

and we lift up our eyes and see 'no one but Jesus only' (Matthew 17:8). The 'heroes of the faith' (Hebrews 11) stand back, and we are left 'looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith' (Hebrews 12:2). This is the way of spiritual growth. This is the way of wisdom and understanding. This is 'the fear of the Lord'. 'Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every

weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus . . .' (Hebrews 12:1-2).

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REJOICE!

Derek Thomas

Philippians 4:4

'Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!'

'The Holy Spirit has exhorted the faithful to continue clapping their hands for joy until the advent of the promised Redeemer' wrote John Calvin,¹—and Paul would agree! *Joy* is what this epistle to the Philippians is all about. The opposite of joy is misery and miserable is something we are not meant to be. The Reformers caught the centrality of joy in the affections of Christians when they insisted that our chief goal in life is 'to glorify God and enjoy Him forever'.²

What Paul alludes to here is what the rest of Scripture echoes. For the psalmist, God is 'my joy and my delight' (Psa. 43:4). We were always meant to enjoy the presence of God and Adam and Eve in their state of innocence no doubt did just that. Eden was a place where our first parents enjoyed both God's immediate presence and the Garden which He had made. Sin robbed them (and us) of the joy that God intended and only heaven will restore it to its full and glorious intensity. This explains why Jesus, in His High Priestly Prayer is constrained to pray for joy: 'I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them' (John 17:13). Of all the matters that must have occupied the mind of Christ in those hours, it is surely of immense significance that our joy should have taken so central a place.

So much is Philippians about joy that George B. Duncan once referred to it as *'The Life of Continual Rejoicing'*³; and noting our Lord's concern for our joy at the end of his life, we should not find it strange that one of Paul's letters should be so dominated by a concern for Christian joyfulness. Joy is *the* theme of the epistle: Paul prays for the Philippians with joy (1:4); some preachers were preaching Christ from false motives—out of envy for Paul's gifts, but no matter, Christ was being preached and for the apostle

it was a cause of rejoicing (1:18, 19); Epaphroditus, Paul's right hand man, was being sent to the Philippians, a matter which called for rejoicing on their part (2:25, 28); and time and again the Philippians had met Paul's practical needs, something which seemed to fill the apostle's heart with joy (4:10). And, at what appeared at the time to be the end of the letter, Paul writes, 'Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord!' (3:1), but discovering that he has much more to say, goes on to say it and returns to the exhortation again: 'Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!' (4:4). J. I. Packer is surely right when he says: '*Joy* and *Rejoice* are the keywords of Philippians'.⁴

We are *commanded* to rejoice. That in itself poses a difficulty, for how can we make ourselves rejoice when we don't feel like rejoicing? This raises the question as to the place of feelings in the Christian life. 'True religion, in great part, consists in the affections', wrote Jonathan Edwards.⁵ In fact, Scripture abounds with commandments that have to do with our affections, including: hope (Psa. 42:5; I Pet. 1:13); fear (Luke 12:5; Rom. 11:20; I Pet. 1:17); peace (Rom. 5:1; Col. 3:15); tenderheartedness (Eph. 4:32); brokenness and contrition (Psa. 51:17); gratitude (Eph. 5:20; Col. 3:17) and lowliness (Phil. 2:3). Together, these commands inform us that we are never to give in to our feelings. Our Christian faith is to dominate every part of us, including the way we feel. We must never adopt the attitude that just because we feel miserable, there is absolutely nothing we can do about it. We must challenge the way we feel. When our Lord prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done' (Luke 22:42), He was testifying to the opposition of His feelings to the course which was laid out for Him. It is part of Christ's triumph

that He never allowed His feelings to dominate His actions.

This is, of course, something which we all implicitly accept. If a child molester argued that he did his terrible deeds because he felt like it, no one would credit him with a valid defence of his actions. One of the consequences of regeneration is that our feelings are brought into subjection to the all-embracing will of God. As John Owen perceives: when a man is regenerated, his affections 'continue the same as they were in their nature and essence; but they are so cured by grace as that their properties, qualities, and inclinations, are all cleansed and renewed.'⁶ We have to tell ourselves as Christians that at times we have no right to feel the way we do! There is a sin of refusing to be comforted, of not allowing ourselves to feel happy. Paul, who knew what it was to be in prison, to be beaten and spat upon, to be cold shouldered and ignored, commands us to rejoice—despite bad feelings!

