

Hello dear listeners,

Last time we reflected together on whether or not it is possible to have true joy in a joyless world. We concluded that it is more than possible, if our gaze is not so preoccupied with the things of this world, but rather turned toward the Lord Jesus Christ, seated at the right hand of his Father in heaven. There is joy in Jesus Christ. Paul was quite within his rights to urge the Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” But this begs the question, what does true joy really look like? What is its picture?

When we hear Paul give the command to rejoice, we might be tempted to understand him as saying, “Be joyful in how you feel.” It’s tempting to understand Paul as appealing to your emotions. But rejoicing here is not equivalent to happiness, or laughter, or some kind of emotional high, as in, “I’m always smiley and happy-clappy!” We need to be clear at the outset that true joy, true rejoicing does not depend ultimately upon your feelings or circumstances. Not at all! Rather, true joy is supposed to be something more lasting, enduring, unfading. That’s why Paul could say, “Rejoice in the Lord always!” Dear listeners, true joy has little to do with emotion. Instead, true joy is an *attitude*, an attitude of *contentment in the Lord*. It’s an attitude, as we started to see last time, that comes from knowing Jesus Christ, and having him as your delight.

It’s an *attitude*, therefore, that is possible, attainable, *always*. It does not depend on our *changing circumstances*, but on the one who never changes, Jesus Christ. That means it is available even in difficult times. Paul seems to anticipate objections to this fact. You can just imagine some of his Philippian readers saying, “How can we possibly rejoice given our circumstances, when there is such division in the congregation?” That’s why Paul repeats the command: “Again I will say, rejoice!” He lets his readers know that truly there are no exceptions, no loopholes. True joy is a deep, inner, and unimpeachable joy.

It’s noteworthy that the Greek word for joy that Paul uses is very closely related to the Greek word for “grace.” The point is, it is the grace of God, yes, it is *knowing, internalizing, digesting* the grace of God revealed in his Word that brings joy, personal, individual joy into one’s heart and life! Knowing who God is, knowing who the Saviour is—that’s what sets a man on his way rejoicing, even when life is chaotic, full of crisis.

What does that tell you? It tells you that this kind of joy exists even when you are weeping. True Christian joy does not exclude or forbid tears or sadness over the brokenness of life. Paul himself tells us in Phil. 2:27 that he endured sorrow over an illness that almost cost a friend his life. And in 3:18 Paul writes that he even wept over those who behaved as enemies of the cross of Christ. Paul was not Stoic, keeping God’s people and their problems at arm’s length. Nor was he keen to give a distorted, rosy-coloured picture of what Christianity looks like, as if once you turn to Christ all your problems will be gone! Paul is realistic, he is truthful. A relationship with Christ does not mean there is no longer any room for weeping. Paul actually commanded elsewhere, Rom. 12:15, “Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.” He did not want God’s people to *insulate* themselves from the pain and sadness that exist in this life. So you see, the biblical joy that Paul models and commands, is compatible with the whole range of emotions we might go through in the various situations of our life. Joy allows for tears. You are not always going to feel *cheerful* or *happy*. No! To rejoice in the Lord is to focus on the Lord Jesus Christ, even when so much goes wrong. To rejoice is to concentrate your mind on treasuring Christ. It is to cherish his nearness, so that your heart can rest in him, the only one you need in every situation.

Paul’s joy overflowed! This was a man who had been tossed into prison with his feet fastened in stocks as punishment for preaching Christ. Yet in spite of this, we read in Acts 16:25 that this very same person was heard in that prison praying and singing hymns and praises to God! Paul rejoiced in

spite of his circumstances. He did not stare forever at the brokenness of life; he did not become so bogged down by the hurt he experienced from sinful neighbours who tossed him into jail. No, Paul had his eye on Christ, and that prompted rejoicing! Paul knew that he was being carried by his Saviour in his distressing circumstance. And so, he tells us, his readers: always rejoice, be joyful! Turn your focus to Christ the Lord! For the more you have the Lord and his work as your utter delight, your focus, your treasure, the less attention you will give to your own circumstances. Rejoice *in the Lord!*

From where, you might ask, did the apostle Paul take his cue, his direction? I would say he took it from the Scriptures available to him at that time, what we have come to know as the Old Testament. I think of the Psalms in particular. In many places we find the psalmist, often King David, starting off his prayer by describing his current predicament. But before long, he turns his gaze away from his plight and focuses on the Lord. One example will suffice—Psalm 35. David is in the enemies’ crosshairs. So he turns to the Lord, looking for salvation, for deliverance. He says in vs. 9-10, “Then my soul will rejoice in the LORD, exulting in his salvation. All my bones shall say, ‘O LORD, who is like you, delivering the poor from him who is too strong for him, the poor and needy from him who robs him?’” David turned to the LORD, and he knew peace, assurance, and joy!

Does this all sound a little over the top for you, as some pie-in-the-sky idea? Does this joy sound unreachable for you? Do you wonder how on earth you can begin to feel joy in your heart when there has been so much hardship in your life?

Maybe this really is a new concept for you. Maybe you’ve always understood joy as something directly tied to your circumstances. If I may be very upfront here, the joy which the Bible teaches is going to sound over-the-top if you have never heard about it before. It *is* going to sound unreachable. And the truth is, it *is* unreachable. Neither you nor I on our own can attain or savour this kind of joy. Here’s why: True joy is a mark of the *Christian*. In Galatians 5:22 Paul calls it a *fruit of the Spirit*. Particularly, he means it is a fruit of the *Holy Spirit*, the third person of the Trinity. That’s to say, joy is a fruit produced in one’s heart and life by God himself and God alone! True joy is something only a Christian can experience, one who believes in Jesus Christ, one who knows himself a sinner saved by God through the death of Jesus Christ. So then, turn to this Jesus Christ. And then you may know the joy of salvation, the joy that no one can take from you no matter what. This pathway to joy we shall consider in more detail next week.