

## THE JOY OF THE LORD IS OUR STRENGTH

The Book of Philippians #31

### PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

*“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*

In the first part of these verses Paul tells the Philippians to *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice!”* This is one of many verses found in the book of Philippians that are used as memory verses. Songs have even been written using this verse, one of which we sang earlier. I am going to concentrate on rejoicing today and save the remainder of the verses for another day.

According to the Random House Dictionary to rejoice is to be filled with great joy. To rejoice in the Lord is to celebrate or delight in the Lord. All of us have had times of rejoicing in our lives but most of us would agree that rejoicing is not something that is always outpouring from our hearts. So what does Paul mean when he says we should rejoice always? Is Paul saying that we should be smiling at all times, never sorrowful or expressing grief? Is this just another way to say, “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we shall die”? (Luke 12:19-20.) I don’t think that is what Paul had in mind at all. I believe he has something deeper to say than what might appear on the surface.

Perhaps the easiest way to understand what this verse is implying is to contrast joy and happiness. These two are often mistaken for one another. Some think that joy and happiness are two close relatives but in actuality they are quite different. Just as there is a difference between laughter and contentment, there is also a difference between happiness and joy. One is foundationally external and the other foundationally internal. And I don’t believe Paul is asking us to be happy all the time, but he is telling us to rejoice.

When I think of the times of happiness I have experienced I think of when I got married, the birth of our three children, great times with good friends filled with laughter and companionship. I also think of the laughter of our grandchildren, reading a good book all the way through in one sitting, seeing an inspirational movie, and spending time away with just my wife and the great outdoors. Precious moments; but moments in time which come and go with the seasons of life.

According to The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Volume 12, page 252), *“Joy is not a feeling like happiness. It is a mental attitude, a life stance. Happiness depends on what happens, joy does not. Joy derives from a conviction that, despite present circumstances, God is in control and will save those who belong to Christ. Joy derives from (being united) with Christ, (and) the promise of the resurrection.”*

I would also add that joy comes from the indwelling Spirit of God, and the faith to believe that God will never forsake or abandon us even when circumstance seems to indicate otherwise.

Two very good examples of how joy differs from happiness can be found in the stories of Abraham and Jesus. After God had fulfilled His promise to Abraham and his son Isaac was born, God instructed Abraham to *“(Take Isaac) to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains* (Genesis 22:2). This is what happened when they got there.

### GENESIS 22:9-12

*... When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said... 'Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me''*

God did for Abraham what He would later do for us. He provided a substitute lamb to be slain upon the altar instead of Isaac.

Was Abraham happy about God's call to kill His only son Isaac? I guarantee he was not. There was nothing to be happy about in that request. Was he happy when God provided a substitute for Isaac so that his son was spared? Of course he was. He must have been both relieved and elated at the same time. The emotional ups and downs Abraham went through - from the despair of a potential loss to the excitement of a loss avoided - must have seemed to him like being in a whirlwind. The day started when he was caught up in a despairing duty but ended when he was comforted with the fruit of his obedience.

Abraham's happiness was dependent upon what was happening at the time. Was he happy about the events in the end? Yes. Was he happy about the events at the beginning? No. But here's my point. I believe he was able to experience joy in the midst of it all. And here's why.

### HEBREWS 11:17-19

*"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, 'In Isaac, your descendant shall be called.' (Abraham) considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type."*

Abraham was convinced that in spite of present circumstances God was in control and able to fulfill His promise, no matter how unlikely that seemed at the time. It was Abraham's belief in God's promise of a son through whom his descendants would come, and the belief in God's ability to fulfill that promise in spite of what was asked of him, that allowed Abraham to experience joy in the midst of questionable circumstances. And herein lies the key.

It is faith that brings joy even in the absence of happiness. Our emotions may go up and down throughout the day and throughout life but joy can remain constant as long as we hold on to faith; Because faith does not look at the present circumstances alone but looks ahead to what lies before us.