Nor is this command to be isolated from the context of his remarks in this epistle. He has just informed the Philippians of three salutary truths about themselves: they are citizens of a heavenly kingdom, anticipating the return of Christ who will then transform their bodies so that they will conform to the pattern of the ascended body of Christ Himself (3:2–21). Earlier, he had reminded them that God is at work in their lives adding all the finishing touches; and one day this 'workmanship' will be complete (1:6). As a summary of his standing as a Christian he says: 'For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain' (1:21). Based on this truth Augustus Toplady spoke to a friend, just before he died, saying: 'That it is a good sign that my death is fast approaching, and blessed be God, I can add that my heart beats every day stronger for glory.' It is armed with such theology that the apostle sees joy as the only right response.

Rejoice—because of what you are!

Rejoice—because of who you are!

Rejoice—because of where you are going!

I. Examples of Joy

Paul was never one to ask others to do what he did not do himself. That is why, throughout the record of his life, we can detect his joy even in the most difficult and testing of situations.

Firstly, we find him in prison. Incarcerated for obedience to the gospel, the apostle is denied his freedom and dignity. He may well be dealing with personal resentment of his circumstances. Certainly, the Philippians were at pains to understand the wisdom of it all: that the most useful servant God had, was cooped up in prison. Some were questioning the providence of God. It would be extremely unusual if the apostle, too, had not to battle with some of these thoughts in his own mind. His feelings may well have dictated that depression, resentment or anger was the fitting response. Instead the apostle looks for the good in his circumstances. As a result of his imprisonment there were certain members of Caesar's 'palace guard' who had been exposed to the faith. Paul may be in prison but 'God's word is not chained' (2 Tim. 2:9). As

he puts it elsewhere: 'But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it' (2 Tim. 4:17). For the apostle, the evangelism of the praetorian guard was worth any suffering on his part. Despite his difficult predicament, Paul was able to rejoice because he perceived another agenda, one which took into consideration greater motives than his own immediate comfort.

Trials ought always to be looked on in this way. We are far too prone to consider ourselves at the very centre of the universe, as though the Almighty had no greater plan than to relieve me of my suffering. We have no right to expect that as Christ's disciples we are going to be treated with any more dignity by the world than he was. 'No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also' (John 15:20). Joni Eareckson has the right to speak about trials. A quadriplegic through a diving accident, she has wrestled with her emotions in public. 'Today—right now,' she has written, 'I want to resolve to know something about the intruder that will invariably knock at my door. Before I get up to answer his knock, I want to remember that this unwelcome visitor, for all his ill manners has come for *my good*, for the good of my character. No matter what my emotions tell me, I want to welcome him in. Why? Because down deep, real character is more important to me than temporary comfort.'⁷

For the second example, we turn to what some of Paul's enemies were doing. These were not unbelievers but fellow preachers of the gospel who were envious of Paul's success and popularity. It is a distressing discovery that there are some who envy the gifts God has given us; and it is devastating to discover that the seeds of this sin lie within our own hearts! Certain preachers were preaching a sound gospel, but out of motives that wreaked of ill will and rivalry. It appears that their real motivation was to aggravate Paul's sufferings, supposing that by their actions 'they will add pressure to my chains' (1:17).⁸ Some were evidently quite pleased to see the apostle receive his 'just deserts' as they considered them.

Have you felt at times that certain Christians were 'out to get you'? Envy and spite is something which Christians are not immune to: the apostles found it necessary to give straightforward advice about it on several occasions (Rom. 13:13; 1 Cor. 3:3; 13:4; Gal. 5:21; Jam. 3:14, 16; 1 Pet. 2:1). So it is salutary to discover how Paul reacted in these circumstances. Despite the envy of fellow preachers in Philippi, he 'rejoiced' that Christ was being preached (1:18). Once again, the apostle focuses on the greater good in the situation the advancement of the gospel. That was far more important than his hurt feelings. He was not about to let his bruised ego get in the way of the progress of the gospel.

