

Broomfield



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Christ's Call to Rejoice

Philippians 3:1

At one point in his life, Martin Luther came upon a Christian who had committed a grievous sin and had spent no less than eight hours asking God to forgive him. This wounded Christian said over and over and over "Oh God, please forgive me!" "Lord Jesus have mercy!" "Forgive my sin!" "Oh Lord, cleanse me!"

After standing over this brother and listening to him pray, Martin Luther said, "Get up! God heard you the first time!"

Martin Luther was correct in exhorting this Christian. Not only because he was making a mockery of God's grace. But also because "the joy of the Lord is [our] strength."¹

That was the exhortation that Ezra and the elders gave to the people of God when they were weeping over their sin. Truly their generation needed to get beyond their mourning over the past, and live in light of the joy of God! And such is the exhortation that rests upon us this day!

Joy not only is a fruit of the Spirit², the result of resting in the Vine³, something we must have during trial and tribulation⁴, but it is our strength.⁵ Yet today we lack joy. We view it as optional. We are a generation of malcontents, and are amazingly happy to live there.

It used to be that a joyless Christian raised the concern of all around them. However, today if you have joy you are considered to be a spiritual "green beret."

I'll never forget the woman in a previous church who called me one day. She expressed to me that she didn't think that she had ever experienced joy as a Christian. Her husband had told her that she just

¹ Compare Nehemiah 8:10

² Compare Galatians 5:22

³ Compare John 15:4, 11

⁴ Compare James 1:2-3

⁵ Compare Nehemiah 8:10

“didn’t have the personality for it.”

I’ll also never forget the man who led the church in corporate prayer on day and said, “God, I don’t understand joy!”

Family of God, since the joy of the Lord is our strength⁶ and the fruit of the Spirit begins with joy⁷ then I can assure you on the authority of God’s word that the Lord intends all of us not only to understand joy, but to live in joy!

Today I intend to answer these questions about joy. What is it? And upon what basis can we possess joy?

This morning, let’s answer these questions and more as we look at “Christ’s Call to Rejoice.” Let’s begin by looking at Philippians 3:1.

The Condition for Rejoicing

Philippians 3:1, “**Finally, my⁸ brethren⁹, rejoice¹⁰ in the Lord.** To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe.”

It is important to note as we again take up the topic of rejoicing that the object of Paul’s exhortation here is, *my brethren*. This is far more than a description of ones who were saved. *Brethren* speaks of the rich, covenantal bond that exists among the people of God on account of Christ — a covenantal bond which if lacking will rob the believer of his joy.

Today we live in a day of non-commitment. Jobs are staffed by people seeking a pay check. Schools are attended with no loyalty to the institution — it is just a means to get a degree. In fact, I recently saw an editorial comic in which the coach of a football team is standing in front of his players speaking on a cell phone. The caption read, “Sure I’d be interested in interviewing for the job. Call me at half-time!” Society on the whole lacks a collegiate atmosphere.

It is this mentality that has crept into the body of Christ. A church is the place where I go to hear a good message and participate in great music. Many attend churches so they can find a spouse. Others come to make new friends. Still others come to enhance their business contacts. It has long since been a family of intimate and abiding fellowship to which I commit myself and they to me.

Thus upon a first reading of this verse, it is easy to skip over the word *brethren*. Yet as we have already seen in this epistle, *brother* means far more to Paul than just *saved ones*. The term *brethren* speaks of a commitment first to the Lord and then to the body of Christ which is composed of brothers and sisters. This text tells us that where this commitment is lacking, so also and proportionally will our joy be lacking.

For example on Paul’s second missionary journey¹¹, God’s providence found the apostle separated from the body of Christ.

⁶ Compare Nehemiah 8:10

⁷ Compare Galatians 5:22

⁸ μου μου

⁹ αδελφος adelphos

¹⁰ χαίρω chairō

¹¹ Compare 1 Thessalonians 2:17-31

1 Thessalonians 2:17-18, “But we, brethren, being taken from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavoured the more abundantly to see your face with great desire. Wherefore we would have come unto you, even I Paul, once and again; but Satan hindered us.”

This separation from the brethren had a profound effect upon Paul.

