

1 John 1:4 (NKJV)

⁴ And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.

Let's suppose Ruth was whisked up to heaven this week so Christ could communicate something to her for our church. And we knew about it. Then when she returned she told us that she had a message from God for us. First she would tell us **how we can know that we can trust the message**. She would talk about what she heard, and then saw, and then touched. She would give evidence that she was not being nutty but this was a true event.

Now imagine this. We are waiting to hear what God has to say to us. And she says this:

God wanted me to tell you what I am going to tell you **so that your joy may be full**.

What would you think?

Maybe we would be **relieved** because we expected His message to be more harsh. We might be afraid that God would say something like, I want you people to straighten out so I am going to tell you about what I see in your lives that displeases me so you can straighten it out. We may have expected a harsh response.

Maybe we would be **thrilled**, because we have been longing to have a relationship with God that **pleases Him more** and now we are going to be told how to do that.

Maybe we would be **amazed** to think that, with the people that we are, Christ's primary focus was to give us joy. What an adjustment to our view of God we would have to make. He truly is the **joy-giver**.

Now in our text there is some question as to whether the original text says **our** joy or **your** joy. From all I can tell it is impossible to know which is true. But in the context of First John we can see that the things written **over and over** were to provide the readers a wonderful gift, a secure confidence, and absolute assurance of what they had in Christ. And that is the foundation of joy.

Also let's look at something else that John wrote in his Gospel, the Gospel of John. He said in

John 15:11 (NKJV)

¹¹ These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.

This is very similar language coming from Christ. He is speaking to His disciples so that their joy may be full.

The word for **full** here is a wonderful word. It means **to make complete in every particular**, to render perfect. (Thayers)

Wow. Look at the intent. Perfect joy. Do you want this? We would be crazy not to want it. Complete, **to the full**, perfect joy? What a wonderful gift. Does anyone here want to leave that gift unwrapped in our pile of presents? I don't think so.

Now, we have talked about this before and we have come to the place where we need to talk about it again. What is this thing called Joy?

And just as there were some surprises when we looked at Biblical Forgiveness, now we are likely to have some surprises when we look at Biblical Joy.

The first surprise to me was to realize that what I thought about the difference between joy and happiness was wrong. The good thing about studying scripture for so long is that after a while you get used to being corrected. Look at this. The word for glad is interchangeable with happy.

Psalm 16:11 (NKJV)

¹¹ You will show me the path of life; In Your presence *is* fullness of joy; At Your right hand *are* pleasures forevermore.

Esther 8:16 (ESV)

¹⁶ The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor.

Proverbs 23:25 (ESV)

²⁵ Let your father and mother be glad; let her who bore you rejoice.

Psalm 32:11 (NKJV)

¹¹ Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous; And shout for joy, all *you* upright in heart!

Psalm 144:15 (NKJV)

¹⁵ Happy *are* the people who are in such a state; Happy *are* the people whose God *is* the LORD!

Proverbs 16:20 (NKJV)

²⁰ He who heeds the word wisely will find good, And whoever trusts in the LORD, happy *is* he.

I could go on, but the point is that scripture does not clearly delineate the difference between joy and happiness or gladness. The words are often used in Hebrew parallelism to say the same thing a different way.

Evidently it was probably Oswald Chambers who first wrote that **happiness** is based on circumstances and **joy** is not dependent on anything but Christ.

Prior to that popular teaching, some of the greats, who were very careful about their language, use happiness and joy interchangeable, using one word to amplify the other. Spurgeon, Jonathan Edwards, Richard Baxter, William Law are all examples of scholars who did this.

OK then. What is this joy that we are promised?

Well this actually gets a little more complicated.

Matthew 13:18-21 (NKJV)

18 "Therefore hear the parable of the sower:

20 But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy;

21 yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.

Here we see that an unbelieving person has joy.

And joy is used as a common human thing.