Example three comes from what Paul has to say about his own immediate future. Locked up in prison, the apostle was facing the possibility of an execution. He was at the mercy of the Roman judiciary. In the very first chapter he had spoken of the possibility of death (1:20). Later, he enlarges on it by suggesting that 'I am being poured out as a drink offering' (2:17). It is a realistic acknowledgement on the apostle's part

that his toils and suffering could lead to martyrdom. Is the apostle downcast? Is he resentful? Not at all! 'I am glad and rejoice with you all' he adds.

These examples from Paul's own life illustrate the remarkable quality of his Christian life. The refrain: 'Give me joy in my heart, keep me smiling . . .' may be theologically inadequate as a Christian apologetic, but it nevertheless expresses a profound lack in our lives. We simply do not have the joy that the apostle knew and felt. Too much of our lives is spent in miserable defeat, yielding to the inner pull of our sins. We grumble too much, complain too much. The lack of joy in our lives is a testimony to the strides in sanctification we have yet to make if we are to conform to the image of New Testament Christianity. 'When I think of God', wrote Franz Josef Haydn, 'my heart is so full of joy that the notes leap and dance as they leave my pen'; adding, 'since God has given me a cheerful heart, I serve him with a cheerful spirit'.

II. Sources of Joy

Can we define with greater clarity what this joy is from what Paul writes in Philippians? Two theological truths bring the source of joy into focus.

1. Joy is the outworking of our Union with Christ.

We were never meant to be alone. God made us so as to form deep and lasting relationships. They are the source of our greatest joys. Paul began this letter, as he began most others, by reminding his Christian readers of their relationship to Jesus Christ: they were 'in Christ' (1:1). By doing so Paul underlined a fundamental truth. Faith, as Jesus reminded His disciples, is a believing 'into' Christ (John 14:12). Faith involves a union in which we totally depend upon the resources of another. The truth was elaborated upon in Jesus' horticultural analogy: He is the Vine, we are the branches (John 15). The intimacy of the relationship between Christ and the believer is something which Paul elaborated upon in detail in Romans 6:1ff. The principle underlined is clear: only by vital connection to the Vine is it possible to bear lasting fruit as a Christian. Joy is a fruit of the closeness of our relationship to Christ. We are dependent upon Him for the production of this fruit: 'Not that we are competent of ourselves; our competence comes from God' (2 Cor. 3:5).

One of the immediate consequences of our union with Christ is joy! In the context of John 15, Jesus assures his disciples: 'These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full' (John 15:11). It is not clear whether Jesus meant to say that believers were the recipients of joy or the objects of joy. Both are probably intended. Christ restores to us—who have lost all joy—the joy He finds in us! And as He sees us bearing the kind of fruit we ought to—including, of course, joy (Gal. 5:22)—it makes Him joyful too! Perhaps now we see the importance of joy in our lives: for it makes the heart of our Saviour glad!

2. Joy stems from GRACE!

The answer to misery is to remind ourselves of where we would be apart from the grace of God. 'Grace, tis a charming sound . . .' wrote Philip Doddridge, thereby echoing what Christians have always felt about God's dealings with us. 'Grace' is the opening and closing salutation of this letter (1:2; 4:23). And following the opening salutation he tells the Philippians of how joyful he felt whenever he thought about them, adding that the reason for his joy was that 'all of you share in God's grace with me' (1:7). Christians find their joy in the way God has dealt with them.

