

## REASON TO REJOICE

By

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One cannot read the account of the young church in the Book of Acts without noticing that in the face of severe persecution and hardship there was sense of joy that pervaded the lives of the Christians, and made the “sect that was everywhere spoken against” shine with beauty in spite of its frail and pitiful appearance to the world.

Neither can one help but compare this inexorable joy of the suffering Christians of the first century with the modern engineers of the church that seek to instill a kind of joy in its members through exciting performances, spectacular programs, retreats, and fun-provoking outings. The early church knew none of these things. They had no experts in the field of programming and entertainment. Yet they knew joy. Not a simulated joy, that was pumped up by a clever and talented crowd manipulator, but joy that flowed from inside like living water, without, and even in spite of, anything happening on the outside.

The apostles, after being imprisoned, beaten, then released, “departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name” (Acts 5:41). Nor did this joy fade away after months and years of suffering. From his prison cell Paul wrote to the Philippians of his own joy, and exhorted them to “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil. 4:4).

What has happened to this kind of joy? If we have the same faith, the same promises and the same relationship to Christ, will we not demonstrate the same joy?

The fact is that the church is shot through with a worldly notion that joy is to be sought after, planned for, and provided to Christians in new and ever increasing varieties of ways. Success with God is measured by the material blessings He pours upon the saint. Some evangelists insist that if you just have enough faith you will not suffer any illness, your bank account will grow abundantly, and you will receive the mark of success in the world. Many believers are sadly lacking in joy because they have not reached these levels.

The character of a person may be seen in what it takes to make him rejoice. David sang, “My soul shall be joyful in the Lord; it shall rejoice in His salvation” (Psa. 35:9). Isaiah said, “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with his ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels” (Isa. 61:10). Paul wrote, “We rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” In each case the basis of joy is the Lord Himself, and not the circumstances prevailing in the world, and bearing upon the believer, nor the things the Lord gives.

The source of joy is the Lord Himself. The humanist doesn’t believe there is a supernatural God, and is left to his own devices, which fills him with fear because man’s inadequacy is a proven fact. The rest of the world may believe there is a “supernatural” but is in bondage to fear of what “it” may turn out to be, or do. The Christian knows who the Supernatural is, That He is a “God of truth...just and right” (Deut. 32:4), that He is “merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in goodness and truth” (Ex. 34:6). It

is the knowledge of the character and attributes of the Lord that first stirs the chords of joy in the believer.

To know that God is real, that He is of such a character that there can be nothing about Him but what is perfectly and absolutely good, and to know that He is merciful to sinners is all sufficient cause for rejoicing. Perhaps we too easily forget what God is like. Too often our attention is focused on the fantasies of the world, where truth is presented as a myth and fiction is portrayed with graphic realism, where mercy and justice are trampled in the name of profit and progress, where goodness is seen as a sign of weakness, and strength is demonstrated by tyranny. When we become engrossed in these things of the world, it is easy to forget that the God in whose image we are made is not like that at all. It is a fallen world, far removed from Eden, destined for demolition so that God can create a new one “wherein dwells righteousness.”

To add to his difficulty of realizing the magnificence of God, there is a great emphasis in the church on the desires of man. Churches compete to see which one can provide the most excitement and make the members most comfortable. The question is not “Lord what would you have me to do?”, but “Lord, what are you going to do for me now?” Sermons, studies, films and seminars deal with man and his various relationships; marriages, divorce, single people, the family, the community, business, and so on. When did you last hear of a film or a seminar or series of sermons on the Attributes of God?

This is not to suggest that teaching on the other subjects is not needed. But if Jesus Christ is to be the foundation of marriage and the home, then it is necessary that He be well known and understood. Joy promised by the Lord is not based upon being bound to a perfect marriage partner, but in being bound to a perfect Christ. When partners find that joy in Him, they will then be eligible for joy in each other. Those who insist on solving all problems in order to find joy are destined to live out their lives in sorrow.

Rather than trying to untangle all the problems of society one-by-one, the church would do well to imitate the apostles and early Christians by “preaching Christ” and “looking unto Him who is the author and finisher of our faith.”

To know the Lord is the first step in personal identity. The world passes from one crisis to another in its frantic search for identity and purpose for man. Young people plunge into drugs, revolution and other destructive traps trying to find themselves, often wrecking their lives in the search. But man was not created to live in such darkness and fear. He is created in the image of God and as it was said of old, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.”

To this end God reveals Himself in Jesus Christ His Son, assuring man that he is of infinite worth, that he is loved, that he is part of an eternal purpose which God ultimately will bring to a glorious fulfillment, that in spite of whatever obstacle or suffering he is enduring at the present, it is part of the means to this fulfillment, and therefore, man is extremely blessed, and has great cause to rejoice.

Barbara Frances, who was the mother of a mongoloid son and who suffered for a number of years from Hodgkins Disease before her death, wrote, “There are more happy people in hospitals than in night clubs.” Joy does not come by searching for it; it is found in places that are designed to provide it at a price.

Rather it is found in the presence of the Lord. “In thy presence is fullness of joy” (Psa. 16:11). The reason so few seem to find it is because so few have any genuine interest in entering into a close relationship with Him. Paul wrote, “For if, while we were

enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, shall we be saved by his life, and not only so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation” (Rom. 5:10–11).

One cannot enjoy the “presence of the Lord” until he is reconciled to him through the death of Jesus. God is such perfection of goodness and holiness that all sin and those who are content in sin are at enmity with Him and, in fact, are under the just sentence of death for sin. Even so, the goodness and perfect love of God shines forth in mercy through the cross, where Jesus pre-empted that sentence by dying our death.

No one enters into God’s presence without an awareness of this fact, that God has been infinitely good to him to provide forgiveness for his sins through Christ. With such awareness, a Christian goes to prayer with joy, to worship with a song and to the day’s work with thanksgiving. His delight is in the fact that he is at peace with God, at one with Him who is “glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders” (Ex. 15:11). We haven’t space to write of these “wonders” that He does, but what He has already done in reconciliation is reason enough to rejoice.

But there is much more. Even while we rejoice in His present goodness, the very thought of Him fills us with a longing to see Him, to attain total fulfillment of our own personal image. To rejoice in the Lord does not mean an end to our longings. Many Christians are disturbed by the fact that, while they love the Lord and enjoy His fellowship, they are not fully satisfied. They go shopping from one church to another, seeking special signs and engaging in worthless and often harmful pursuits trying to put an end to that longing for full and complete satisfaction.

But the full satisfaction does not come until the day the Lord appears and changes us into the eternal like Himself (I John 3:2). The Psalmist has written, “I shall be satisfied when I awake with Thy likeness.” The more we know of Him, the more we experience His presence, the more we think of seeing Him and being with Him in the new creation of perfect beauty, the deeper the longing. Dissatisfaction with the world is not a sign that something is missing in the Christian’s faith and life. It means that we are pilgrims here, looking for the eternal city and the blessed hope.

This is all the more cause to rejoice, that your name is written in the Lamb’s book of life.

“Rejoice in the Lord always: again, I will say, Rejoice” (Phil. 4:4).

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