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THE CHOICE TO REJOICE

Philippians 4:4

By

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Philippians Lesson 22

The Choice to Rejoice Philippians 4:4

Everyone wants joy in life. On the surface, Paul's words, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!" are some of the simplest in Scripture to read and understand. But when you scratch beneath the surface, they raise a pile of questions: Is it *really* possible to rejoice *always*? What does this mean? Am I supposed to go around with a perpetual smile on my face? Is it a sin to feel depressed or sad? Am I supposed to deny pain or sorrow? How can you command a feeling, anyway? Are these the words of a bubbly, incurable optimist, or what? Just reading the verse might get some people depressed, because they despair of ever being able to do it!

We need to recognize that what Paul commands here is not just a cheerful disposition, which many have by nature, but rather something that requires supernatural power--it is joy *in the Lord*. And, while we may never perfectly attain such joy in this troubled world, Paul repeats the command for emphasis, as if to say, "It is possible, so don't shrug off what I am saying." His emphatic words show us ...

Abiding joy in the Lord should be the aim of every Christian.

First, I want to define what Paul means when he commands us to rejoice in the Lord always; and then we'll look at how we can obey such a command. Scripture must be our authoritative and sufficient source, not human wisdom or psychology.

WHAT DOES "REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS" MEAN?

1. To rejoice in the Lord always does not mean that we will never feel depressed or sad.

The Bible is realistic and balanced. We must look at the totality of Scripture rather than taking a verse like this as if it were all that is written on the subject. It's interesting that the shortest verse in the Greek New Testament is, "Rejoice always" (1 Thess. 5:16). The shortest verse in the English New Testament is, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). They are not contradictory! Our Savior could weep

and yet have the fullness of joy, even as He faced the cross (John 15:11). Paul commands us to weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15), and yet to rejoice always. The Bible says that godly people are marked both by mourning (over sin, Matt. 5:4; James 4:9; 5:1) and yet by irrepressible joy. Scripture acknowledges that discipline and trials are not joyful at the moment, but that afterward they yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness if we submit to God (Heb. 12:11; John 16:20-22).

Thus we would misapply Paul's words if we took him to mean that a Christian should deny or never feel sadness or grief. The Psalms are helpful in this regard. The psalmist often is overwhelmed with despair or sadness, and he readily acknowledges his feelings to God. He never puts on a happy face and denies the intensity of his troubles. But in the process of crying out to God for help and re-focusing his thoughts on the Lord and His great mercies, by the end of the psalm his mood has changed, even though his circumstances are no different. So the psalmist often experiences a flood of God's joy even in the midst of tremendous pain. Thus to rejoice in the Lord always does not mean that we deny our feelings or that we stoically endure our trials by ignoring how much we hurt.

2. To rejoice in the Lord always is not primarily a matter of feeling, but of obedience.

Philippians 4:4 is a commandment, repeated twice for emphasis, so that we will not shrug it off. It is a command that we must deliberately *choose to obey*, especially when we're in difficult circumstances. It has to do with our attitude which depends on our mental focus which depends on our choice. The choice to rejoice often must go deliberately against how we feel. When we go through trials, when we're treated unfairly, when we're disappointed by people or circumstances, we are faced with a decision: Will we obey this command to rejoice in the Lord or will we allow ourselves to be swept along by our feelings?

I just wish that Paul had been more realistic and had said, "Rejoice most of the time"! But if he had said that, most of us would have justified ourselves by thinking, "I usually do rejoice." But we wouldn't have had to confront our grumbling and complaining when things don't seem to go our way; our lack of trust in

God in the midst of trials; our anger when we're treated unfairly; our disappointment when people let us down or, to be honest, when we feel that God has let us down.

We see this choice to rejoice illustrated in Paul's life in this very epistle. He has been incarcerated for well over two years and is facing possible execution because the Jews in Jerusalem falsely accused him of bringing Gentiles into the temple and of stirring up rebellion against the Jewish people and their Law (Acts 21:28). Though he should have been released, the Roman governor kept him in custody because he was hoping to receive a bribe from Paul and because he wanted to do the Jews a favor (Acts 24:26, 27). The next governor also should have released him, but he, too, was playing politics with the Jews (Acts 25:9).

