

THE JOY OF BELIEVING

BY

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“In their presence is fullness of joy” (Psalms 16:11). It is the obvious teaching of Scripture that a believer can have joy without anything else. But it is just as obvious that few believers seem to realize this joy.

Many churches are head over heels into the happiness and fun business, trying to stir up the appearance of joy because the real thing evades them. One church sends out clowns on its buses to make everyone feel that going to church is fun. Who can help but laugh at a clown? The bus is filled with laughter; Ergo: Christianity is fun!

Many youth sponsors keep the teenagers busy with skiing, skating, pizza parties and numerous other pleasure activities to assure them that being Christian is “fun.” Surely a Christian can have as much fun skiing and eating as a non-Christian, and there is no harm in that, but advertising fun as a Christian goal is to steer the kids in the wrong direction and give them the wrong concept of Christian joy. Is joy found only in those times and activities where all is fun? What of joy for those unable to participate, for believers in time of persecution, for the poor, for those in underprivileged countries, for the old and infirm?

Well-intentioned leaders should be careful lest they condition youth to think that joy is actually found in worldly amusements and temporal things.

It is true that every good and perfect gift, whether spiritual or material, comes from God (James 1:17) and we give thanks for all things. But material possessions do not necessarily bring joy. We in the United States, even the poorest of us, are wealthy compared to most of the rest of the world, yet we certainly are not known to be the most joyful.

Sorrow, bitterness and unhappiness are the lot of millions of affluent people who have everything money can buy.

The joy promised in Scripture comes from believing. Paul wrote, “Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing” (Rom 15:13). Jesus, after His great discourse in John 7:13–16, said, “These things I speak in the world that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves” (John 7:13). Years later, as the apostles remembered and believed, they were filled with joy as Jesus had promised.

After the Ethiopian heard the gospel and was baptized, he “went on this way rejoicing” (Acts 8:39). The Philippian jailor, in such distress that he was about to take his life, heard the gospel, believed it and was baptized and “rejoiced greatly” (Acts 16:34).

Belief involves many things, but first of all, it means belief in God, that He is just what He says He is: Righteous and good. This is where it is easy to stumble, for as one reflects on God’s goodness, he must also reflect on the suffering, violence and sorrow in the world. When doubt is cast on God’s goodness, the joy of believing is negated.

To believe in God in reality is to believe He is good, not just relatively good, several shades better than my friends, and even a couple of notches better than I! But absolutely good; perfectly good, so good that never, NEVER does He make a decision or enact a law or do anything that is contrary to the ultimate good. Does He call on me to

suffer a harsh and painful physical ailment? Not that God is the author of disease, but that he may give me over to such as he did Job. But He only does this because it is the way that will bring me to him and His likeness and eternal goodness.

One weaker in goodness might shield me from the greater pain, but also rob me of the greater glory. But not the Father. Only the best of His children.

Could there be any greater joy than to launch out every day, in every effort, and even in the difficult and bitter things that have to be done — like burying a loved one or paying taxes — and looking to God with perfect confidence that he is looking on us and will bless our efforts to see that it all works out for good? The road may lead up to beauty, and that we can see is good, or it may lead downward, in the brambles, among the stones and hot waterless places and ugly crags, but he is there, and he is good. To believe this is joy.

What He gives may look more like stone than bread, but it is good. It is hard to imagine more difficulty and suffering than Joseph was forced to bear by his wicked brothers. Sold into slavery, falsely accused and then slammed into a dungeon, not because he sinned but because he resisted sin and was faithful to God. But he never gave up belief and found joy in that belief even in the worst situations. Finally, after being elevated to a high position in Egypt, he spoke to his brothers about their wicked treatment of him. “You did it for evil,” he said. “But God meant it for good.” Easy to say that after it was all over. But Joseph had faith in it all along. That’s when we reap the joy of believing — not after the suffering is over and the danger is past, but while it is all going on.

Jesus, “for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross...” (Heb. 12:2). You can endure the difficulties of life, the problem of financial loss, the pain of physical ailments, the burden of a retarded child, the horrible blow of divorce, and all the rest, and still have joy by believing in God’s goodness.

There is joy in believing in salvation. Daniel Webster once was asked, “What is the greatest thought you ever had?” Without stopping to reflect, he replied, “The forgiveness of sin.”

Dr. Karl Menninger wrote a book entitled, “Whatever Became of Sin?” In it he said that we have talked about permissiveness and disease and treatment, but “no one talks about sin.”

If there is no sin, there isn’t much excitement about forgiveness. A recent survey found that people tend to justify themselves. If an undesirable action cannot be forgotten or undone, then it is justified. They find a good reason for it! The experimenters also found that people accept credit when they have succeeded, but attribute failure to external factors.

Perhaps this is why some religious groups offer salvation on the basis or “receiving” Jesus, without all the pain of repentance and submission to baptism. “Just bow your head and ask Jesus to come into your heart.” Where is the realization of sin? Where is the repentance? And where is the basis of joy?

It was when the Prodigal Son “came to” and realized that he had sinned against heaven and in his father’s sight that he started his long journey back home. His sin weighed so heavily upon him that he dared ask only that he be given the place of a servant. Imagine his joy when his father richly forgave him and not only restored him as a beloved son, but also heaped royal honors on him to boot.

That's what He does for all of us who have come to Him repenting of sin and begging to be His servants. He removes all the sin and makes us His heirs. But first there must be a realization of the depth and horror of sin and its ultimate consequences. To see God in His goodness is to see ourselves as vile sinners. When Isaiah saw Him in a vision, he cried out, "Woe is me, for I am undone. For I am a man of unclean lips and dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5). To believe in God is to believe we have fallen far from His holy image. In consequence there is only the ultimate judgment and wrath of God, ending in a fiery consummation of sin and the sinner. For goodness to prevail all sin must be totally eliminated. In His judgment of sinners God's goodness excels.

We believe we deserve death for sin, but God has righteously judged Jesus in our stead. He died our death. We are now free from the sin and its penalty. We see ourselves rescued from the pit of horrible vileness and an even more horrible death. Were there nothing else in which to rejoice, that would still be enough to cause a true believer to sing out with Paul, "Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say, Rejoice" (Phil. 4:4).

But believing goes further, and gives greater reason for joy. It links us with the eternal, now in the present world, and to that which is to come. Already God has "raised us up together with Him and made us to sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6). In Christ we see the world from His position. Our values are not those designated by dollar signs, but the eternal things which can never be taken away from us against our wills. Such eternal things include fellowship with God and with all others of faith, both now and in eternity. It means transforming our lives back to his image, not just for now, but forever; life that is glorious, incorruptible, in a perfect setting and in the likeness of Christ.

Why do some talk about faith, but continually preach fear, fear of nuclear war, fear of cancer, fear of being deprived of earthly things? They talk about heaven, and about life after death, but live in dreadful fear of this life coming to an end. Do they really believe God? In His goodness? In a resurrection to a glorious and perfect world? Such a prospect far overshadows the complicated problems of life in this world. This is why it is important to know the true doctrine of Christ.

As long as one is mixed up about what God is like, what He is doing and intends to do, he can "believe" in him, and still be filled with anxiety. The source of joy is in believing the truth about God, His goodness, His eternal purpose, the terms of release from sin, and the ultimate goal. Then to put our lives into his hands in true belief is joy.

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