

Inexpressible Joy

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Introduction.

In our country right now, it is fair to say that we have a joy deficit. Never before in history has any people had so many of the things that they thought would make them happy, yet been so unhappy. We have an unimaginable wealth of material goods. We have a do-whatever culture where there are few moral constraints on the pursuit of happiness. We have psychiatrists with their little pink pills that they say will make us feel better. We have bars on every corner and enough illegal drugs flooding across our borders to put all of us into a coma of chemically induced bliss. And yet, none of these things, nor anything else that human ingenuity can invent, seems to help people to be joyful.

We see a dramatic contrast in the Christians whom Peter describes in 1 Peter 1:8-9. These people were poor, bound to a strict moral code, suffering, and persecuted for their faith. In short, they had every excuse for misery, yet Peter says that they rejoiced with a joy that was so great that they couldn't even put it into words. The people who should have been unhappiest in worldly terms had a happiness that the people around us would pay anything to get.

Sadly, even a lot of Christians today have lost touch with the joy that was a hallmark of our first-century brethren. I've visited churches before where the atmosphere was so dreary and so grim that it felt like I was attending somebody's funeral. The only thing missing was the casket up front. Those churches may have been "sound" as could be. They may have suffered through all five acts of worship in the prescribed way. But I tell you, friends, that any church whose assembly is marked by such a lack of joy has gone dreadfully wrong. Nor is this problem limited to churches. Many individual Christians also live lives that are joyless and miserable. Brethren, these things ought not to be. Joy is our blessing, our birthright as children of God. Let's see, then, where we can look to find this inexpressible joy.

Service.

One of the most obvious of these Scriptural sources of joy is **THE WORD**. Look at Paul's testimony about the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 1:6. As we learn from Acts 17, right from the very beginning, the Thessalonians had a difficult time of it. Just as soon as Paul preached the gospel, the enemies of Jesus formed a mob and went around looking for Christians to drag into court. To human logic, that gave the Thessalonian church every reason to go back to the world. However, they remained faithful to the Lord, because the spiritual joy they had in His word was too great.

Although our circumstances are much kinder, I fear that many Christians today have lost touch with that same delight in the law of God. They suffer through teaching from the word in services, when they go, and they certainly never open the word or think about it in their own time. Brethren, that's a terrible tragedy. If anything we read fills us with joy, it ought to be the Bible. In God's word, we learn about the depth of God's love for us, we learn about the promises He makes to His children, we learn how to live righteously, and perhaps most of all, we learn about Jesus. If reading about the life and teachings of our Savior doesn't lead us to rejoice, we are in the spiritual ICU, and in real danger of dying altogether. No matter where we are, we need to work to nurture that joy in the message of the word of God.

Just as we can find joy in listening to God, so also we can find it in talking to Him through **PRAYER**. Consider the promise that Jesus makes in John 16:23-24. As the saying goes, there are no atheists in foxholes, and even the most evil people may pray when they get in some kind of trouble, but what sets us apart as Christians is that we have the right to pray. The blood of Jesus has given us the privilege of approaching the throne of God, and even though God is the Ruler of the universe, even though He orders the movements of entire galaxies through outer space, He still will give us His attention and answer us in the way that He thinks best. We spend a lot of the time focusing on the times when we pray and we don't get what we want, but in reality, the vast majority of the time, He listens to us and gives us what we've asked for. Just in the realm of health, how many of our older members here are getting on into their 80s or even their 90s and still have healthy bodies and healthy minds? How many have dealt with things like heart surgery and cancer, faced illnesses where the survival rate is not high, and kept right on going? I'm quite confident that Dolly Hensley's medical chart alone is about the size of *War and Peace*. She should have been dead about five times over already, and yet, here she is. Now, we can attribute all of that to coincidence piled on coincidence, or we can just accept that prayer works. And since it does, isn't that an amazing thing? When we grasp that God hears and answers us, how can we not rejoice?

We should also rejoice in the work of God when we see **THE SALVATION OF OTHERS**. The early church certainly did this, as we learn from Acts 15:3. It was a big deal to first-century Christians when the lost came to Christ, and honestly, I think that they were so effective at spreading the gospel precisely because it was such a big deal to them. How about us? How do we feel when a soul is baptized or restored? Brethren, when we see that, we are seeing nothing less than the power of God working on the heart and the blood of Jesus cleansing the conscience. Salvation is the greatest of the works of the Almighty, and it means nothing less than God taking a soul who would have been eternally

lost and setting his feet on the road to heaven. When we see that, it should fill us with a profound and reverent joy. When we find that joy, when we understand what's truly happening, it will make us more committed to reaching out to the lost whom we know too. If we were to persuade a lost soul to obey the gospel, would that make our day? Would it make our year? If not, we need to get back in touch with the joy that salvation always ought to bring.