### HEBREWS 11:1

*"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."*

Though he could not see it, Abraham was confident that God could raise his son Isaac from the dead. Full of this assurance Abraham was able to obey the Lord without hesitation doing a task that most of us could never imagine doing. But he was able to look beyond the present circumstance to the power behind the Throne.

So Abraham is one example of how we can be unhappy over the circumstances of life yet have joy in the midst of it. The second example is found in the depth of obedience displayed by Christ in the midst of His betrayal, arrest, trial, beating and crucifixion. Jesus is our model for obedience in the midst

of suffering and persecution.

In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus was not experiencing happiness; Far from it. He knew His arrest, beating and death on a cross were all just hours away. There was no happiness to be found in the events that were about to transpire. Just the anticipation of these events caused Jesus to be in agony; and as He was praying His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down on the ground (Luke 22:44).

What happened between the prayers in the garden of Gethsemane and His arrest shortly thereafter? An angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him (Luke 22:43). We know from the Old Testament that angels frequently provided strength for those to whom they visited. Mortal men would quake in fear or fall lifeless before these angels who would then give them the strength to stand and listen to their message. So it is not unusual for an angel to strengthen someone inhabiting a mortal shell (Daniel 10:1-21).

But Scripture tells us that there was more than just physical strength involved in Jesus' ability to face death. Jesus was able to endure because He had joy; and His joy was centered not on the transitory ordeal immediately ahead of Him, but on the reward that awaited Him beyond the temporal. He was able to endure because of what He would inherit as a result of His obedience.

#### HEBREWS 12:2

*“(Let us fix) our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”*

Jesus endured His unhappy circumstances because He knew the joy that awaited Him. This Scripture says that this joy was “*set before Him*”. It reminds me of when the devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness.

#### MATTHEW 4:8-11

*“The devil took (Jesus) to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; and he said to Him. ‘All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Go, Satan! For it is written, “You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.”’ Then the devil left Him; and behold angels came and began to minister to Him.”*

The devil set all the pleasures of the world in front of Jesus and said I will give them all to you if you will only worship me. But Jesus did not seek after the pleasures of this present world but after the riches of the next. He was not willing to surrender obedience to the prince of this world but remained committed to the God and Father of us all. There was a joy He sought after but it was not in the happiness this world could temporarily bring but rather in the everlasting riches of heaven and its untarnished promises of reward for faithfulness and righteous behavior.

Like Jesus others too forsook the promises of this world in order to obtain the promises of the next. Even in the midst of torture the faithful saints of old would not forsake their Lord for temporary release from pain. Instead they chose to hold on to their faith and suffer because of it so they might attain a far superior release - the resurrection from the dead and the eternal life promised to them by faith (Hebrews 11:35).

So we see that happiness comes and goes based on circumstances. Some things make us happy and some things don't. But joy resides in the midst of whatever life brings because it is not based on the

whims of life but rather on the promises of God.

There is a story I have seen on Facebook that has been shared many times. It concerns a woman who is moving into an adult living facility. She asks her caregiver to describe her surroundings and seems very content with what she hears. When asked why she has such a positive attitude the blind woman replied, “I made the decision before I came that I would like it here. And I am determined that nothing will steal my joy.”

This woman made a decision not based on the circumstance which she could not control but rather on what she could control – her attitude. It is the same for us. What our flesh is telling us can be overruled by what the Spirit is teaching us. What we see with our eyes and experience in our flesh does not have to rule what we see by faith; for we are told to *“walk by faith and not by sight”* (2 Corinthians 5:7).

There are emotions and events which cycle through everyone’s life – times of birth, death, planting, uprooting, tearing down, building up, weeping, laughing, mourning, dancing, etc. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8). But there is one thing that is unchanging – God Himself. In this we rejoice. He is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). His promises are true, His presence is guaranteed, and all our tomorrows are in His hand. In this we can rejoice.

