

Always Rejoicing!

Go with me back in history a couple of thousand years. Let's go to Rome, to a rather drab little room, surrounded by high walls. Inside we see a man seated on the floor. He's an older fellow, shoulders stooped & head balding. Chains are on his hands & on his feet.

Who is this man at whom we are looking?

Why -- it is none other than the great Apostle Paul; the man who said he was **bound only** by the will of God is **now** bound in **chains**, stuck in a dingy jail house, attached to a Roman officer.

Look, he is writing a letter! No doubt it is a complaint letter to God! No doubt it is a list of grievances! After all, Paul has every reason to be bitter & to complain. Let's peek over his shoulder & see if we can read what he is writing. Oh, look -- **it is not a letter of complaint at all!** Instead, we witness Paul writing a letter which 2000 years later is still known as **the thesis on joy!** It is the letter found in Holy Scripture known as **Philippians!** Written from a dismal prison cell in Rome, the words **joy & rejoice** appear again & again! **Paul's joy is expressed all through Philippians.** The verb "rejoice" appears 11 times -- & the noun "joy" appears 5 times. **This is the keynote of Paul's inspired letter.**

William Barclay calls Philippians "**the loveliest letter Paul ever wrote.**" Why don't we spend more time with it? In fact, I would like for you & I to literally **wrap** ourselves over the next few weeks -- at least during the month of May -- **inside** the beautiful 4th chapter of this lovely little letter!

I would have you notice that Paul is only half way through his letter when he writes in 3:1, "**Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord.**" Do you know what it means when a preacher says: "Finally"? **It does not mean a thing!** An optimist is someone who thinks the sermon is ending when he hears the preacher say, "In conclusion..." But at least with Paul as our example, we preachers do have a Biblical precedence.

Let's look further at what Paul says about "rejoicing." In **Philippians 4:4-5** -- Paul writes: -- "**Rejoice in the Lord always: & again I say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand.**" The word "rejoice" means "**to be full of joy.**" It must have been important, for Paul repeated it. "Rejoice in the Lord always: & again I say, Rejoice!" **A Christian must be ever mindful of the kind of image the Lord expects of us! What kind of image do you reflect as a believer?** Oh, dear Christian -- Be happy! -- Be glad! -- Always be full of joy! Celebrate God all day, ever day. -- Delight yourselves in the Lord; -- yes, find your joy in Him at all times.

There are three or four things I want you to notice in these verses:

1. The Extent of our Joy -- "Always"

"**Always!**" Is that really possible -- or only a pipe dream? Now I must honestly admit, if I had written this, I might have said: "Rejoice **most** of the time." If I could rewrite it that way, many of you would agree with it readily, because most of the time it's not too difficult to rejoice. "Rejoice most of the time." Could you go along with that?

As I look back over my life I can certainly find moments of great rejoicing. I rejoiced when my pet rabbit won a Blue Ribbon at the Portage County Fair. I rejoiced that special Christmas Day when I was given a beautiful brand new Schwinn bicycle. I really rejoiced the day a lovely young lady named Jeannette agreed to marry me -- & to my delight, **she did!** All through life I could rattle off high points, great moments; certainly times to rejoice.

But I will admit that at times I have had **difficulty** with this text that says, "rejoice always." Because between the high mountain peaks, there have been dark, dreary valleys. Valleys of sadness! And I know something about the valleys that connect the mountains. I know about reaching for something I thought was within my reach, & yet missing it. I've calculated things only to find my figures were wrong. I know what it is to walk away with a downcast head. I know what it is to be informed that it was my best friend who plunged the dagger into my heart; that the one I considered my best supporter was really against me.

So I have trouble in the admonition to rejoice always. I would have no trouble with it saying "sometimes" -- but always? And yet this **is** the inspired Word of God -- **& I must live by it!** God makes no mistakes in the commands of His Word!

So let's try to see here: Is there a program? Whenever the Lord tells us to do something, He gives us a program, a means by which we can fulfill His command. **If we follow God's plan, He will lead us to His goal for us.** Most of God's commandments begin with His statement, in this case to "rejoice always."

Then we, & we see an important truth that gives us hope & courage in our pursuit of joy!

And that brings us to my second point -- the Source of our Joy!

2. The Source of our Joy -- "... in the Lord."

Do you see that? We are to rejoice always "in the Lord!" To accomplish this joyful spirit, we must do it "in the Lord." The context defining our rejoicing is to be "in the Lord." This is what makes the command realistic, rather than an order to whistle in the dark. Joy

comes from the Lord Who lives within us, not from what's happening **around** us. When our joy is "in the Lord" it is more than a mood, or emotion.