1 Thessalonians 3:1, “**Wherefore when we could no longer forbear**¹², we thought it good to be left at Athens alone.”

This term endure is a nautical term that refers to a water-tight boat. It indicates a deck that is holding out the water and pushing against the pressure. The fact that Paul was no longer able to endure indicates that Paul was being crushed by the pressure. His ship was sinking. His roof had collapsed. Truly, this verse speaks of a condition in Paul’s life where we can say that he lacked joy! You say, “Isn’t that reading a little too much into this text?” Absolutely not.

1 Thessalonians 2:19-20, “For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming? For ye are our glory and joy.”

The church of the Thessalonians was Paul’s joy in the Lord! To be bereft of this body would necessarily dampen his joy. And such is the case for all God’s children in the body of Christ! To be bereft of the covenant family called the church is not necessarily to rob you of all your joy, but certainly a large portion of it!

The Content of Rejoicing

Philippians 3:1, “Finally, my brethren, **rejoice**¹³ **in the Lord**. To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe.”

The root of this word in the Greek is the word for *joy*. Consequently the term *rejoice* is an expressed joy. It is a joy which comes from knowing that when it comes to God it is well with my soul. Peter equates joy with trusting in Christ.

1 Peter 1:8, “Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, **yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.**”

Peter speaking of our coming salvation wrote this:

1 Peter 1:6, “**Wherein ye greatly rejoice**, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations.”

Salvation is the fountain from which springs abundant joy in the life of the believer! A. W. Tozer explains this truth this way:

”The man who comes to a right belief about God is relieved of ten thousand temporal problems, for he sees at once that [his problems] have to do with matters which at the most cannot concern him for very long; ... [for gazing upon God] the one mighty single burden of eternity begins to

¹² στεγω stego

¹³ χαίρω chairō

press down upon him with a weight more crushing than all the woes of the world piled one upon another. That mighty burden is his obligation to God. It includes an instant and lifelong duty to love God with every power of mind and soul, to obey Him perfectly, and to worship Him acceptably. And when the man's laboring conscience tells him that he has done none of these things, but has from childhood been guilty of foul revolt against the Majesty in the heavens, the inner pressure of self-accusation may become too heavy to bear.

"The gospel can lift this destroying burden from the mind, give beauty for ashes, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness."¹⁴

Our joy arises from the soil of an understanding of our "burden to God!"

Consider your burden this day. What is your obligation toward the Almighty in terms of living a life perfectly before Him? You cannot have one sin, bad thought, and evil desire, one failed obligation. Then consider that Christ has relieved you of your burden by giving you His perfect life in exchange for your miserable failings on account of which He went to the cross and died! The resulting state is what we call joy!

Joy is not a "be happy" attitude. It does not come from the sappy smile which sings "don't worry! Be Happy! It is not an emotion. Rather it is a deep conviction arising from the soul which says, "God is at peace with me!"

Joy arises from the certainty that when God looks upon me, He smiles with approval! And that brings me to the very important question: What is God's disposition toward you when you sin? Is it wrath? Is it the stern look of disapproval?

Romans 3:25, "**Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation¹⁵ through faith in his blood**, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God."

Propitiation is a wrath removing sacrifice. A sacrifice that appeases or expiates wrath is said to be propitiation. We can conclude that if you are in Christ, God never again will look upon you in wrath.

This doesn't mean that God will not discipline us as His children.¹⁶ Rather, what it means is that when He disciplines us, He does on account of His love for us.¹⁷

If you are struggling in your walk with God and are burdened by the heaviness of your sin know that in Christ God is for you.¹⁸ God looks upon you in your sin and rebellion and sees His Son! God rejoices over you on account of the Lord! Now if you will accept this just for a moment, you will know joy. This will naturally lead us to the cause of the believers' rejoicing.

The Cause of the Believers' Rejoicing

Philippians 3:1, "Finally, my brethren, rejoice **in the Lord¹⁹**. To write the same things to you, to

¹⁴ A. W. Tozer, The Knowledge of the Holy pages 10-11

¹⁵ ἱλαστήριον hilasterion

¹⁶ Compare Hebrews 12:11

¹⁷ Compare Hebrews 12:6

¹⁸ Compare Romans 8:31

¹⁹ κυριος kurios

me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe.”

It is an important statement: *in the Lord*. In fact it is the first time in this epistle that Paul has qualified the term *joy* with *in the Lord*.

