

Reflections
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Rejoice!

Philippians 4:2-9

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" This isn't the first time in his letter that Paul has raised the subject of joy. In fact, Philippians is sometimes called "the epistle of joy" because of its frequent references to the subject of rejoicing. If Philippians were a piece of music, then joy would definitely be the refrain. It's a theme that pervades the entire letter.

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" Sounds exactly like what a pastor, music director, or other worship leader might say when standing before the congregation. But we have to remember that in this case, Paul isn't standing before the congregation. On the contrary, he's separated from the Philippians by hundreds of miles. He's in prison, most likely in Rome. Having been jailed for his witness to Christ, Paul writes to the Philippians in order to assure them about his own situation and to express thanks for a gift they had sent him. He also wants to give them encouragement and advice in the face of struggles and persecution.

Rejoice in the Lord. At first hearing, this sounds like strange advice coming from an incarcerated pastor to a persecuted congregation. Why talk about joy when things seem to be going so badly for Paul and the Philippians? But on closer examination, we can understand and appreciate Paul's command to rejoice.

For one thing, Paul isn't telling them, "Cheer up. Think positive. Look on the bright side. Put on a happy face." Remember that this isn't Paul the cheerleader. This is Paul the servant of Jesus Christ, the emissary of God's gospel. He's not trying to be an eternal optimist. Instead, he's preaching the good news, this time from a jail cell. He may not be able to join them for Sunday morning worship, but that can't stop him from delivering the Lord's message. He's already reminded the Philippians that the good work God has begun in them will surely be brought to completion when Christ comes again (1:6). The power of God for salvation has already been unleashed among them, it's operating in them, and it will eventually accomplish their complete transformation. So in view of what God has done, is doing, and will do for them through Jesus Christ, it makes complete sense that they should rejoice, whatever their circumstances.

That's because joy has a certain depth and durability to it. It's not a superficial cheerfulness. Rather, joy is a gift of God that comes through a deepening relationship with Christ and with Christ's people. Joy isn't dependent on health, wealth, comfort, and general well-being. Joy is dependent on God. Joy is a settled state of assurance and confidence in the faithful love of God demonstrated through Jesus Christ, most of all his death and resurrection. This is why Paul urges us to rejoice *in the Lord*. This means that the Lord is both the object of our rejoicing and the ground of our rejoicing. In other words, he won't be derailed in his plan to save us and to give us a share in his glory. He can be counted on to finish what he has started in our lives.

Rejoice in the Lord *a/ways*. So Paul not only tells us to experience and express joy that's grounded in Christ. He also tells us to do this at all times, in all circumstances. The Greek word translated as "always" or "at all times" calls for an ongoing, continuous activity, not a sporadic eruption of gladness. So day in, day out, during highs and lows, success and failure, delight and despair, pleasure and pain, there is a constant for the Christian, and its name is joy. Joy is more than just a matter of being on a momentary spiritual high. Joy is a daily way of life.

Always. What word could possibly be more inclusive of all our experiences, and all the world's experiences. I once read an article in a Christian magazine in which the authors talked about our need to rediscover joy. They wrote:

One reason we are perennially attracted to a serious call to a purpose-driven life is the state of the planet. According to a recent report from the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, world hunger is only worsening. Nuclear threats grow daily in the Middle East. Human trafficking is expanding. Billions are mired not just in poverty of material needs but also poverty of spirit. Who in their right mind can talk about joy? Empathy, yes. But to put on joy when so many are dressed in the rags of anxiety, grief, and despair—well, it would be scandalous. There will be time for rejoicing once we make some headway on the human catastrophe.¹

But then the authors went on to point out that Christian joy, the kind of joy grounded in what God has done through Jesus Christ, doesn't wait until everything is straightened out and fixed before it breaks out. On the contrary, the kind of joy generated by the gospel shows up just when everything is falling apart, just when prospects are bleak, just when it looks like there's no hope.

Remember that Paul is writing to the Philippians from prison. In many ways, imprisonment during Paul's day and time was very different from what it is today. Conditions were beyond what many of us can even imagine. But notice that Paul doesn't wait until circumstances improve before he'll bring up the subject of joy. He doesn't tell the Philippians, "Once I'm out of this filthy, crowded cell, no longer starving, no longer sick, no longer half naked, no longer chained, no longer able to hear the cries and screams of other prisoners being tortured, then I'll rejoice, and I'll have you rejoice with me. But for now, my dear Philippians, just lay low and put a lid on your joy. Cancel your worship gatherings. Shelve those copies of the cantata. Don't open your hymnals or let your gladness show. When things start to look up, then you'll have permission to rejoice."

On the contrary, Paul tells them that now is the time that joy is breaking forth, in him, and should be in them. Even the possibility of his life coming to a violent end at the hands of the authorities can't kill his joy, and shouldn't kill theirs either. As Paul himself notes, he may be chained, but the word of God isn't. So rejoice in the Lord always. That's the way it is with joy. Christian joy always has a "nevertheless," an "in spite of," quality to it. In spite of circumstances that seem to contradict the sovereignty of God, we'll continue to rejoice, because God may use those very circumstances to advance his work in our lives.

The story is told about a devoted Christian undergoing chemotherapy who was told by a friend, "Under the circumstances, I don't see how you can be so cheerful." With humility and personal conviction, the patient responded, "I'm not under any circumstances. Because of Jesus, I'm on top of the circumstances."² Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

¹ "The Joy-Driven Life," *Christianity Today* (December 2009) 53.

² Benjamin Reaves, "Joy Because Of, Joy in Spite Of." *30 Good Minutes*. Accessed December 10, 2009 <http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/reaves_5003.htm>.