Not only that, but on the way to Rome Paul had gone through a shipwreck at sea. Once he arrived, many of the pastors in Rome were not only distancing themselves from Paul the prisoner, but were preaching out of envy, selfish ambition, and strife (Phil. 1:15, 17). Paul had good reason to be angry and depressed at the treatment he had received over the past few years. You would think that he would have been in need of the Philippians writing to cheer him up. But instead, this short letter to them is filled with joy (15 x). As Paul's words in 1:18 show, his joy was not an automatic feeling, but rather a deliberate choice: "... in this I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice."

3. To rejoice in the Lord always is an attitude of contentment and hope that transcends circumstances.

Though our hearts may be heavy with sorrow or grief because of trials, beneath the surface is the abiding confidence that our God is sovereign and that our lives are in His hand, so that not even the hairs of our heads fall to the ground without His knowledge. Paul had learned to be content in every situation (Phil. 4:11-13). "Every situation" for Paul included some severe trials, in some cases where he despaired even of life. But this, he writes was "in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead;" then he adds, "He on whom we have set our hope" (2 Cor. 1:8-10).

This joy in the Lord which we must aim for is not a superficial happiness based on circumstances or on the absence of trials, but rather is a solid, abiding contentment and hope that is as steady and certain as our faithful God who has given us His promises in His Word. Our Lord Jesus knew that joy even as He faced the cross (John 15:11; 17:13). The apostles knew that joy when they were flogged for preaching the gospel, and they went on their way "re-joyicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41). Paul and Silas knew that joy when they were unjustly thrown in the Philippian jail, their backs torn open, their feet in the stocks, as they sang hymns of praise to God (Acts 16:25). Many martyrs, like John Hus, knew that joy. He died singing praises in the flames as his enemies gloated.

God intends for every believer to know this same joy in the Lord, especially in difficult times. Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit and the Bible is filled with commands, such as our text, to rejoice (Ps. 5:11; 33:1; 64:10). It's a matter of obedience, not of temperament. If we're constantly depressed and weighed down with care, we're not attractive advertisements for our Lord Jesus Christ. We can't be effective leaders in the church or godly examples to our families if we are dominated by depression. So we must work at developing this abiding joy in the Lord. How?

HOW CAN WE "REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS"?

I preface my remarks by saying that if you struggle with frequent depression, you should get a medical checkup, since it can be due to physiological causes. Also, you may need personal counsel from a mature Christian who can help you apply Scripture to your situation. Avoid anyone who mingles the Bible with psychology. The joy Paul is exhorting us to is decidedly not the kind of joy the world offers through psychological insights. Almost 50 years ago, Martyn Lloyd-Jones commented on this verse, "... there is perhaps no greater travesty of the gospel of Jesus Christ than psychological teaching which presents itself in Christian terms" (*The Life of Peace* [Baker], p. 146). It is joy *in the Lord*, joy that comes from the very life and power of God operating in the believer, not through some supposed insights into your unconscious mind or how your parents treated you.

The world's latest prescription for overcoming depression is Prozac or other anti-depressant drugs. For sake of time I refer you to what I wrote in my booklet, "Christians and Psychology: Some Common Questions Answered." I'm not totally opposed to the careful use of such drugs, but I do urge caution. And, even if such drugs help restore normalcy, each person must still learn to deal with sinful thoughts and habits. In almost every case, a depressed person has certain unbiblical thought and behavior patterns that contribute to the depression. Psychology has nothing to offer Christians in this regard. Every believer must learn to apply the biblical principles I am going to enumerate.

