

Rejoice in the Lord  
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We were made for joy, for laughter, for songs, for dancing in the rippling stream, for gazing into the wondrous glory of sun-crowned mountains, for hearing earth's perpetual plainchant, steadily drumming, "Holy, Holy, Holy," for witnessing the wonder of rushing rivers crashing across ancient stones, for walking through tender spring grass glistening with morning dew, for harmony, for hilarity. We were made for light. Sung into being by the breath of the Holy Lover, we were created in the delightful bliss of Eden.

Now we live so very far from Eden.

We live in a land of fear and anger and anxiety and pain. We stumble through a maze of human desires and human cruelty and human selfishness. Our world bears the mark of sin: hearts turned away from the lovingkindness of our Creator and Father above. We are haunted by an unnamed longing, a yearning, a desire. Desire drives us forward, as we seek to possess that joy, that unending happiness, that elusive longing that plagues the human heart.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ breaks into the gloom of human emptiness with Good News, glad tidings, great joy! Our Creator is our redeemer, our lover, our healer. He has come to free us from the slavery of sin and selfishness.

When St. Paul enters Philippi, he bears witness to this exceeding Good News. He frees the slave girl held captive by unclean spirits. When he and Silas are captured, beaten and imprisoned for this Good News, they respond with songs of praise. The joy of the Lord echoes through the cells and hearts of the prisoners. The foundations are shaken, the doors are opened, the shackles fall away. Fearing the prisoners had escaped, the jailor draws his sword, intending to kill himself. But Paul cries out, "Do yourself no harm, we are here."

Paul and Silas bring the Good News of Great Joy to the jailor and his whole family. They step out of darkness and into the joyous, wondrous hope of God's love in Christ. And so begins a friendship, a fellowship of love, a community of Christ in the city of Philippi.

Years later, Paul writes his friends in Philippi. He writes from a Roman prison. He writes to encourage his friends who are suffering alongside him, and when he writes, his words are bursting with joy.

“Rejoice in the Lord. Again I will say, Rejoice!” He is echoing an ancient refrain from the Psalmist. In some sense, he is echoing the ancient song of Eden, the holy joy of creation’s Sabbath. John Calvin writes, “There is not one blade of grass, there is no color in this world that is not intended to make us rejoice.” As we are transformed in and through Christ, we behold a world ablaze in joy.

But we don’t always behold that world. It’s not always easy to rejoice. The pressures of life, the struggles of our heart, health, family situations and more can all make joy seem a bit elusive. When people are struggling or discouraged or facing great trials and struggles, how can we say, “Rejoice in the Lord!” It sounds a bit hollow and even cold. Are we singing songs to heavy hearts? Are we treating pain lightly, and calling for superficial smiles?

Years ago the Mark Heard sang a song about a church living on superficial smiles. He writes,

These plastic halos  
They seem so out of place  
Behind the mask  
lurks a scarred and fragile face  
We lie so spiritually  
Familiar smiles  
displayed  
Misleading masquerade

We hide our pain  
We try to laugh  
Fools to think our tears  
Would provoke holy wrath  
In stone-gray silence  
We do not face our fears  
We bite our lips  
And we press on with feeble cheer  
With hearts of sadness  
We say our thankful prayers

## Refusing comfort unawares<sup>1</sup>

How do we rejoice in the Lord with hearts of sadness? How do we avoid wearing plastic halos and superficial smiles? As I was reflecting upon Paul's charge, I felt this tension strongly in my own heart and life. I want to honor those who suffer and don't feel joyful, but I also believe the Gospel calls us into joy. So how do we live in this reality of kingdom joy without falling into a pretense of joy?

Paul is writing this letter from a prison cell where he awaits to hear his own life or death sentence, and he is writing a community who face persecution and struggles of their own. Yet, he persists with the call to "Rejoice in the Lord!"

How does he get to joy through struggle and pain? He focuses upon Jesus Christ. As we rehearse the words of Philippians, we might see afresh the goodness of God in the face of Christ.