I've found the pearl of greatest price,
My heart doth sing for joy . . .

is something we sing because we mean it. Joy springs from knowing the value of what God has given us. When Paul became a Christian something happened to him: his assessment of the value he placed on the things of this world changed. The grace of God became the object of his chief delight. By comparison, the world's baubles he reckoned as *skybala*—realistically rendered 'dung' (3:8). By comparison to what God had given him—a righteousness which is not of his own—Paul is constrained to want to know more and more of this wonderful grace of God (3:7–10). 'I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus' he says (3:14). Paraphrasing, Packer puts it like this: 'I have lost a great deal, but I have gained more. What I have gained is something supremely worth having, something that is glorious and that will grow, broaden, deepen, and become richer to all eternity: namely, an ongoing love relationship with Jesus Christ the Saviour. The more I have of it, the more I want of it; thus it establishes itself as the biggest and most valued thing in my life'.⁹

III. Implications of Joy

So, what does this command to rejoice mean for me in my particular situation? Two things:

i. We must learn to control our feelings. There are various kinds of depression, to be sure, and some are the result of complex physical and psychological disorders. But there are times when we are spiritually depressed *for no good reason*. There are times when the best thing to do with our feelings is to challenge them:

Why are you downcast, O my soul?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Saviour and my God.

(Psa. 42:11)

Far too often we spend our days in misery and gloom all because we are not taking what we know to be true about God and His control over our lives seriously. We must pray and ask God for strength to overcome our depressive, melancholy states. There is such a thing as a will that will not bend to God's. We can

become hardened, refusing to see the good hand of God. It is a cancer that will destroy us.

ii. No matter what my circumstances may be, I must seek for that interpretation that causes me to rejoice. We are to 'rejoice in our sufferings' too (Rom. 5:3). I think of the story of Horatio Spafford, a business man in Chicago in 1873 who lost his entire business in the Chicago fires. Sending his wife and four daughters across to England on the SS. Ville de Havre, he was to learn that the vessel struck another (the 'Lochearn') in mid-Atlantic with the loss of 261 lives including his four daughters. Mrs Spafford, who had been rescued sent him a cable which read: 'Survived alone'. Boarding the next available ship to meet her, Horatio was to be told by the captain of the vessel of the very spot where his daughters had drowned. It was then that he wrote those lines:

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea-billows roll,
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,
'It is well, it is well with my soul'.*

That is the way God wants us to live. We have no right to expect that our lives are going to be free from trouble. But in every circumstance, if we are the Lord's people, we are assured of God's care and providence. He is working out every detail. There are no mistakes with Him (Rom. 8:32ff). Every moment

of our existence is cause enough for joy: the good and the bad together should integrate to form a Hallelujah symphony to the praise of Almighty God.

Footnotes

1. [On Psalm 47:1, 2], John Calvin, *Commentary on The Book of Psalms*, Vol. II, p. 207.
2. Answer 1 of the Shorter Catechism.
3. *The Life of Continual Rejoicing*, by Rev. George B. Duncan (New Mildmay Press, nd).
4. J. I. Packer, *Laid-Back Religion*. A penetrating look at Christianity today (IVP, 1987), p. 95.
5. J. Edwards, *Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections*, Works (Banner of Truth, 1974), p. 236.
6. John Owen, *Works*, Vol. 7 (Banner of Truth, 1972), p. 415.
7. Joni Eareckson, *Secret Strength* (Multnomah Press, 1989), p. 105.
8. The translation is that of Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Moody Press, 1988), p. 73.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 105-106.

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CALVIN AND EXPERIMENTAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

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This article is an attempt to pull together from a variety of Calvin's works some of his comments on one particular aspect of his doctrine of the knowledge of God; 'experimental' knowledge of God. This is that type of knowledge that Jonathan Edwards termed 'practical' or 'spiritual' over against 'natural' or 'speculative', the sort of knowledge Edwards says '... principally consists in the heart' (Works, Vol. 2 p. 158). R. S. Wallace has termed this same knowledge 'mystical'.¹

What we would term 'head-knowledge' today Calvin would never have regarded as satisfactory in a Christian, '... it is not enough if the knowledge of Christ dwell on the tongue or flutter in the brain',²

again '... it is not enough for us to confess coldly that our salvation springs from God's pure liberality, but we must be ... inflamed ... to his praise'.³ For Calvin true religion was in the heart, in the affections.