When you see me laughing & joking & happy, it doesn't mean I haven't had a storm; it just means **I have a Storm Stopper!** Oh, I've been through the storms, but I have Somebody Who can say: "**Peace, be still**" (Mark 4:39). It is the Lord Jesus Who still says today: "Peace, be still."

My friends, **if** you have not accepted Jesus Christ; **if** you don't have a right relationship with Christ; **if** you don't have Jesus in proper focus; **if** He is not an indwelling personality in you; you cannot "rejoice always." The world is **too mean** to be happy every day, that is, if you don't have an inside Source of Peace & Joy. You'll suffer disappointment if you don't have inner peace. You'll have too many inner storms if you don't have that inner peace. You need to have Someone Who can say: "Peace, be still."

If you are to rejoice always you've got to start with the Lord Jesus! You might say it doesn't matter **who** you start with -- just so you start. Well, that is **not** so! Now take Buddha; he can't calm your storm! He is just a statue with hands that cannot heal; feet that cannot walk; a mouth that cannot talk; & eyes that cannot see. You can't chant enough to Buddha to get the storms of life to subside for you. **You've got to have the storm stopping Jesus to succeed in calming your storm!**

Rejoicing implies that we have a healthy adjustment toward life's uncertainties. Even when life pushes us off-balance, stressing us to the maximum, **in the Lord** we are able to **rejoice!** Jesus, & Jesus alone, is our Source of Joy!

3. The Basis of our Joy -- "The Lord is at hand."

The basis of our joy is seen in verse 5, "The Lord is at hand." The NIV says: "The Lord is near!" J. B. Phillips writes: "Never forget the nearness of your Lord." This one thing I know my friends: whatever your circumstance, the Lord will be with you!

Often these days we think of the words "the Lord is at hand" as almost exclusively referring to the Second Coming of our Lord & Savior. And in the world in which we live, that is a **blessed hope!** Many Bible translations interpret this in the sense of the Lord's soon return, saying things like, "Remember, the Lord is coming soon" (NLT); "He could show up any minute!" (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*). I don't know about you, but with the way things are going in this old world, I'm ready for the Lord to return! Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly.

But **how much more** precious is the declaration of the nearness of our Lord to each one of us personally in our daily circumstances of life! As Christians, we often breathe the atmosphere of antagonism from the world around us. But these simple, yet profound words, "the Lord is near" brings **encouragement** to all of us. He is near, in the midst of our troubles, in the fiery furnaces & the trials of life, in the valleys, in disappointments, in sorrow. No matter how much trouble & tragedy may press in upon us, we can rejoice, because we know the Lord is near us & with us & in us! The Lord, being near at hand in every time of need, makes us **an optimist in the best sense of the word!**

Now, I know I usually only have three points, but I must include one more important point in this message. We've seen the Extent -- the Source -- the Basis -- of our Joy ... Now let's look at the ...

4. The Impact of our Joy -- "Let your moderation be known unto all men."

I read these words in many Bible translations in order to better understand them. The NIV says: "Let your gentleness be evident to all." The NLT reads: "Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do." J.B. Phillips reads: "Have a reputation for gentleness." Others say: "Let your humility"; "Let your forbearing spirit be plain to every one"; "Let your reasonableness be recognized by everyone."

They are all talking about our **witness** in one way or another. Being in Christ creates a new atmosphere of praise, & enables the Christian to be at his best **for God, & for service** among people around us! My friends, the greater the joy in our lives, the greater the impact of our witness to those around us! Oh, how much the world today needs the testimony of the rejoicing heart!

Allow me to give you a couple examples: -- In a recent (Spring 2007) issue of *The Olivetian* (a quarterly publication of the college Jeannette & I attended), I read about two young college students: Lauren & Amy both tall, athletic, blonde females, who teamed up as softball players from across the nation, traveling with a sports ministry organization. **When** they played an East Asia's national team, people noticed them; **when** they worked children's sports clinics, people noticed them; **when** they traveled the country to visit standard tourist spots, people noticed them. But it wasn't just their blonde hair, or their athletic build, **people noticed something in their spirit; their attitude.** Amy Murray shares how, "They would ask us, 'What is it about you that makes you so different? You just have this joy.'"