- Chapter 1. The Call of Christ
- Chapter 2. The Mind of Christ
- Chapter 3. The Pursuit of Christ
- Chapter 4. The Provision of Christ

This is not an attempt offer a comprehensive look at Philippians or at the challenge of living into joy but maybe it will provoke to turn afresh to Jesus Christ, the source of our hope and joy.

In chapter one, Paul turns again and again the faithfulness of Christ as the source of joy and hope that his purpose will be fulfilled. He writes,

<sup>3</sup> I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, <sup>4</sup> always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, <sup>5</sup> for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, <sup>6</sup> being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ; <sup>7</sup> just as it is right for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as both in my chains and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers with me of grace. (Philippians 1:3-7)

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Heard. "These Plastic Halos," from *The Eye of the Storm*. Home Sweet Home Records, 1983.

Jesus Christ is at work in His people. Just as He gathered the Philippians through the word of Paul, He has gathered us. We believe because He has called us, opened our eyes and hearts, and led us into faith. The word He began, He will complete. He is leading us to fullness of joy and perfection of faith on the day when Jesus Christ us fully unveiled.

There are times in life when we will feel satisfied and hopeful that our life is valuable and has purpose, but there will be many times when we question our purpose, doubt our decision, feel discouraged about our achievements, and lost hope about our future.

In these times, we may turn afresh to the call of Christ.

We are created in and through Jesus Christ. We are redeemed in and through Christ. We trust that he is faithful to complete the work He has begun in us. What is this work? We are growing up into the image of Christ; we are becoming a people who reveal him in our words and actions and relationships. Paul continues in chapter one,

<sup>9</sup> And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, <sup>10</sup> that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup> being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1:9-11)

Our belief takes shape in a life of love toward other people. Even as we seek to follow the Lord and behold the Lord, He is making us into lovers.

Just as Sabbath commands us to remember God's action in creation and redemption, we remember that we have been created in and through Christ, and that we have been redeemed in Christ, and that we are being transformed into the fullness of Christ's love.

This regular habit of remembering teaches us a heart of thanksgiving. As the child's song reminds us, "Count your blessings." We remember the goodness of God in our lives. We remember the blessing of people all around. We cultivate a habit of thanksgiving in all we say and do.

Christ is working out His purposes, His love, His glory in our lives whether we are working in the business world, raising children, going to school,

retired, and at every other point in our lives. We rejoice even as we are learning to trust that He will complete the work He has begun in us.

In chapter two, Paul focuses upon the people around us. There are times in life when we lose our joy because of the problems in relationships: strife in the workplace; conflict at home; worry about a family member; or even persecution from the outside. Our joy is bound up in the lives of other people.

Paul reminds us of the mind of Christ. He writes,

Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, <sup>2</sup> fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus... (Philippians 2:1-5).

The call of Christ leads me directly to the cross of Christ, and I behold the Lord of Glory pour out His life for others in love. The writer of Hebrews exhorts us to,

... lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup> looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2)

As we think about joy and the cross, we might also consider the tension of Paul's command to "rejoice in the Lord" and the life of Jesus Christ as a "Man of Sorrows." In Isaiah 53 we are reminded,

<sup>3</sup> He is despised and rejected by men,  
A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.  
And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him;  
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. (Is 53:3)

How can joy and sorrow be reconciled? Only in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Only in Christ Jesus can we behold the Love of God that gives completely without restraint. The cross of Christ reveals God's love in a world of

sin and brokenness. Even as the cross reveals the damage of sin, it also reveals God's unrestrained love.

The Son humbles himself and pours his life out without restraint even to death on the cross. In turn, the Father pours out the Spirit of Resurrection and exalts the Son, giving Him the name above every name. This life of continual submission and service between Father, Son and Spirit reveals a communion of love and joy.

In Philippians 2, Paul invites us to live out the reality of this communion of love by pouring out our lives for one another. His words echo Jesus' call to love one another as He has loved us. In John 13-17, Jesus reveals this way of love is part of the life of abiding in His love. In John 15:9-12, He says,

<sup>9</sup>“As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. <sup>10</sup>If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.

<sup>11</sup>“These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and *that* your joy may be full. <sup>12</sup>This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup>Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.

