Joy is Yours

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JOY IS YOURS

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Joy Is Yours

W hy is there so much sorrow in the world?” someone asked me not long ago. A well-known preacher of the recent past preached a famous sermon, “The Story that Never Grows Old,” in which he assigned three reasons why the message of Christ must be preached to every generation and era. His reasons were: because there is so much sin in the world; because there is so much anarchy in the world; and because there is so much sorrow in the world. Those three conditions of the human predicament remain just as real today in too many of our lives.

Have you ever found yourself feeling a vague, indefinable burden? How often have you stopped in the midst of a busy day, only to notice the worried frown on your face? In recent weeks I have carefully watched the faces of my fellow travelers in various parts of the United States, from Seattle to New York. Frankly, I have seen what appeared to me to be a large number of joyless people. Will history say of us that we never experienced true joy?

God does have something else for those who believe in Him. The shepherds near Bethlehem heard an angel announce, “Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people: for there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10, 11). “Great joy . . . to all the people” indicated the state resulting in every life that would totally accept Jesus as Saviour. This announcement of great joy should also be connected with one of the last things Jesus said to His disciples before the crucifixion. “These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full” (John 15:11). At the beginning and end of His earthly life Christ and the angels emphasized joy in the lives of all disciples.

The Bible speaks conclusively and convincingly of the joy God gives to man. Of God’s revelation to him, the prophet Jeremiah declared, “Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy words were unto me a joy and the rejoicing of my heart: for I am called by thy name, O Jehovah, God of hosts” (Jeremiah 15:16). The man who accepts God’s word for his life thereby receives the joy of heaven into his heart.

David, the vivid Old Testament example of sin’s agony, was allowed to know again the joy of God. In his famous penitential prayer of the fifty-first Psalm this famous sinner confessed his transgressions, cried for God’s forgiveness, and also petitioned, “Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice” (Psalm 51:8). Later, in the same prayer for forgiveness, he prayed for “a right spirit within” himself (Psalm 51:10). This “spirit” is further defined when David pleads, “Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with a willing spirit” (Psalm 51:12). God’s gracious and complete forgiveness of all sin provided the basis for David’s joy.

The Acts of the Apostles reveals joy as a major result of one’s conversion to Christ. The Philippian Jailor listened to the message of Christ presented by Paul and Silas (Acts 16:31, 32). Out of his hearing of Christ came a new faith in Christ, a reversal of attitude and conduct toward his former prisoners, and obedience to Christ in baptism (Acts 16:33). At this point in the story of his conversion the author of Acts says this: “And he brought them up into his house, and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, with all his house, having believed in God” (Acts 16:34). Today as I fully surrender to Christ in the penitent, obedient faith that expresses itself in baptism, I am thus recreated into a new life of “great joy.”

The power that creates this joy in the obedient Christian’s life is explained by Paul in two passages, The
Me.
The apostle identifies “joy” as “the fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22, 23). Christians at Thessalonica were reminded by Paul that “ye became imitators of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 1:6). Notice carefully that we have not here discovered another method by which joy arises in our lives. Rather by remembering the jailor’s experience of “great joy” following his obedience to the gospel of Christ, we naturally recall the teaching of Acts 2:38 and Acts 5:32 which reveal that the Holy Spirit is given as a gift to those who obey God, who repent and are baptized for the remission of all sins. At this point, according to Ephesians 1:13, 14 and Galatians 4:6, the Holy Spirit dwells and lives in our hearts with one of His Biblically described results being a state, mood, and condition of joy!

The apostle Paul prayed for his brethren in Christ at Rome: “Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, in the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13). Joy the Christian knows, joy to sustain God’s child through life’s experiences, is given every soul obedient to God’s word.

Christ is the center of the Christian’s life. He is the Christian’s sovereign and therefore controls and directs all that the Christian says and does. Our Lord Jesus repeatedly assured His followers of a joyful life. More than twenty times in John, chapters fourteen through sixteen, Jesus explained and promised joy to His followers. Among other things He said, “These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full” (John 16:24).

Our study of these words from the Master in John sixteen prepares us to look more closely into what actually occurred in the lives of these followers who were told they would sorrow and then rejoice again.

Following the crucifixion Mark reveals that the entire group “mourned and wept” (Mark 16:10). When Mary Magdalene came with the first report of the empty tomb, this same group “disbelieved” her (Mark 16:11). Luke tells that the entire group of women who had gone to the tomb returned with the report of the resurrection only to have their message declared “idle talk; and they disbelieved them” (Luke 24:11).