Happiness comes from what we are experiencing in the present. And I believe God intends for us to enjoy what life brings. My intent is not to diminish happiness. I wish all the happiness that God brings into our world to all who seek after it, including myself. For I believe that it is God’s will that we enjoy the blessings of life that come from His hand.

#### ECCLESIASTES 5:18-20

*“Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting; to eat and enjoy oneself in all one’s labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of life which God has given him for this is his reward. Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God. For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of heart.”*

But there is a limit to the happiness that this life can bring and a limit to what God says we can enjoy. If we are not careful the riches of this life and the pleasures it brings can override and choke out the word of God (Luke 8:14) that has been planted in our hearts. It can also cause us to forsake the Lord and one another because we love this world more (2 Timothy 4:10; Luke 9:62).

Enjoying the pleasures of life that come from the hand of God is a healthy response to the knowledge that all we have comes from Him and that in Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). It is right to be grateful for and find happiness in the gifts that God provides, for we are told that every good thing given and every perfect gift comes from Him (James 1:17a). But we are warned about loving the pleasures of this world more than the pleasure of knowing God (1 John 2:15-17). And Jesus warns us about placing a greater value on the treasures of earth than on the treasures of heaven.

#### MATTHEW 6:19-21

*“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*

What are the treasures of heaven that we are to store up for ourselves? They are the promises of God to all believers - eternal life, bodily resurrection, and the rewards that come from a life lived by faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave Himself up for us (Galatians 2:20). These things ought to bring us joy.

The joy that was set before Jesus was specific to Him. He would be seated at the right hand of the Father and everything would be placed under His rule and authority except for the Father Himself (1Corinthians 15:28). His joy was also based on the sufficiency of His atonement for sin – not for Himself, for He had no need of it – but for us. His joy resided in the fact that His redemptive act was sufficient for all who believe in Him to gain fellowship with God and entrance into His eternal Kingdom.

The joy that is set before us comes as a direct result of the joy that was set before Jesus. Without His joy we would have none. If Jesus had chosen to escape His suffering and embrace this present world we would have no hope for any joy being set before us – only the promise of eternal separation; besides this having no ability to bring even temporary happiness here it lacks any ability to produce joy; for without the joy that Christ experienced there is no future reward for any of us.

Joy comes from believing that the work Christ completed on the cross is sufficient for our salvation. Accepting this basic spiritual truth gains us entrance into God's eternal kingdom. When we are thus saved the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us and to guide us into experiencing the joy of the Lord. In Galatians we are told that joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22) - a byproduct of abiding in God's love and being obedient to His commands. Our joy is made full when we remain in Him, letting the Spirit control our actions and our thoughts. And righteous living results in righteous rewards.

Scripture tell us there are many things and occasions to rejoice over. We are to rejoice in the Lord Himself, in His incarnation, His power, His presence with the Father and His presence with us; We are to rejoice over His ultimate triumph over death; We are to rejoice when we hear the gospel; We are to find joy in our salvation, our receiving of the Lord as our Savior, our enrollment in heaven and our liberty in Christ; We are to rejoice over our hope and prospect of reward; We are to find joy in the obedience and godly conduct of fellow-believers, the proclamation of Christ, and the harvest that comes from sharing the gospel; We are to rejoice because we suffer as Christ did for the cause of the gospel; We are to find joy in the manifestations of grace shown to us and to others; We are to rejoice when we meet with fellow believers, rejoicing with them when they rejoice.

God even tells us to be joyful in the midst of suffering. Why is that? There is something that suffering is meant to produce in us if we will allow it. And what it produces is what gives us cause to rejoice.

#### JAMES 1:2-3

*“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”*

With this verse we come full circle. So I ask the question again. Are we to be happy over being persecuted? Does persecution bring happiness? Should we be smiling in the midst of our suffering, never showing sorrow or expressing grief? No. For we see that we are not to rejoice over our circumstances but rather in what the circumstances will produce if we yield to the Spirit.

