

“Christian Joy”

One of the marks of a Christian should be *joy*! In the Bible we often find the words *joy*, *joyful*, and *rejoice* in describing God’s people! For example, Isaiah 12:3 says, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.” To be saved, to experience salvation, should bring joy to our life! Philippians 4:4 says, “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I will say, ‘Rejoice.’” Notice, it doesn't say rejoice in Lord some of the time, or when we're feeling like it, but *always*! This point is also made in 1 Thessalonians 5:16: “Be joyful always...”. Christians are supposed to be joyful people!

But are they? Are *we* if we say we're a Christian? I'll bet all of us can think of Christians who are real grumps! Sourpusses. Just no fun to be around. Maybe we're one of them! We probably know some professing Christians who are critical, negative, joyless human beings. I have to ask: Gosh, is that me?

Sometimes our church services just lack joy! The famous author, Robert Louis Stevenson, once wrote an entry in his diary in which he expressed some surprise. He wrote, "I have been to church today, and I am not depressed." Often our worship is marked more by a somber, depressive mood than the joy of the Lord. Our committee and board meetings can lack an atmosphere of joy. I believe one the reasons why churches like LCBC and churches with a more contemporary worship style get more people to come is that the music and worship is more upbeat, joyful, celebrative. *If we're followers of Jesus, our lives ought to be saturated with joy!*

Jesus was a joyful person! Unfortunately, we don't often think of Him as smiling or laughing. One reason is that artists (and maybe preachers) have focused too much on Jesus as the *suffering Savior*. He was that....but He was also a joyful man. Jesus once said to His disciples: "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11). Jesus was full of joy, and He wanted His followers to have it too!

Let's think more about the *nature* of this joy we are to have in Christ. ***First, Christian joy is different from just being happy and cheerful.*** Most people feel joy and happiness *some of the time*. A son or daughter graduates from high school or college...a new grandchild is born...we're feeling better after a bout with illness or surgery...someone throws us a surprise birthday party. Whether we're a Christian or not, when good things happen the normal response is to feel joyful and happy about it.

But what happens when these circumstances change? We can often lose those joyful feelings: it's a rainy Monday morning and we wake up with a miserable cold...we flunk a test in school or get a bad performance review from our boss...our car breaks down and we have an expensive repair bill that we can hardly afford.

Christian joy is different from the normal happy feelings that come and go, depending on outward circumstances. The Greek word for joy is “chara”. It comes from the same root as “charis”, which mean grace. Christian joy is rooted in God’s grace. It's grounded in God's steadfast mercy and kindness towards us, which we don’t deserve. Christian joy is rooted in God,

not circumstances. Circumstances change; God doesn't. Christian joy is an inward gift of God that isn't dependent on the changes and chances of life.

Because of this, we can have joy even during difficult times in our life. It's an "in spite of" joy! We see this "in spite of" joy in Jesus' own life. In the prayer of Jesus recorded in John 17, as the cross looms just ahead, Jesus prays, "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). The Apostle Paul knew this "in spite of" joy. He spoke of himself and the other apostles, suffering hardship for the gospel, "as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:10).

Many times I've looked at Christians going through rough times, people who have no reason to feel any joy, and I've seen them have a deep joy inside of them. It's an inward joy that only Christ can give. My father died after being retired only several years. He was a young 66, and had a lot of life and spunk in him. I felt a tremendous sadness watching cancer take its toll on his body, and eventually take his life. But during his illness, he and I had a chance to talk about spiritual things in a way that we never did before. Shortly before he died he asked if I'd give him communion. It was a sad and painful thing to do, but I also felt a deep joy as I gave him communion there at the Lebanon V.A. hospital.

What am I saying? There are times when we go through difficult experiences. We don't feel giddy, or bubbly, or happy. But deep inside we can feel a strange joy, the abiding joy of Christ – a joy that the world can't give and can't take away.

This kind of joy that we're speaking about is a foretaste of the joy we will experience in the kingdom of God. If we're saved, if we have turned our life over to Christ, then we have the promise of sharing in the kingdom of God someday! And that kingdom is marked by joy! Romans 14:17 says the kingdom of God is "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." The kingdom of God is a joyful place! And God wants to give us a preview *now* of the joy we'll experience when we enter God's kingdom!