These athletes used those opportunities to share what made them different, **their love for & relationship with Jesus Christ!** Sharing with others in a country in which more than 90% of people had never even heard the name of Jesus proved intimidating at first. But they found that even when people did not know the message, they had a hunger for it; & it was incredible how people who did not know the Lord could **feel** His presence in their Joy.

Perhaps the one most drawn to the athletes' spirit of joy was their **translator.** As a government worker, the translator should have

turned in the team for trying to spread the Gospel of Jesus. Instead, she chose to translate the girl's message of hope again & again as they toured the country. Amy remembers how "it was beautiful to see the Gospel work in her life. She had never even heard it before. But every time she told it, she'd have more questions. Every time she told it, a different part of her heart became alive." The day their flight back to the States was to take off, the translator told the team she wanted to know **who** this person, Jesus, really is. Hours before leaving the country, team members led her to Christ.

My friends, the greater the joy in our lives, the greater the **impact** of our witness to those around us!
But you may say, "They were young & vibrant! As we grow older & the burdens of life become greater, it is far more difficult to be full of joy!" So let me tell you another story I read about a 92-year-old Christian woman who was legally blind. In spite of her limitation, she was always neatly dressed, with her hair carefully brushed, & her makeup tastefully applied. Each morning she would meet the new day with eagerness.

After her husband of 70 years died, it became necessary for her to go to a nursing home where she could receive proper care. On the day of the move, a helpful neighbor drove her there & guided her into the lobby, & then left. Her room wasn't ready, so she waited patiently in the lobby for several hours. When an attendant finally came for her, she smiled sweetly as she maneuvered her walker to the elevator. The staff member described her room to her, including the new curtains that had been hung on the windows. The little old lady declared: "I love it!" The attendant replied: "But Mrs. Jones, you haven't seen your room yet." She said: "That doesn't have anything to do with it. Happiness is something you choose. Whether I like my room or not doesn't depend on how it's arranged. **It's how I arrange my mind.**"

You see dear friends, the happiness of your life depends upon you, & upon how you are enjoying your relationship with the living Christ!

Conclusion: This command to rejoice always **probes** us! Rejoicing is clearly a Scriptural command. **To ignore it is disobedience.** We can complain enough when things are fairly good; so what would we do in prison? **If the joy of the Lord is our strength** (Neh. 8:10) **no wonder we are so weak!** But Jesus is Lord, & we can rejoice in Him! No, we **will** rejoice in the Lord **because He is Lord indeed!** This simple command contains the proper direction to guide every child of God in living a victorious life for our Lord!

The Bible doesn't say joy is a fruit of **circumstances**; it clearly states that joy is a fruit of the **Spirit** (Galatians 5:22). To live a joy-filled life, we must "walk in the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25). Joy is the fruit of a life in which the Spirit of Christ has taken root. As we walk in the Spirit -- we **can** & we **will** rejoice in spite of our circumstances.

Paul uses the word "rejoice" twice in verse 4. This suggests that we are to continually -- regularly rejoice. It can be translated, "Rejoice & keep on rejoicing!" As J.B. Phillips put it: "Delight yourselves in the Lord; yes, find your joy in him at all times."

At the bottom line, Paul's continuing command to rejoice is an affirmation **that our Christian faith** must control our responses to life, rather than allowing our emotional reactions to affect the expression of our faith.

Rejoice, & again I say, rejoice! In the church -- in the home -- in the classroom -- in the work place -- in the market place -- in the prison experiences of life, even like Paul -- in your circumstances. If all the world has turned against you -- rejoice. For the Lord, our Savior Jesus, is always near to you! Rejoice, & again I say, Rejoice!

Rejoice, the Lord is King; -- Your Lord & King adore!
Rejoice, give thanks & sing -- And triumph ever-more.
Lift up your heart; Lift up your voice! Rejoice, again I say rejoice!

Jesus, the Savior reigns, The God of truth & love.
When He had purged our stains, He took His seat above.
Lift up your heart; Lift up your voice! Rejoice, again I say rejoice!

His kingdom cannot fail; He rules o'er earth & heaven.
The keys of death & hell -- Are to our Jesus giv'n.
Lift up your heart; Lift up your voice! Rejoice, again I say rejoice!

Rejoice in glorious hope! Our Lord, the Judge, shall come
And take His servants up -- To their eternal home.
Lift up your heart; Lift up your voice! Rejoice, again I say rejoice!
-- Charles Wesley

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