If we understand that the various trials we encounter are tests of our faith then we will be better equipped to pass that test. And if this understanding remains we will find that the testing of our faith will produce the endurance we need to face the trials of life. And the endurance we gain will allow us to be complete in the midst of unfulfilled expectations and dreams. Having everything tangible taken away we will lack nothing.

This is the basic difference between happiness and joy. Happiness can come and go because it depends on circumstances. Joy does not stem from the immediate but rather from the eternal. Joy sets its sights on what awaits us rather than on what we have. This joy finds its value in eternal things not on earthly things which fade and lose their importance. That's why joy can remain constant in the midst of instability. Joy is able to pass unchanged and unharmed through the fire of loss and despair.

Happiness is vividly and easily seen in the outward expressions of excitement, laughter and smiles, but joy is not always expressed outwardly. Joy is more of an inward strength that stabilizes the individual. That is not to say that joy cannot be outwardly expressed, but rather the outward expression of joy is seen most frequently in strength of character, in having hope in the midst of difficult circumstances and in the overcoming of fear while dwelling in the heart of the unknown. Happiness draws its energy from the present while joy draws its fuel from the future.

I was once asked by a very gregarious person why I was unhappy. This person was always smiling and very friendly, outwardly excited and seemingly always "up". I was more reserved. Sensing the root of his observation was not my happiness but rather a comparison of my outward demeanor to his, I decided to get to the heart of the matter. I explained that while it was true one could appear happy on the outside that expression was not always a guarantee of happiness on the inside. Likewise a lack of exuberance on the outside was not a foolproof indicator of a lack of internal happiness. What you see is not always a reflection of what is happening on the inside. One must dig deeper to discover the truth.

I said that I believed that true happiness was based on circumstances but I also believed that one could experience joy when there was nothing to be happy about. There were a few unpleasant circumstances at that time that I was attempting to work through and they might have been on display through my facial expressions. But as unpleasant as some of these circumstances were I had a foundation of joy in their midst.

I did not know how the issues at hand would resolve themselves but I knew that I had placed them in God's hands and was not going to allow them to dictate my thoughts or actions. So while I may not have felt happy at that moment, perhaps even displaying that outwardly, I did have joy. And I personally would rather have a joy built upon an unmovable foundation than happiness built upon the crumbling foundations of changing circumstances. What he interpreted as being unhappy was in reality the calmness and peace I felt in spite of my circumstances. I had no cause to be happy but I did have cause for joy.

We are not all the same. God did not grant each of us the same personality. We each express ourselves in different ways. Most of us will never experience the same thing at the same time. And there is always going to be a difference in how each one of us handles any given situation. But all believers have this in common. There is a joy set before us and this joy can override any and all circumstances of life. It is the supporting structure of our life and the foundational principle by which we are guided.

It was for the joy set before Him that Christ endured the cross, despising the shame, and as a result He was able to sit down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2). It was because Abraham

by faith was looking for the city which has no foundations, whose architect and builder was God that he was content to live as an alien in a foreign land (Hebrews 11:9-10). In the midst of constant upheaval Abraham found contentment in the joy of a heavenly city awaiting him because of his faith in the eternal promises of the God who called him His friend (James 2:23).

It was for the joy set before them that those who were persecuted and tortured did not seek for release by denying their faith. Their present and future joy caused them to seek a permanent release, a better resurrection whose method of attainment was not through being saved from death but rather by going through death with their faith intact (Hebrews 11:35).

We have all had difficulties in life and as long as we remain in this body difficulties will continue to come. But the joy that is set before us allows us to forget what lies behind and press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:13-14). God is constantly redeeming our past. He is consistently hammering the swords that have pierced our lives into plowshares so we can reap good out of evil (Isaiah 2:4).