On the Sunday evening of the resurrection day the disciples gathered behind closed doors “for fear of the Jews” (John 20:19). When Jesus appeared to them on that occasion Luke says, “they were terrified and afrighted, and supposed that they beheld a spirit” (Luke 24:37).

On this and subsequent meetings between Jesus and His followers He spoke three messages to them. First. He reassured them with the words, “Peace be unto you” (Luke 24:36; John 20:19, 26). Second, these meetings provided the opportunity for Jesus to reprove His followers for their unbelief. To the two disciples of Emmaus He declared, “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Behooved it not the Christ to suffer these things, and to enter into his glory?” (Luke 24:23, 26). Mark’s account of the great commission reveals that before that wondrous change Jesus “upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them that had seen him after he was risen” (Mark 16:14). And third, Christ gave them a definite mission for life. “Reach out into all nations and touch every creature with the message of me” (Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:15, 16; Luke 24:44-49).

From utter chaos and intense sorrow, to a confused and muddled kind of joy, to a great and abiding presence, the apostles were transformed by their resurrection faith into triumphant and invincible Christians. Even before the now famous Pentecost, Luke tells us that, following the Lord’s ascension, these transformed disciples “returned to Jerusalem with great joy: and were continually in the temple, blessing God” (Luke 24:52, 53). The same resurrection faith they knew, we also know today (I Peter 1:3). In that faith, Peter says, we “greatly rejoice” (I Peter 1:6). The announced blessing of joy is and was realized in every believer’s life (Luke 2:10, 11).

But it must also be observed that this recovered joy obviously requires the Christian’s continual attention. Peter talks, in his First General Epistle, of “the proof of” the Christian’s faith, and says that his attitude toward Christ must be that of “not having seen ye love; on whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice greatly with joy unspeakable and full of glory: receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls.” (I Peter 1:6-9). Joy results from one’s increasing strength of faith and love.

In another part of the same epistle, Peter says that Christians “are partakers of Christ’s sufferings” and should, therefore, “rejoice” (I Peter 4:13). This posture and attitude is explained in the next part of the same verse, “that at the revelation of his glory also ye may rejoice with exceeding joy” (I Peter 4:13). In the following verse Peter explains why the Christian can rejoice when “reproached for the name of Christ,” “because the Spirit of glory and the Spirit of God resteth upon you” (I Peter 4:14). In this passage strong emphasis is placed on one’s intimate association with Christ and the Holy Spirit for continual and increasing Christian joy.

That we must give continual attention to our recovered joy appears again in Paul’s description of “the kingdom of God,” the essence of which is “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). The kingdom here described is that which Jesus teaches us to seek first (Matthew 6:33). By keeping the Kingdom of God foremost in our lives, and by giving diligent attention to our responsibilities as kingdom citizens, we open our lives to greater joy.

In the Old Testament the joy of God’s people came because they took “refuge in” God; because God defended...
them; and because of their love for God’s name (Psalm 5:11; 33:21).

But no discussion of recovered joy can dismiss Paul, the joyful Christian. No New Testament figure, no Biblical writer, no gospel preacher, displayed more personal joy than this apostle. His joy, Paul wrote, is “in the Lord” (Philippians 4:4). The fellowship with his “children in the faith” and the financial and prayer support of his ministry by fellow Christians created joy in his life (Philippians 4:1, 10; I Thessalonians 3:9). So overpowering was this emotion, understanding, and presence in Paul’s life that he knew joy in the midst of sorrow (II Corinthians 6:10), in all kinds of affliction (II Corinthians 7:4), and even in martyrdom (Philippians 2:17, 18). Paul remains the epitome of Christian joy. He is our example for a full, confident, happy, joyful Christian life today!

The joy Christ realized in His life called for His sacrifice at Calvary (Hebrews 12:2). Do not mistake this profound condition of heart and life with sentimentalism. Well-defined goals and purposes coupled with the proper commitments of life create joy for us regardless of the external circumstances of this life (Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-4). Isaiah best concludes our discussion: “Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem; for Jehovah hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem. Jehovah hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God” (Isaiah 52:9, 10).

God said in the death of His Son, Jesus Christ, “I want to be involved in your burdens. I want to help you to a joyful, eternal life.” Rather than “reckoning unto us our sins” God gave of Himself in order to reconcile us, Paul teaches in II Corinthians 5:18, 19. I wish I knew how to describe the bliss, the serenity, the abiding comfort, and the never-ceasing joy that you can know as a Christian. Hear Jesus’ call to faith (John 3:36), to repentance (Luke 13:3), to public acceptance of Him (Matthew 10:32, 33), and to baptism (Mark 16:16). “Joy unspeakable” is the way the Bible describes what you will know as the result of your personal surrender.