

Rejoice in the Lord  
Philippians 4:4-5  
August 28, 2022

Paul wrote “to the Christian community in Philippi to thank them for the gift they had sent to him on learning of his detention in Rome.” (1) Paul was under house arrest. This letter was probably written in 61 A.D. six or seven years before his second Roman imprisonment which culminated in his death. Unlike many Christians, Paul was decapitated and not crucified because he was a Roman citizen. Philippians “is a missionary thank-you letter in which the missionary reports on the progress of his work.” (2) It is also a letter of great encouragement to this small group of believers. The city of Philippi was a retirement community for Roman soldiers. It was an appealing place to retire because it was a Roman colony and its citizens had the same rights and privileges as those living in the city of Rome. Philippi was a prosperous city in Macedonia not far from the Aegean Sea. There was a small Jewish community which was not large enough to have a synagogue, because that required ten adult Jewish men. As a part of the Christian church, they worshiped with the believing Gentiles. The smallness of the Jewish community of believers may help to explain why Paul did not quote the Old Testament in this letter. In spite of their being few in number Paul, out of love and appreciation, sends them a heartfelt thank-you and encourages them to, “stand firm in the face of persecution and rejoice regardless of circumstances.” (3) No doubt his letter served as a great source of strength and encouragement in the years to come as the church was likely persecuted as were many by the Roman empire. In all that was and was to come Paul tells the church in Philippi to rejoice.

The word joy is such a beautiful and powerful word. Joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit. It is “supernatural and is determined by how much nourishment Christians get from feeding on God’s word and if they are walking in step with the Holy Spirit.” (4) That has been my experience over the years and I would imagine, yours also. When we center our lives on God’s word and walk in his presence, we experience unspeakable joy. Rejoice means to be filled with joy. Paul writes, “rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice.” (Philippians 4:4) As believers we are to be filled to overflowing with the joy of the Lord. William Barclay says about our joy, “Christian joy is independent of all things on earth because it has its source in the continual presence of Christ.” (5)

On the other hand, the world seeks happiness, but the happiness it longs for is event-oriented. It is dependent upon outside situations: people, events, or expectations. The happiness that comes with the security, safety-nets, and assurances the world offers us can be gone in an instant but, “Joy is a spiritual quality that is internal.” (6)

Christopher Parkening is regarded as the world’s greatest classical guitarist and he is also a world-class fly fisherman. He writes, "By age 30, I'd achieved all my dreams in the

musical world, but I was tired of hotel rooms, performances and recording sessions. It was time to go fishing, so with the money I had earned, I found my dream stream on a ranch in Montana. I bought the ranch, called my management group at Colombia, and told them I had no desire to play anymore. I had earned enough money that I didn't need to work anyway.

So, for several years, I did what I wanted, but as time went by, my life became emptier. I found out that when you have everything you thought would make you happy, and it doesn't— you start asking questions like: What's missing?

While in California visiting friends, I attended a church where I heard a sermon entitled, "Examine Yourself Whether You Are in the Faith." The preacher said that you could know all about Christ, the Bible, even pray to God, and Jesus could still say, 'Depart from me, you worker of iniquity, I never knew you.' I was convinced if I had died that night, Jesus would have spoken those words to me.

So, I walked down the aisle, surrendered my life to Christ, and was baptized. I read the Bible when I was a kid, but I never wanted a Lord to obey unconditionally. I went home that day broken over my selfish ways."

That night, I couldn't sleep, so I got up and started reading the Bible, and I developed a great hunger for the Word. Soon I came across 1 Corinthians 10:31 that said, 'Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.' I realized there were only two things I knew how to do: fly fish and play guitar. I am playing the guitar today for God's glory, and that's what I tell my students at Pepperdine, where I teach. I now have peace and joy unspeakable that I never had before. My life has purpose." (7)

Jesus tells us how to experience true joy. On the night before his death Jesus told his disciples and us, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." (John 15:9-11) The book of Hebrews says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." (Hebrews 13:8) He is our source of joy and our anchor for life in both calm and stormy seas.

Paul wrote the letter to the Romans four years before he wrote to the Philippians. In the middle of the letter to the Roman church he writes, "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." (Romans 8:31, 32, 35 & 37) We are more than conquerors because of a relationship the world knows nothing about. A personal relationship with Jesus Christ who along with the Father, comes and lives in the believer's heart. (John 14:23) As believers we have joy because we realize

that we are more than conquerors. The obstacles and hardships which life can place in our path, including that which appears to be the greatest--death-- has been defeated. That which seems most to defeat us has simply become a gateway to eternity. We have joy because we have victory in God through Christ Jesus. Therefore, Paul could write from prison out of the depth of his heart to his fellow believers, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4) Christians are to be agents of joy...bearers of salt and light in a world that lacks God's zeal and lives in darkness.