1. Make sure that you are in a right relationship with God through saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

As we saw in chapter 3, where Paul first exhorts us to rejoice in the Lord (3:1), many who claim to be Christians are not relying only upon Christ and His shed blood for salvation, but rather are trusting in themselves (3:2, 4-6). Paul explains how he had to come to the point of counting everything of himself to be a total loss so that he could be found in Christ, not having a righteousness of his own derived from keeping the Law, but rather that which comes from God through faith in Christ. Martyn Lloyd-Jones observed, "There are many people who never know the joy of the Lord because they have failed to see themselves as miserable sinners. The only way to be happy in Christ is to be desperately unhappy without him" (*ibid.*, p. 148).

2. Walk in submission to the sovereign Spirit of God.

In Galatians 5:16 Paul says, "Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh." He goes on to catalog some sins that characterize the flesh. There is a direct correlation between many of those sins and depression. Then Paul lists the fruit produced by the Holy Spirit: "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). To walk by the Spirit means to live in moment-by-moment submission to the indwelling Holy Spirit, saying no to self and yes to the Lord. It means to trust in the sufficiency and power of the Spirit because you distrust your own ability (see Prov. 3:5). As we learn to walk by the Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit, including joy, will grow in our lives.

The words “walk” and “fruit” imply a process, not something instantaneous. If you have spent your life walking in the flesh, it may take some time before you experience steady joy in the Lord. Also, walking in the Spirit is a deliberate process that involves putting self to death and submitting to the sovereign God. This means confronting your anger, because anger usually stems from not submitting to God’s sovereign dealings in your life. A crucified self doesn’t shake its fist in God’s face, saying, “I don’t like what You did to me when I was a child (or, what You’re doing to me right now)!” Anger and depression often go together (Gen. 4:6-7; Jonah 4:1-4). So if you want God’s abiding joy, you’ve got to walk in submission to His sovereign Spirit.

3. View your trials through the lens of Scripture.

Paul was going through some pretty intense trials and could easily have become depressed. Instead, he had abundant joy because he viewed his trials in light of God’s Word. He submitted to God’s sovereignty over his imprisonment (1:12-14), over the preachers who were trying to cause him distress in his imprisonment (1:17), and even over his possible impending execution (1:20). He was living for the gospel, to proclaim Christ in every way (Phil. 1:18). He knew that when he died, he would be with Christ for eternity, so he could write, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (1:21).

Many Christians get depressed because they do not understand God’s purpose in trials or they do not mentally deal with their trials in the light of God’s Word. Often it can start with a simple disappointment--something you hoped would happen didn’t happen. Someone you were counting on let you down. A situation you were hoping and praying for did not come about. If you don’t consciously yield your disappointment to the Lord and thank Him by faith, trusting in His sovereign love, you can slip into depression. Satan often comes to you in a moment of disappointment and tempts you to doubt God’s loving care. Peter tells us to humble ourselves under God’s mighty hand, casting our cares on Him, and to resist the devil, firm in our faith, in such times of trial (1 Pet. 5:5-11).

4. Deal properly with relational conflicts.

The verses before and after verse 4 deal with proper relationships. If we have wronged others and have not done all we can to make it right, we will not have joy in the Lord. If we humble ourselves and go to our brother or sister and ask their forgiveness, we will be flooded with God's joy. It's no accident that love precedes joy in the list of the fruit of the Spirit.

5. Sing praises to God.

I have not validated it, but I've heard that the most frequent command in the Bible is, "Sing!" You may be thinking, "Singing is the last thing I feel like doing when I'm depressed." Well, where did you ever get the idea that the Christian life is living by our feelings? God doesn't need to command us to do what we already feel like doing. It's no accident that the longest book in the Bible is a hymn book. When you're feeling down, turn to the Psalms and create your own tunes to the words. Put on some praise music, or get out a hymnal and get alone and begin to sing to the Lord. Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn (Ps. 118) as they went out to Gethsemane (Matt. 26:30). Paul and Silas sang in the Philippian jail (Acts 16:25). "The joy of the Lord is your strength" (Neh. 8:10).