Today in the church, we “rejoice” over so many things. 1.”I am sky-high today; I got the job!” ”Praise Jesus! My loved one has returned home safely!” ”I am so happy! My quiet times are back on track!” Truly, we can be found rejoicing in what God has blessed us with. We rejoice in prosperity, in personal accomplishment, in a loved one, in a sweet providence. Rarely is the cause of our joy the person and work of Christ!

Yet — don’t miss it — the only cause/basis for a believer’s rejoicing is “in the Lord.”

This practically means that “rejoicing” is an expressed joy derived from the knowledge that it is well with my soul before God. The ground of rejoicing is not my profession of faith. It is not based upon my decision to follow Christ. It is not an attitude. It is not based upon my moral conduct. This is an important distinction for these typically are the things in which we rejoice most today! Yet each one of these is mutable/changeable! It is no wonder we lack so much joy today.

Biblical joy is rooted and grounded in an increasing apprehension of God’s greatness and man’s sinfulness. These truths should cause us to have an abounding marveling over the fact that God approves of me! Let me give you a couple of examples that recently have moved me?

Bible printing in the house of atheist

Voltaire, the noted French skeptic, who died in 1778, predicted that in one hundred years from his time Christianity would be swept from existence and passed into history. Yet fifty years after Voltaire’s death, the Geneva Bible Society moved into his house and used his printing press to produce thousands of Bibles for worldwide distribution!

See the unthwartable plan of God by which He makes foolish the wise of this world.²⁰ Consider that this unthwartable God has set His love upon me and taken away my sin. I must consider it all joy even when I encounter trials.²¹

Re-Awakening to the Things of God

Consider the story of Richard Wurmbrand. Wurmbrand was a Soviet Christian who was sentenced time and time again to the gulag on account of his faith. In one such imprisonment, he was placed in solitary confinement where he witnessed to the other prisoners by tapping out a code on the wall.

After many months, Wurmbrand succumbed to his torture and he lost his mind. When he was released into the general prison population, a fellow prisoner sat down opposite him and whispered the gospel which slowly woke him from his stupor. Some time later Wurmbrand asked the prisoner where he had come to hear of the gospel. The man replied, “While in solitary confinement a man tapped out the gospel message on the wall! You guessed it, that man was Richard Wurmbrand!

²⁰ Compare 1 Corinthians 1:20

²¹ Compare James 1:2

Once again, when I consider God’s amazing grace by which He saves and protects His children my heart soars with joy even though the world may fall around me. To be part of God’s family is cause for rejoicing.

The Bible gives more illustrations of God’s amazing grace. Consider Abraham who spent 30 years waiting for the promised child. Joseph spent years in a dungeon in the service of God. Daniel ended up in a lion’s den. David wandered around the desert waiting to be King. Moses stood before the Pharaoh. Jeremiah was cast in the well. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stood condemned before Nebuchadnezzar. Elijah ran in the wilderness. Joshua met the Warrior before the conquest. Gideon and his 300 men prepared for battle. Peter was cast into prison. The disciples waited in the upper room. All these saints²² beheld the unstoppable plan of God through which they each were delivered from their trial and eventually graduated into the presence of God hearing those precious words, “Well done thou good and faithful servant!”²³

I cannot look at God’s incredible acts of deliverance and His glorious character without being consumed with joy! As I consider that the same God who shut the mouths of lions has shut the mouth of Satan. The God who raised the dead has promised to raise me from the dead. The Deliverer who brought Joseph out of prison has promised to deliver me out of mine. The Physician who healed the leper and brought sight to the blind has promised to heal all my diseases. The God who blessed Sarah with a baby, Naaman with health, and Samson with strength has given me every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.²⁴ When I consider all these I abound in joy!

We must live in joy when the basis of our joy is the unchanging Rock — Jesus Christ!

In fact, recall that Paul who is exhorting the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord was at that very moment imprisoned in Rome. He was being buffeted and abused by Christians. He was bereft of the comforts of this earth. And he was awaiting the possible news of his execution. Yet he was filled with joy. Why? Because he knew that sitting in his prison cell with him was a sovereign Lord whose unthwartable will was being accomplished.

This is why Paul called upon the Philippians who themselves were facing a similar bitter providence²⁵ to rejoice in the Lord!

This brings us to the caution when it comes to rejoicing.