There was a story from the pen of Erma Bombeck, "about a mother and father who sat with their three-year-old during a Sunday morning worship service. The small child was quietly walking on the pew, smiling, and grinning at the people who were sitting in the pew behind them. The father solemnly grabbed the boy and told him to sit down and stop smiling and having fun," because they were in church. (8) True – we are a little too big and too old to safely be walking around on the pew, but there is no reason why we should not smile, have fun, and rejoice in church or for that matter in all walks of life. One source of joy for the Christian is to live a God-centered life rather than a life centered on our circumstances.

A second source of joy is to believe deeply in Jesus Christ. The early Christians believed as we do that God sent Jesus in the fullness of time. (Galatians 4:4) He was sent to bring true joy to the hearts of believers. Nearly fifty years ago I graduated from Texas Tech University with a degree in psychology. I very much enjoyed college. I learned a lot of things and grew in many ways which was to be expected. Although it was a secular university, it was quite conservative by today's standards. Lubbock, where Texas Tech is located was known as "the belt buckle on the Bible belt of the south." It was not enough to be part of the Bible belt. They considered themselves to be the belt "buckle." I was able to accept most everything I was taught, but I was troubled by one thing. That "success" in my life depended upon my working hard, on being clearly focused and goal-oriented. If I possessed those qualities and used them properly, then I would succeed. As a Christian I would agree that hard work, focus, and goals are important, but they cannot give me true life or bring me joy. As I look back over my nearly seventy-five years there has not been much "success" in my life by worldly standards. Why? The truth of the answer for me personally is simple. I never really wanted worldly "success." I have been more interested in having joy. A joy found in Jesus Christ alone. Jesus said to his disciples on the eve of his death that he wanted them to experience his joy in all its fullness. What was true of his disciples that night is true for us today. Jesus wants us to live with a deep and abiding joy rooted in him. The third source of joy is to open yourself to Jesus.

One of my favorite pastors and authors is Reverend Eric Ritz. I would like to share a quote from him on the topic of joy and life in Christ that is very insightful. "Life without Christ is no life at all. It is pulse without purpose, heart without happiness, existence

without eternity; life without living. With Christ we have a purpose to live for, a power to live by, and a person to live with. Jesus not only saves us from our sins, he also saves us for a new life of purpose and power in the presence of God. He gives us unending joy.” (9)

One of the joys of my life over the years has been listening to the J. A. F. radio program on Christian radio. Sadly, I have not heard it lately, because it is not on the Christian radio station I listen to. J. A. F. stands for Joni and friends. Joni is Joni Eareckson Tada. She is an amazing Christian woman paralyzed from the neck down by a diving accident at age seventeen and a two-time surviving cancer victim. She has been paralyzed for over fifty years. She is one of the greatest Christians of our time. Her ministries have led countless people to the Lord. An inspiration to millions she is an artist, Christian author, and speaker. J. A. F. is a four-minute-long inspirational Christian radio program in which Joni talks about Christian life and joy despite hardships. You ask how can someone who is totally paralyzed accomplish so much for the Lord? When she is tired, her husband lays her on the bed and all she can do is pray. So, she prays---to her Lord and savior Jesus Christ---by the hour until the Holy Spirit washes over her and fills her to overflowing with joy. Joni has discovered the source of true joy “open your lives to Christ and joy will flow in.” (10) Joni realized the futility of her efforts after struggling against God. As she lay in the hospital for months following her accident, unable to move only her head, she realized that she was not going to win. She finally surrendered. She now lives in the palm of God’s hand with her hand firmly gripping the hand of Jesus. She uses prayers, thoughts, and words of encouragement to bring joy to the hearts of millions. She cannot stand up, but has chosen to stand tall for her Lord and Savior. Where does she get her strength and wisdom? She spends hours lying on her bed, quietly, motionlessly---praising her Lord, soaking up the holy spirit and being filled with joy. Do you need a closer fellowship with the Lord? Move God to the center of your life, believe deeply in Jesus and open yourself up to him. Decide that you are going to spend time with him. Decide and be committed in your efforts to have Jesus as your best friend. As I have said many times, if you can choose to have one friend in your life---choose Jesus. He makes all the difference today, tomorrow, and forever.

Amen.

(1) NIV Study Bible p. 2336 “notes”

(2) *Ibid.* p. 2336

(3) *Ibid.* p. 2336

(4) Sermoncentral Illustration “Joy” Tim Laughlin August 11, 2008

(5) Philippians William Barclay p. 75

(6) Psychology Today December 18, 2012

(7) Sermoncentral Illustration “The Secret of Happiness” June 25, 2009

(8) Dynamic Preaching June 1992 p. 40

(9) *Ibid.* p. 41

(10) *Ibid.* p. 42