

Hello dear listeners.

This month I would like to consider with you the matter of joy. The apostle Paul in his letter to the church at Philippi instructed God's people, "Rejoice in the LORD always; again I will say, rejoice." When those closest to you—your spouse, your siblings, your friends—look at you, what do they see? How do they know you? Are you known as a joyful person? Do others describe you as one with a cheery disposition, as one who always looks on the bright side of things? Do you see yourself as one who is more joyful than anxious, stoic, or even pessimistic?

Your answer is going to be based on what you would identify as *reasons* for joy. And in today's world, people point to all different kinds of reasons. The one person's joy comes from stuff he owns. Another's joy is derived from the emotional or physical pleasures she is currently experiencing. Yet the joy derived from these sources is carnal and perishable, because stuff and pleasures are carnal and perishable; there is nothing permanent about them. Material goods and pleasure fail to bring the kind of joy that lasts. So *their* departure is followed by joy's departure. And so, many in this world, even the rich, the famous and powerful, find *lasting* joy remarkably elusive. The well-known author Mark Twain once admitted, "Fame is a vapor, popularity is an accident, and the only earthly certainty is oblivion." Many are persuaded that a truly joy-filled life is far beyond the realm of possibilities. Joy has apparently fallen on hard times.

The question emerges, then: is it possible, in today's unhappy world, to be joyful? Is it possible for one to taste joy that lasts, a joy that cannot be shaken by discouragement, frustration, even grief and tears? This is a major question for our day! At the same time, we may need to be reminded that there really is nothing new under the sun. This major question for our day is the very same question raised some 2,000 years ago, in the time of the apostle Paul. In his letter to the Philippians he reflects on the question, "Is it possible to be joyful in a joyless world?"

He had good reason reflect on this question. The Philippian community to which he was writing faced a number of significant struggles, and Paul had caught wind of some of those. He was aware that they still had a ways to grow in their faith (1:9). In particular, Paul has to spend some time in his letter addressing their *selfishness*. 2:3, he writes, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves." You see, the Philippian congregation was divided, and they were letting their actions toward one another be motivated by selfish ambition. They had to overcome their selfishness. They had to make progress on this point. The disunity they were experiencing was causing anxiety in their midst. And so Paul has good reason to reflect upon whether it is possible for his Philippian readers to be joyful in a joyless world.

He also had to consider that question for *himself*. For indeed, the apostle could summon quite the list of happenings in his own life that pictured joylessness. He is not sailing the ocean blue of the Mediterranean. Nor is he sipping an espresso in the local Philippian Starbucks. Paul was in prison. He had previously been stripped and beaten and severely flogged at the order of Philippian magistrates. He was tossed into prison with his feet fastened in stocks. This was his punishment for proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. Could Paul have joy in the midst of such circumstances? His earthly situation could hardly be worse; he was unsure of whether he would live or die. Elsewhere, in his second letter to the Corinthians, he gives a whole catalogue of inflictions he endured throughout his life. In 2 Cor. 12:24ff. Paul relates that in his lifetime he received five times from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times he was beaten with rods. Once he was stoned. Three times he was shipwrecked; a night and day he was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, robbers, his own people, Gentiles, in the city, in the wilderness, at sea, from false brothers; he often lived in hunger and thirst, in the cold, and through many a sleepless night. And in addition to all that, he experienced the daily

pressure of concern for all the churches he had established and served! Could Paul genuinely have joy in such circumstances, or, in spite of such circumstances?

Well, dear listeners, Paul knows that “Yes, I can have true joy!” And we can be sure of his conviction in two ways. In the first place, the very matter of joy permeates his letter to the Philippians, to the extent that it has often been called his “Letter of Joy.” “Joy” is found in every chapter. In 1:4 he shares with his readers that his every prayer for them was filled with joy. Later, in 1:18, Paul rejoices because he knows that the Philippians are receiving in their hearts and lives the proclamation of Jesus Christ. In chp. 2 Paul says he would love to have the Philippians make his joy complete by being of the same mind (2:2). At the beginning of chp. 4, Paul calls his readers “my joy and crown” (4:1). And now in 4:4, just as he did at the beginning of chp. 3, he exhorts his readers to rejoice in the Lord! So his letter is full of the vocabulary of joy. This is one way we can be sure that Paul knows he can have true joy in spite of his circumstances.

The second way we can be sure Paul knows that he, and also others, can have true joy is an even deeper way: by having their focus not on themselves, but on *another*! The apostle very much evaluated the facts and events of his own life through the lens of another, namely, the one who was Lord of his life, Jesus Christ. Paul saw his own life, his own sufferings, as the very things that were intended to draw him closer to Christ. He wrote, for example, in chp. 3, “For [Christ’s] sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him...that I may know *him* and the power of *his* resurrection, and may share *his* sufferings, becoming like *him* in *his* death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” These are very deep words, but what they say to us is that Paul’s pursuit in life was to know Jesus Christ, to focus on Jesus Christ. He wanted to make Christ his own, as Christ had made Paul *his* own.

And Paul wanted the same for his readers, his fellow Christians. Paul is saying that only with your focus on Christ can this life make sense, and have true meaning and significance. That’s to say, then, that only with your focus on Christ can you have true joy. Knowing Christ, knowing one person, made all the difference in Paul’s disposition. Obviously, this one person had to be special, in order for Paul to have true joy, rather than true negativity and hate, in such difficult, oppressive circumstances. This one person was special. He is divine. He is the Christ. He is the Son of God!

And so Paul can most assuredly say, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” This is how Paul answers the question, “Just how, in the nitty-gritty of my life, can I look past my various crises, distresses, anxieties, even hostilities I endure?” Through rejoicing in the Lord. Through *contentment in the Lord*. True joy is possible, when our eyes are shifted from down to up, from earth to heaven, from circumstances to Creator, from man to God.

Yet, does this altered vision now mean that the tears and sadnesses are wiped away for good, impossible to show up anymore? More on that next time, when we hope to get a clear picture of what true joy itself really looks like.