The Caution When It Comes To Rejoicing

Philippians 3:1, “Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. **To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous²⁶, but for you it is safe²⁷.**”

This phrase links Paul’s call to rejoice with the exhortation given in verse 2 regarding false Christians.

²² Compare Hebrews 11

²³ Compare Matthew 25:11

²⁴ Compare Ephesians 3:1

²⁵ Compare Philippians 1:30

²⁶ οκνηρος okneros

²⁷ ασφαλης ασπηαλεσ το λοιπον αδελφοι μου χαιρετε εν κυριω τα αυτα γραφειν υμιν εμοι μεν ουκ οκνηρον υμιν δε ασφαλες

This implies that verses 1 and 2 are themes that Paul dealt with at Philippi²⁸.

Philippians 3:1 is the eighth time in the epistle that Paul deals with joy²⁹. This might cause us to think “Paul is in a rut here.” But we know that this is not the case since this is the Word of God. The fact that Paul mentions joy as many times as he has in this epistle is an indication that in the life of the believer — don’t miss this — joy is fragile!

In fact, notice the wording. The term safe is a reference to a place of security.³⁰ Its verbal form is used of not tripping, stumbling, or being overthrown. In essence, Paul is seeking to safeguard their joy lest it should be overthrown.

Likewise Paul is writing this so that we may safeguard the joy in our walks with God. For if we are negligent, the joy of the Lord which “is our strength”³¹ will evaporate!

You may say, I thought that joy was not based on circumstances?

It isn’t! But just like Peter who took his eyes off the Lord³² we too can easily find ourselves taking our focus off of Christ. And when we loose focus of Christ we loose our joy!

What is it that can compromise joy? What is it that can take our eyes of the Lord? Sin.³³ Tribulation.³⁴ (In fact James exhortation implies that trials can rob us of our joy.) Regrets over our past failings can rob of joy.³⁵ These situations can rob the believer of joy because they tend to take our focus off of Christ!

Yet there still is another cause for joyless living as believers. The very reason Paul is calling upon the Philippians to rejoice here is found in chapter three of Philippians. Here Paul transitions into a sober discussion of the Philippians’ future. So much so that the Apostle found it necessary to exhort the Philippians here to not loose their joy! Keep their focus on Christ. Anchor their joy in the Lord.

What was it about the Philippians’ future — and ours — that might take our focus off Christ and thus rob them of joy?

Philippians 3:2, “Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the concision”

On the horizon of every work of God and of every church is the threat of apostasy and treachery.

Acts 20:29-31, “For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.”

²⁸ Hendriksen, NTC, *Philippians*, page 148; Ferguson, *Let's Study Philippians*, pages 70-71; Bruce, NIBC, *Philippians*, page 102.

²⁹ Compare Philippians 1:4, 18, 25; 2:2, 18, 28, 29

³⁰ Compare Hebrews 6:19

³¹ Compare Nehemiah 8:10

³² Compare Matthew 14:30

³³ Compare Psalm 51:12

³⁴ Compare James 1:2-3

³⁵ Compare Nehemiah 8:10

In fact Paul wrote specifically to the church at Philippi speaking of professing Christians:

Philippians 3:18-19, "(For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things.)"

So the Philippians must not be mistaken. As wonderful, precious, and glorious as had been the work of the Lord in their midst, they must be sober-minded and watchful. The work that God was doing there would not go unchallenged or unhindered. Satan was sending his vessels — some of whom would be well-intentioned dragons — whose effect would be the disruption of God's work in that body.³⁶

This is scary. And that is Paul's point! In spite of what might happen tomorrow, we must not approach our future with apprehension. God is working in and through our lives. Rather, we must face the future with the joy of the Lord. For the joy of the Lord is our strength! And so, let us therefore guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Let us entrust our souls and our future to the faithful Creator because He is doing what is right.³⁷ Keep our confidence in the Lord!

Let us be people of joy!

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on January 26, 2003. Greg is the preacher at Broomfield Presbyterian Church.

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³⁶ I have a good friend in the gospel ministry, who having watched church after church be infiltrated by "dogs," gives this encouragement to all families that come: "We are a church at peace. The fellowship here is intimate and precious. If you have any other plans than to add to this intimacy, we ask you to leave now."

³⁷ Compare 1 Peter 4:19