Suffering.

However, all the sources of our inexpressible joy aren't so intuitive as these. The Bible also tells us that we should take joy from **TRIAL**. This is James' point in James 1:2-4. This is a kind of joy that it takes some spiritual maturity to find. Trials are bad things, and we don't naturally enjoy it when bad things happen to us. Some people, in fact, when they face trial, blame it on God and lose their faith. James' point, though, is that just like a sculptor will use a chisel to chip away at the stone to reveal his sculpture, God uses trial to shape us more into what we need to be. He allows unhappiness and tragedy into our lives, yes, but He does not do so without purpose. We learn more and grow more in the hard times than we ever could in the easy ones. That makes us more useful in the kingdom here and more likely to reach the eternal kingdom of heaven. That still doesn't mean that trial is fun, but it does mean that when we endure trial, we can look into the future, appreciate where God is taking us, and rejoice in that.

Even more than trial, though, we should especially rejoice when we meet **PERSECUTION**. Consider Jesus' paradoxical decree in Luke 6:22-23. Persecution may be even less fun than trial. When we are persecuted, we face being rejected by the people around us, losing our social status, or possibly even physical injury and death, but Jesus says that all of these things are cause for joy. In fleshly terms, that doesn't compute. In spiritual terms, though, persecution is a backhanded compliment from Satan. When we are persecuted for the cause of Christ, it shows that we have been doing such a good job of following Him that our righteousness is offending the evil people around us. Persecution shows that we're on the right track, because the footsteps of Jesus lead through persecution. That's not pleasant to endure here, but in spiritual terms, when we understand the significance of persecution, it's cause for tremendous rejoicing. Persecution is about the best evidence that we can get on earth that we are pleasing God. It's the greatest affirmation that we can get that we're bound for heaven, short of actually hearing "Well done, good and faithful servant." For a disciple, what greater joy can there be than knowing that? That's why even persecution ought to be cause for rejoicing in us.

Seeking and Finding God.

In a broader sense, we also find this spiritual joy in **GIVING ALL FOR JESUS**. Let's look at the attitude of the nameless man in the parable of Matthew 13:44. The treasure that he found was so great that he rejoiced to give up everything he had to gain it. If we want to find joy in Jesus, we have to give everything up too. At a guess, for Christians who don't have the inexpressible joy of the Bible, this is where the problem lies. Like the Israelites at Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18, they limp between two opinions. They've got one foot in the kingdom, but the other foot is in the world. The world isn't going to bring them joy, no matter how many feet they've got in it, but their divided loyalty also keeps them from the joy that Jesus promises. This kind of halfway Christian is always going to be miserable. They may come to the conclusion that real joy can't be found in God either, but the reality is that the problem isn't in the Lord. It's in them.

Thankfully, even if the solution is hard to do, it's simple to understand. We find joy in Christ by putting it all on the line for Him. We come to services three times a week. We study the Bible on our own. We work in the church. We fight every day to be a better disciple. If we do those things, we will be joyful people. Guaranteed.

If we're committed in this way, we can also discover joy in **THE HOPE OF HEAVEN**. Paul talks about this in Romans 5:1-2. Interestingly enough, heaven is also one of those things where only a true disciple can find joy. Think about it. Heaven is just an eternal version of all the things that make Christianity joyful, and if we don't like God's kingdom here, we aren't going to like it there. If a man has the opportunity to assemble with the saints here and never goes, why would he enjoy spending eternity with the saints? If he has no interest in being a disciple of Jesus in his life on earth, then the opportunity to be eternally with Jesus is meaningless. If the wicked knew what heaven was like, they wouldn't want to go. But for the righteous, there can be no prize that glitters more brightly than the Jerusalem that is above. All of the spiritual blessings that we know here, that we enjoy so much in a flawed and incomplete form, we will taste in a full and eternal perfection, and the hope of that joy should be enough to lead us through anything here.

Finally, though, and most fully, we ought to be taking our inexpressible joy from **GOD**. Paul puts this quite plainly in Philippians 4:4. God is perfectly powerful, wise, loving, righteous, holy, and the perfect expression of every other good attribute. He is the most amazing being in the universe, and He loves each one of us so much that He wants us to be His children and to live with Him for eternity. That boggles my mind. If we really understood the implications of that, I think we'd all be jumping up and down and squealing like a bunch of giddy fourteen-year-old girls. In a very real sense, Christianity is the process of understanding that, of learning who God is through study and discipleship, so that we can appreciate what it means that we belong to Him. The better we know Him, the more we rejoice.