Proverbs 15:23 (NKJV)

23 A man has joy by the answer of his mouth, And a word *spoken* in due season, how good *it is!*

Matthew 13:44 (NKJV)

44 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Joy is not always a spiritual attribute. It can be a simple human attribute. We were discussing this in Sunday School and having a hard time coming up with an answer to this question of what is joy? It is no wonder.

I am going to quote an interview with Randy Alcorn who wrote a book about Happiness in 2015.

He says this:

David Murray, who we both appreciate, identifies six different kinds of happiness. He talks about nature happiness, social happiness, vocational happiness, physical happiness, intellectual happiness, and humor happiness. All of those in God's common grace are available, except the final one which David calls "spiritual happiness." He calls it a joy that at times contains more pleasure and delight than the other six put together. And that is the thing that you can't have until your sins are forgiven and you are reconciled to God — you are made right with him. That is why [Psalm 32:1](#), using the Hebrew word *asher*, a very common word that means "happy," says, "Happy is the man whose sins are

forgiven.” And then in verse 2, “Happy is the one whose transgressions are not counted against him.” Now you are made right with God, you have a deep, reality-based happiness. It’s based upon the truth that you are made right with the happy God of Scripture who created you and wired you to be happy. But up until now, up until your sins are forgiven, you have been trying to satisfy your happiness and find it in all of these cul-de-sacs and dead-end streets. But now you truly found it in God.

Randy Alcorn is making that point that human joy and happiness and the joy and happiness offered in Christ have similarities. I think it is much like the cap gun that a kid may have gotten when they were a kid (not sure they make them any more) and the 270 rifle he gets on his sixteenth birthday. They have similarities. But clearly one is much more effective than the other.

The world around us is looking for pleasure. They **do** know a little about happiness. They **do** know a little about joy. And they want more of it. They don’t want a spiritualized version where joy really has nothing to do with happiness. They know that the two are similar. They use them interchangeably. They do not want a joy that is robbed of happiness.

And the truth is, we don’t either. When you chose to sin, do you ever do it with the goal of it robbing you of happiness? No. We choose it because it will give us a dose of pleasure, a dose of happiness. We want that good feeling in whatever form we have allowed ourselves to become addicted to.

Well the huge difference between the **world’s happiness apart from God** and **the believer’s happiness in God** is that the world’s happiness is fleeting and has its foundation on the shifting sands of circumstances. The believer’s happiness and joy and gladness is steady because **the foundations of it** are in bedrock. They are as solid as the promises and love of God.

The non believer wishes for good things to come every day to sustain their happiness. And often they will spend anything that they think will provide them with that temporary fix of happiness. The believer does not need to wish. We hope. We wildly look forward to that which we know is going to happen. And that hope allows us gladness and happiness in situations where the world could have nothing of the kind. We see Paul mention this.

Romans 12:12 (NKJV)

12 rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer;

Rejoicing in hope, or having joy in hope. Our hope is our foundation for our joy. Our good feelings are based upon that which we believe will happen. Our happiness has a firm foundation so it can withstand the storms. The world’s happiness is always based on wishful thinking.

OK

So we have looked at this idea that happiness and joy are not different animals. They are experienced to some degree by non believers. But a superior joy is provided to believers.

Now what is it? That is hard to answer. Scripture does not put an easy definition to it.

But rest assured, it is an emotional word. Joy has to do with a deeply emotional condition. If we were to deprive it of this, we would have to rewrite scripture.

Now I am going to borrow from some work that John Piper did.

First I will list three things that joy is not.

1. Christian Joy is not an act of will power.

One thing is for sure. You don't get joy by telling yourself how much you should have it. Our emotional states don't work that way. You can never change your emotions by focusing on your emotions. You change your emotions by changing the thoughts where your emotions are coming from.

Now sometimes our emotions come from our chemical reactions in our bodies and our hormones and other kinds of things. Those emotions sometimes need to be endured. And that can be extremely difficult. But the source for joy is to believe what God says is true.

Look at this.

1 Peter 1:8-9 (NKJV)

⁸ whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see *Him*, **yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible** and full of glory,

⁹ receiving the end of your faith--the salvation of *your* souls.