As I mentioned before, there are moments in life which bring extreme happiness. Just think of your wedding or the birth of your first child. Think of the first Christmas where you got everything you wanted or discovering your best friend has just moved next door to you. Think of that raise or Christmas bonus that came just at the point of most need. Think of the time you felt really wanted for who you were and not what someone wanted you to be. These are all wonderful moments which have the capability to produce happiness but they do not have the ability to sustain it. They are fleeting moments that come and go, frequently at random. And when they go they take happiness with them.

There are people who choose to be happy and project a positive attitude no matter what they experience. These people have my utmost admiration. I wish I was more like them while at the same time I acknowledge that they seem at times unreal and disingenuous. Likewise there are those who project a sense that nothing bothers them. They can project a calm presence in the midst of chaos yet may also seem at times detached from reality.

Events in life rise and fall and our emotions follow suit. Whether the events of our lives are outwardly displayed with enthusiasm or with composure one thing is true of all. Life has its bad and its good moments and when going through each, happiness will ebb and flow. At first happiness will come in like a flood, overwhelming all else. But it will soon begin to flow back into the sea of life to be drowned in the waves of circumstance.

True joy on the other hand can remain. It is not subject to the ebb and flow of life. It is firmly rooted in heaven where sin has never reigned. It is entrusted to us by faith and guarded by God Himself. No one can snatch it away from us for what God has promised He is able to deliver. Setting our mind on these truths will enable us to experience the joy that overcomes circumstances.

#### COLOSSIANS 3:2-4

*“Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.*

While still allowing us to enjoy the happy moments of life, this resetting of our minds on the things above and not on the things that are on the earth will allow us to focus on what is most important.

When we keep our sites centered on the things above we can endure anything that life throws at us. Like Jesus and Abraham, even while despising our present circumstances, we can be centered on the joy that is set before us and endure the crosses of life because we are seeking a city that is not made with human hands, a city whose foundation is not of this earth, whose builder and Maker is God.

Life will disappoint us. Both good and bad circumstances will come and go with regularity upsetting the balance beam of life on which we travel. But joy can remain a consistent companion. Seeking to be consistently happy? That is an admirable goal but ultimately unattainable. Seeking after strength to endure? Seek no farther than joy, for we are told, *“The joy of the Lord is our strength”* (Nehemiah 8:10) and that *“Weeping may last for the night but joy comes in the morning”* (Psalm 30:5). That is why Paul says to,

PHILIPPIANS 4:4

*“Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice.”*

The joy found in the promises of the Lord can overcome our weeping and overpower the dark nights of our soul. For here is our promise:

PSALM 126:5-6

*“Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting. He who goes to and fro weeping, carrying his bag of seed, shall indeed come again with a shout of joy, bringing his sheaves with him”*

REVELATION 2:7

*“To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.”*

We do not know what tomorrow holds but we know Him who holds our tomorrows. Though we have the promise from God of eternal life and resurrected bodies, a wedding feast with a new heavens and a new earth where there is no crying, tears or sorrow, we do not know all that awaits us in heaven; for all has not been fully revealed. But we do know this – whatever is now hidden from us will be worth the wait. Until these things are revealed we walk by faith through the challenges of life relying on the strength which God supplies, consistently looking forward to the promised reward that awaits us in heaven. For in this way, though happiness be fleeting, joy will remain the constant companion of those who know the Lord.

I KNOW WHO HOLDS TOMORROW

I don't know about tomorrow. I just live from day to day.  
I don't borrow from its sunshine for its skies may turn to gray.  
I don't worry o'er the future for I know what Jesus said.  
And today I'll walk bedside Him for He knows what lies ahead

*Many things about tomorrow I don't seem to understand.  
But I know who holds tomorrow and I know who holds my hand.*

I don't know about tomorrow. It may bring me poverty.  
But the one who feeds the sparrow is the One who stands by me.  
And the path that is my portion may be through the flame or flood.  
But His presence goes before me and I'm covered with His blood.

*Many things about tomorrow I don't seem to understand.  
But I know who holds tomorrow and I know who holds my hand.*

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