School class or in the responsibility of being a trustee. It may involve a commitment in the family life such as having family devotions or looking for opportunities to serve others as a family. It may involve a commitment to refrain from spending money on a luxury item or a hobby so that we can help support missionaries or Christians who are persecuted for their faith. Most of the time, our devotion to Christ is expressed in the activities of everyday living. Cultivating a "single mind" of devotion to Christ is essential for experiencing joy in the Christian life.

2. The Submissive Mind

The second chapter of Philippians focuses on people, and the key verses are verses 3-4: *“Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.”* In verse 5, Paul goes on to write, *“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.”*

There can be no joy in the life of the Christian who is selfish and puts himself above others. From an unknown source comes an article titled “How to Be Miserable.” It says, “Think about yourself; talk about yourself; use “I” as often as possible; mirror yourself continually in the opinion of others. Listen greedily to what people say about you. Expect to be appreciated. Be suspicious. Be jealous and envious. Be sensitive to slights. Never forgive a criticism. Trust nobody but yourself. Insist on consideration and respect. Demand agreement with your own views on everything. Sulk if people are not grateful to you for favors shown them. Never forget a service you have rendered. Shirk your duties if you can. Do as little as possible for others.” We expect unsaved people to be selfish and grasping, but this should not be true of Christians, who have experienced the love of Christ and the fellowship of the Spirit. The eyes of Christians are to be turned away from themselves and focused on the needs of others.

In Philippians 2, we find several examples of the submissive mind. Each example illustrates three characteristics of a submissive mind; thinking of others, serving others, and sacrificing for others. Persons with the submissive mind do not avoid sacrifice. They live for the glory of God and the good of others.

In verse 8, we read that Christ *“humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross.”* In verse 17, Paul alludes to a willingness to be offered upon the sacrifice and service of their faith. In verse 20, we read this about Timothy, *“I have no man likeminded, who will naturally care for your state.”* And then in verse 30, Paul describes Epaphroditus in these words, *“for the work of Christ he was nigh unto death, not regarding his life, to supply your lack of service toward me.”*

“Others” is the key word in the vocabulary of the Christian who exercises the submissive mind. That does not mean that the believer is at the beck and call of everybody else, or that he is a “religious doormat” for all to use. In 2 Corinthians 4:5, Paul gives the right perspective when he writes, *“ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake.”*

A writer for a major newspaper visited India. One day he met a missionary nurse who lived among the lepers and served them. The reporter looked upon her with amazement and remarked, “I wouldn’t wash the wounds of these lepers for a million dollars!” “Neither would I,” answered the missionary nurse, “but I gladly do it for Christ. I have no thought of any reward other than His smile of approval upon me!”

3. The Spiritual Mind

The third attitude of mind that is essential for experiencing joy in the Christian life is found in verses 18-19 of chapter 3. Paul describes those who “mind earthly things.” Many people today are living under the delusion that joy is to be found in the temporary things of this world. They mind earthly things.

Percy Ainsworth tells of a picture hanging in London, which is one of the most tragic pictures ever painted. It portrays *the last rough slope of a mountain leading to the edge of a precipice, at the foot of which one catches a misty glimpse of a graveyard.* A crowd of men and women pack the slope, all

struggling for a foothold on the highest point and tearing and treading upon one another. They are gazing upward where the filmy, beckoning, mocking figure of pleasure floats out of reach. The picture is called, "The Pursuit of Pleasure." On that grim, sunless canvas the artist had not painted one happy face; not a smile, not even a flicker of gladness; nothing but fear, hatred, selfishness, and pain is seen. That painting is a commentary on the world's pursuit of joy and happiness. Joy is not found in pleasure. Lord Byron had his fill of pleasure. Toward the end of his life, he wrote, *"The worm, the canker, and the grief are mine alone."* Joy is not found in wealth or possessions. Jay Gould was an American millionaire who when dying remarked, *"I suppose I am the most miserable man of earth."* Neither is joy found in position nor fame. Lord Beaconsfield experienced more than his share of both. But in disgust he wrote, *"Youth is a mistake; manhood is a struggle; old age is a regret."*

In contrast to those who "mind earthly things," Paul in verses 20-21 describes the believer with the spiritual mind. *"For our conversation (citizenship) is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body, according to the working whereby He is able even to subdue all things unto himself."* It is this anticipation of Christ's coming that motivates the believer with the spiritual mind. He does not live for the things of this world; he anticipates the blessings of the world to come. This does not mean that he ignores or neglects his daily obligations, but it does mean that what he does today is governed by what Christ will do in the future. First John 3:3 says, *" . . . every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as He is pure."*

The Scriptures repeatedly teach that the focal point of our joy should be our hope of a blessed future. The apostle Peter mentions *"an inheritance, incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation, ready to be revealed in the last time wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations (trials)"* (1 Peter 1:4-6).