Does this look like something that someone drums up in their souls to you?

No. This is a reaction to **the content believed**. That is how we are wired.

The good news is always that you do not need to drum up emotions to be a good Christian. You don't have to fake feelings. But you do need to have self control in your mind. You need the Holy Spirit's fruit of self control to control the thoughts you are thinking and to take captive the ones that are from the world and the flesh and the devil. And if you don't think you are tempted to believe those lies, you just aren't paying attention.

Do you feel despondent, hopeless, defeated, fearful, desperate. Follow your trail of thoughts. If you will do that and commit that process to prayer, you are very likely to track many of those thoughts back to seeds that are lies.

Now if you are not reacting to some life event, then maybe it is biological. But if your emotions are a response to something that is happening in your life,

that is not something that was inflicted upon you. That is something you are deciding. Follow it to its seed.

We see here what belief leads to. It may not be immediate. It may be gradual. But the **truth of what is true about a believer leads to joy inexpressible**. And think about it. How could it not?

2. **Christian Joy Is Not Superficial and Flimsy**

When we say that the believer's joy is not like the non believer's happiness, this is much of what we mean. But what we are really saying is that the foundation of our happiness is more firm and more exciting than the wishful thinking that a non believer's happiness is built upon. When a terminal illness hits a non believer, they are going to have a very difficult time holding onto their happiness. But a believer's happiness is different.

Romans 5:2-3 (NKJV)

² **through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.**

³ **And not only *that*, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance;**

2 Corinthians 8:2 (NKJV)

² **that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality.**

2 Corinthians 6:10 (NKJV)

¹⁰ **as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.**

Can you see what causes this deep joy, this unspeakable joy? I think it is impossible to miss. It is based, again, on what we really, in our heart of hearts, **believe**. That is where it springs from. It is the **unchanging truth** in the midst of our **changing circumstances**. These people did not have joy BECAUSE they were suffering hard times. They had joy because the hard times did not eliminate **their source** of joy. Their joy was not based on having to have a pleasant **here and now**. In fact, the **here and now** had very little to do with the fuel of what they had joy about. Everything about **here and now** is working out for a better **THEN**. There is nothing that can happen now that will convince us that we are not headed toward a great reward. That is the point.

3. **Christian Joy Is Not Natural**

Now we have already made the point that human joy feels the same whether it is in a believer or a non believer. Joy is joy and happiness is happiness. But one difference in Christian joy is that it stems from a miracle of God's work in our lives. God has changed our reality. We used to be creatures that could be

explained by biology and circumstances and social sciences and human events. But one day God got hold of us and suddenly we were something very different. We became **spiritually alive** instead of **spiritually dead**. We could **see** instead of being **blind**.

So that which we believe to be true is now supernatural. We were given faith which is the gift of God. That faith results in hope and that hope results in joy. They are both supremely logical and emotionally breathtaking. We find that the work of **the Holy Spirit** is the **source** of our deep joy that withstands life's hardships. We are convinced of truths that the world around us is completely uninterested in. They motivate us and drive us and we look crazy to those around us. They try to make this planet as much of a home as it can possibly be, and we look at it as something we are just passing through.

So this joy we have, which feels similar to the world's joy, is just like joy on steroids. It has a spiritual source and is rooted in spiritual truth.

Galatians 5:22-23 (NKJV)

²² **But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,**

²³ **gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.**

1 Thessalonians 1:6 (NKJV)

⁶ **And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit,**

There are other passages, but this is just to show that the joy has a supernatural source. Now I have a question here. Is this describing a God-Zap emotional feeling or is this describing the predictable result of a transformed mind. In other words, does the Holy Spirit zap us with the feeling of joy? Or does the Holy Spirit work **the truth** deep into our hearts and believing that truth cannot help but result in **overflowing joy**.

Surely God does both at times. But I think normal Christian life is based on the change of thought that results in the change of feeling. I don't think the emotion of joy is the miracle. I think the changed heart that believes the amazing promises of God is the miracle. The joy is a predictable outcome of that change in thinking. We have an incredible future that is absolutely certain that we have to look forward to, no matter what is happening to us right now.