We are completely free to love one another even as Christ loved us. In pouring out our lives for one another, we trust that God is making us to shine out like lights in the universe and a world of striving and darkness. We become the living examples of joy and hope and peace and love.

As this call to love and live and think as Christ takes hold, we are also free to let go. We can let go of reputation, of successes, and even of failures. For some people, joy seems elusive because their are holding on too tightly when they should be letting go.

We hold on to failures and successes. We hold on to expectations and dreams when God has led us in a different path. Some people live in the glory of past success, but feel stuck in the present moment.

What is that is hindering you? What are you holding onto that weighs you down in your pursuit of Christ? Paul encourages each of us,

<sup>7</sup> But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. <sup>8</sup> Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ... (Philippians 3:7-8)

Again and again, we must turn afresh toward Christ and his calling. As we pursue Christ in all and through all, the words of Paul ring true. Count all things as loss for Christ.

These seven words could free us to such joy: Count all things as loss for Christ. Letting go of reputation, of self-righteousness, of every distraction, of bitterness, of disappointment, of all that might hinder our pursuit, we run toward Christ. Something amazing happens as we count all things as loss in pursuit Christ, we rediscover the joy of being alive, the joy of God's grace in all things. We behold God's hand behind every bush, every struggle, every person.

In Philippians 4, Paul exhorts his friends,

<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!

<sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand.

<sup>6</sup> Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; <sup>7</sup> and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-6)

The Lord is near: Rejoice! Jesus Christ has called us and will not forsake us. He is leading us into His love, His glory, His holiness. He will meet all our needs according to His riches in glory. As we learn to rest in the love of God in Christ, we learn how to rest, trust whether we are up or down. God is faithful. Let us rejoice.

Listen to those words: trust, rest, rejoice. These sounds like Sabbath words. The Sabbath was a gift to Israel that commanded rest and provided rest. The rest of faith.

Heeding Paul's exhortations, we practice a life of Sabbath rhythms. We stop, rest and remember that Christ has called us, that Christ has poured out his life for us, that Christ is leading us forward (and teaching us to let of everything that hinders), and that Christ is faithful and good and true and will meet all our needs.

The whole letter of Philippians calls us to behold and trust the Lord Jesus Christ afresh and learn to walk in His joy. It can teach us Sabbath rhythms for living in the joy of the Lord. If you struggle with discouragement, anxiety, lack of joy, emptiness, and doubt. Turn to Jesus Christ. Ask Him for mercy. Ask Him to lead you into His joy. As you seek His face, you might practice Sabbath rhythms of remembering His grace, following His call to love, letting go of hindrances and rejoicing in His nearness and provision.

First, take time to look back and remember. We remember God's faithfulness in the life of His people and His promises to the call in our lives to completion. We remember and give thanks for His blessings and the blessings of others in our lives. In remembering, the weight of discouragement may lift and we may find a new way toward hope.

Second, we look out at the people around us. Follow the action of Christ, we look to the needs of others. Forgetting resentments and jealousies, we lay down our lives for the people around us. We let Jesus teach us the love of Father, Son and Spirit and discover the joy of God's unrestrained love.

We also look forward to fullness in Christ. We let go whatever may hinder our pursuit of Christ. He is leading us forward into the fullness of His life and love. As we follow him forward, we learn how to live flexibly like people of the wind. So the Spirit can lead and move us as He will.

Lastly, we rejoice in His presence and His provision. We take a Sabbath, a rest, a vacation from worry, from anxiety, from frustration, from disappointment and discouragement. We bring these anxieties and troubling thoughts and actions to Christ and as offer them to him in worship. We trust that He is faithful and willing to strengthen us, to fill us, to comfort, and to lead us into fullness of joy.

As we look back to the faithfulness of God, and look out to serve and love those around us, and look forward in pursuit of Christ, and look inward at His work of grace in this moment, we might rehearse afresh the ancient prayer:

May Christ be with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ to my right, Christ to my left, Christ where I lie down, Christ where I sit, Christ where I stand, Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks to me, Christ in every eye which looks on me, Christ in every ear which hears me.