6. Serve the Lord with gladness.

(See Ps. 100:2.) Quite often people who lack joy are not involved in serving Christ. As we've seen in Philippians, Paul had great joy even in facing execution because he was living for the gospel (1:12-20). Get your focus off yourself and your problems and on to what God wants you to do for the furtherance of the gospel. There is great joy in seeing others trust Christ as Savior (Luke 15:5-7, 9-10, 32; Acts 8:8; 15:3); and, in seeing them stand firm in the Lord (Phil. 2:2; 1 Thess. 2:19-20; 3:9; 3 John 4). A Christian woman once told me that she had been depressed every day of her life. She had been going to psychologists for years, to no avail. I finally asked her, "What's your ministry? God has gifted you to serve Him. How are you doing that?" She was dumbfounded. She said, "I've never thought about that." She was consumed with self. If you want joy, get your eyes off yourself and on to how God wants you to serve Him.

7. Focus your mind daily on the Lord and the things He has promised us in Christ.

This joy is *in the Lord* and we are *in Christ!* Daily meditate on the cross of Christ and all the riches that are ours through His death. Think on the fact that you are risen with Him, seated in the heavenlies, with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph. 1:3; Col. 3:1-4). Revel in His abundant grace that is greater than all our sins. Marvel at His sovereign grace that chose you before the foundation of the world in Him, that predestined you to adoption as His son or daughter (Eph. 1:4, 5) and that will “keep you from stumbling” and will “make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy” (Jude 24). The Philippian jailer went from being suicidal to rejoicing greatly because of his salvation (Acts 16:27, 34). How can you be depressed if you are focusing daily on the marvelous grace shown to you in Christ?

8. Live by faith, not by feelings.

The Christian life is a walk of faith, of trusting in things not seen, not of “getting in touch with your feelings.” Peter wrote to Christians going through intense trials, “... though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but *believe in Him*, you *greatly rejoice* with joy inexpressible and full of glory” (1 Pet. 1:8). Or, as Paul wrote, “Now may the God of hope fill you with all *joy* and peace *in believing*, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 15:13).

Conclusion

I wish I had time to develop this last point, to tell you of the joy that men and women of God have known in the midst of sorrow as they trusted in the Lord. Hudson Taylor, the great pioneer missionary to China, lost his beloved wife, Maria, after 12 years of marriage. They had been delighted with each other's love. Shortly after her death, he wrote to his mother in England,

From my inmost soul I delight in the knowledge that God does or deliberately permits *all* things, and causes all things to work together for good to those who love Him.

He and He only knew what my dear wife was to me. He knew how the light of my eyes and the joy of my heart were in her.... But He saw that it was good to take her; good indeed for her, and in His love He took her painlessly; and not less good for me who must henceforth toil and suffer alone--yet

not alone, for God is nearer to me than ever. And now I have to tell *Him* all my sorrows and difficulties, as I used to tell dear Maria; and as she cannot join me in intercession, to rest in the knowledge of Jesus' intercession; to walk a little less by feeling, a little less by sight, a little more by faith.

To one of his mission leaders he wrote at that time,

My eyes flow with tears of mingled joy and sorrow. When I think of my loss, my heart--nigh to breaking--rises in thankfulness to Him Who has spared her such sorrow and made her so unspeakably happy. My tears are more tears of joy than of grief. But most of all I joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ--in His works, His ways, His providence, in Himself. (*Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission, the Growth of a Work of God* [The China Inland Mission], pp. 199-200, emphasis his.)

Do you know such abiding joy in the Lord? One of Taylor's favorite hymns was, "Jesus, I am resting, resting, in the joy of what Thou art; I am finding out the greatness of Thy loving heart." That same Jesus and that same joy is available to everyone who will rejoice in Him.

Discussion Questions

1. Where's the balance between not denying our feelings and yet not living by feelings, but by faith?
2. Discuss: Is depression a sin? Always? Never? Sometimes?
3. Agree/disagree: Every Christian can know God's abiding joy.
4. Agree/disagree: In almost every case of depression there is some unbiblical thought pattern or behavior.

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