In Hebrews 10:34, we read of a group of Christians who joyfully accepted the spoiling of their goods, because their focus was on the inheritance that awaited them.

4. The Secure Mind

The fourth attitude of mind that is essential for experiencing the joy of the Lord is found in verse 6 of Philippians 4: *"Be careful (anxious) for nothing."* The Greek word translated careful (or anxious) means "to be pulled in different directions." Our hopes pull us in one direction and our fears pull us in another direction. That describes worry. The Old English root from which we get our word "worry" means "to strangle." If you have ever really worried, you know how it does strangle a person. Proverbs 12:25 in one translation (NIV) says, *"An anxious heart weighs a man down."* Worry is a thief of joy. In Philippians 4:6, Paul says we are not to be *anxious* and then says, *"in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God."* A related Scripture is 1 Peter 5:7, *"Casting all your care upon him, for he careth for you."* The word translated *casting* describes the action of casting a blanket on a colt or a sack of potatoes on a truck. We are admonished to cast our cares upon the Lord. Paul continues in Philippians 4:7, *"And the peace of God which passeth all understanding, shall keep (guard) your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."* That describes a secure mind. Because Paul possessed a secure mind, he could write in 2 Corinthians 6:10, *"As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing."*

There was a surgeon who on one occasion was asked, "Doctor, what was the greatest operation you ever performed?" He thought for a while and then responded, "Many operations have required all of my skills, but perhaps the one that meant the most to me was the time I operated on a little girl who was given only a 10 percent chance of survival. She was such a sweet little thing, and so pale when they brought her into the operating room." He continued, "At that time I was having a great deal of trouble, myself. I had a son who was a real problem and there were other things as well. I had allowed myself to become an unhappy man. As the nurses were preparing to administer the anesthetic to this little girl, she asked, 'Doctor, may I say something?'" He replied, "Yes, what is it?" She said, "Every night when I go to bed I say my prayers, and I'd like to say a prayer right now." The surgeon said, "That's all right—please say your prayer, and think of me too, won't you?"

In a sweet voice she prayed, "Jesus, tender Shepherd, hear me; Bless thy little lamb tonight; through the darkness be Thou near me; keep me safe till morning light. And dear God, please bless the doctor." Then she added, "I'm ready now. And I'm not afraid, because Jesus loves me and is right here with me." The surgeon confessed, "I was blinded by tears. I had to turn away and occupy myself with another wash-up before I could start the operation." He prayed silently, "Dear God, if You never help me save another human being, help me save this little girl." He performed the operation and the miracle happened. She lived. The surgeon remarked, "Leaving the hospital that day, I realized *that I was* the one who was operated on, not the girl. She taught me that if I take all my problems and put them in the hands of Jesus, He will see me through."

In summary, there are two results of joy: One, the joy of the Lord gives strength (Nehemiah 8:10). Two, the joy of the Lord on the inside will develop radiance on the outside (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Many years ago, when the missionary Adoniram Judson was home on furlough, he passed through the city of Stonington, Connecticut. A young boy playing about the dock at the time of Judson's arrival was struck by the man's appearance. Never before had he seen such a light on any human face. He ran up the street to a minister to ask who the stranger was. The minister hurried back with him, but became so absorbed in conversation with Judson that he forgot all about the impatient youngster standing near him.

Many years afterward, the boy who saw that joyful countenance became a noted preacher. His name was Henry Clay Trumbull. In a book of memoirs, Trumbull penned a chapter entitled, "What a boy saw in the face of Adoniram Judson." The joyful countenance on Judson's face had changed his life. Likewise, the joy on your face can change the lives of others.

-Allen Nell

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