This explains why Christian joy is often tied in with the Holy Spirit. The Bible says God gives believers the Holy Spirit as a "down payment" or "first installment" of the kingdom of God. Having the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, in us – living life in the Spirit - is a preview of the kind of life we will experience in God's kingdom. That life in the Spirit is marked by joy! Galatians 5:22 lists the fruit of the Spirit, and one of these fruits is "joy". "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace...". 1 Thessalonians 1:6 also speaks of joy "inspired by the Holy Spirit". So, Christian joy isn't something we can pump up and generate on our own. It comes when we receive the Holy Spirit at conversion, and nurture the life of the Spirit in us.

God wants His people to be joyful people! How can we have this joy? Here are some steps we can take.

First of all, give yourself over to Christ completely and unreservedly. A lot of us believe in Jesus. We consider ourselves to be Christians. But we haven't pulled out all the stops and given

ourselves and our will entirely to Christ without holding back. I believe there is a spiritual law that says the more we hold back from Him the less joy we will have, but the more we abandon ourselves to His will, the more joy we will have.

To put it another way: Let the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ in you, have more and more control of your life. We've already noted that joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit. The more we allow the Spirit to control us and fill us, the more joy we will have!

Then, if we are to experience the joy of the Lord, we need to turn away from sin. There is probably nothing that diminishes the joy of the Lord in us more than willful sin. Now we all sin, and God provides a way for us to be forgiven through the cross of Jesus. But deliberately sinning, and allowing sin in our life to be unconfessed, squeezes the joy of the Lord out of us.

King David was a great man of God, but he sinned by committing adultery with Bathsheba. Then David added to his adultery by lying and committing murder. The prophet Nathan confronted the king with the awful things he had done. David repented. And in Psalm 51 David expresses his heartfelt grief over the wrongs he had done and his desire to get right with God once again. In that Psalm David cries out to God, "Restore to me the *joy of your salvation*" (Psalm 51:12). David lost his joy when he sinned so badly – and he wants it back!

Confess any known sin. Turn from doing wrong. Ask God for forgiveness, and joy can come back into our life!

Then, we also need to work hard to get rid of negative, joyless attitudes. Some of us are kind of programmed to be negative, critical, joyless people. Maybe we grew up in a family where there wasn't much happiness or positive outlook on life. Maybe growing up we never got much affirmation or encouragement, so we are down on ourselves and not feeling very good about life.

A farmer was known as a grumbler, a very negative, joyless person. One fall, he had the best crop of apples he'd ever had. His crop was better than any of the neighboring apple growers. A neighbor stopped by to congratulate him. "Well Jake, you sure ought to be happy now. This is the finest crop of apples I've ever seen around here." "Well, I suppose they'll do" old Jake groused, "but now I don't have any rotten ones for the hogs!" I think God wants to deprogram some of us from our negative, dismal outlook on life that squelches the joy God wants to pour into us. Why not let Him begin to change our attitude today!

Finally, if we want the full joy of the Lord, we should share the joy of Christ with others. You've probably seen the acronym: J O Y. Jesus first. Others second. Yourself last. God doesn't give us joy just so we can feel good and keep it to ourselves. The joy of the Lord is meant to be shared with others! It's multiplied when we give it away! The most joyless people in the world are those who are self-focused and me-centered. *In fact, joy doesn't come when we seek it – it comes as a by-product of our forgetting about ourselves and loving and serving God and others!*

In Margate, NJ there was a gifted young composer named Bonnee Hoy, who died in the prime of her life. At her memorial service a friend told how a mockingbird used to sing regularly outside Bonnee's window on summer nights. "Bonnee would stand at her bedroom window, peering into the darkness, listening intently, marveling at the beautiful songs the mockingbird sang. Then, musician that she was, Bonnee decided to sing back. So she whistled the first four notes of Beethoven's 'Fifth Symphony'. With amazing quickness the mockingbird learned these four notes and sang them back to Bonnee. 'And in perfect pitch', Bonnee marveled.

"Then for a time the bird disappeared. But one night, toward the very end of her life, when Bonnee was so terribly sick, the bird returned and in the midst of other songs, several times sang those first four notes of Beethoven's 'Fifth'." And then, Bonnee's friend at the memorial service went on to say, "I like to think of that now. Somewhere out there (in a big, big world) is a mockingbird who sings Beethoven because of Bonnee."

I hope and pray that somewhere in this big, big world, someone is singing a song of joy because of you, and me. And I pray that somewhere in this big, big world, someone who doesn't yet know Jesus will sing a song of joy because they came here and found the joy of the Lord in this place!

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