I want to give a definition of joy that is what I believe at this moment. It may change.

Joy is a deep seated feeling of well being that is derived from believing the truths about our relationship with God and the good things He has

done and will do for us and others. The intensity of our experience of this supreme happiness may ebb and flow based on the focus of our faith and competing life's circumstances, but the **truth** that our joy **is based on** is such that it is always true, even during life's worse experiences. So joy is always available and we are expected to continually gravitate toward it.

OK now in keeping with Mr. Piper's outline we have the next important question.

Can this joy be commanded?

And the answer is YES. Now how can this happen if we cannot drum up emotions? I think we will see that the **commands to rejoice** are all based on **mental content**, on reason that the writers communicate. We make a rational choice on what we will focus on, what we will dwell on, what we will believe. And that choice determines whether we have joy or not.

I firmly believe that on any given day we can have a wide range of emotions and that means **very little** about our spiritual lives. But the patterns of what **we feel** that are the natural outcome of patterns of how **we choose to think**, those mean a great deal. Emotions are not adequate indicators of truth. But emotions are clues that we can follow to find out what we are thinking. Spiritual thinking based on the truths of God's word lead to unspeakable joy. If our trend is not toward joy, there is something wrong with what we are believing, or there is a biological problem somewhere.

Let's look at the commands.

Matthew 5:11-12 (NKJV)

¹¹ **"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.**

¹² **Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**

Do you see the mental content that the joy is based on. Great is your reward in heaven. The logical conclusion would be if the reward in heaven is not enough for us, then there is something wrong with our thinking. If we expect something more from God, we are thinking faithlessly.

1 Thessalonians 5:16 (NKJV)

¹⁶ **Rejoice always,**

Philippians 4:4 (NKJV)

⁴ **Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!**

1 Peter 4:12-13 (NKJV)

¹² **Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you;**

13 but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.

Do you see the reasoning here. It does not say, have joy just because you should have joy. The reasoning is that we should have joy because we have a reason to have joy that supersedes the awful conditions we are currently facing. When God's glory is revealed you will be in a wonderful spot, as opposed to those who think they are in a great spot now. Our joy comes from truth believed. We don't drum up the joy. But we **do decide** what we will believe. Will we believe our seemers? Will we be critical of God's choices of what He allows in our lives? Or will we simply believe Him. Both joy and hope are the outcome of belief.

And consider this all from God's point of view. Have you ever had a child that refused to be happy? How did you feel about that? Did you not see it as an intentional reflection upon the job you were doing? Did you not feel that it was intended as a criticism at how you were doing your job? How do you think God views it when we refuse to be happy in Him? How do you think He takes it when we will not focus on the future that He has promised us? How do you think He views it when we will not trust that He has good intentions for us in what is happening and that He will bring them to fruition? God commands us to rejoice in Him, to have Joy in Him, because He deserves that we should be a joyful people for all that He has done and will do for us. Are we so self absorbed that all we think about is what **we should have** and **what we want** and what we think **we deserve** and what we think **we can handle**? If so we are completely missing the point of faith. Faith reorients our reality around God because, well, He is worthy. It is pretty simple. We should be full of happiness in God because He is worthy of us being happy in Him.

I want to quote John Piper here even though he throws in some things we have not looked at.

Now we can put the pieces together: first, there is the **love of God** which chooses us and calls us and justifies us and guarantees for us a share in the glory of God. Then, there is the **work of the Holy Spirit** that pours the love of God into our hearts so that we recognize it and cherish it. Then, out of this deep experience of the love of God grows **an unshakable hope** even in the midst of suffering. And finally, in **this hope we rejoice, we experience joy**. So you can see, this joy and happiness that we should feel comes from the most secure foundation that there could ever be. How gloriously fortunate we are for the **joy that God gives us**. And here is John in our text writing to us so that **our joy will be full to overflowing**. How much more fortunate could we possibly be?