

# The Gift of Joy

or

How To Be Happy In An Unhappy World

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I want to begin this morning by reading from the book of 1 John.

1 John 1:1-4: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full."

And in Philippians 4:4, the apostle Paul writes:

Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice."

The subject of my message this morning is joy, and rejoicing. So what is joy? The dictionary defines joy this way: "the emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something exceptionally good or satisfying; keen pleasure, elation". It defines "rejoice" as: "to feel or express great joy or happiness". If we were to have to choose a synonym for the word joy, I think the obvious choice would be happiness. It's a word that's much more commonly used in our society than joy is. But where does happiness come from?

Even the very word "happiness" is a little misleading, I think. "Happiness" comes from the root word "hap", the same word for happening or happenstance. In other words, the root from which the word "happy" comes from has to do with circumstances. "Hap" is defined as "one's circumstances or luck". As the scripture says, "time and chance happen to all men". We all find ourselves in various circumstances – sometimes we abound, and sometimes we are abased, as the apostle Paul said.

Things happen to us. We don't have much control over that. Again I ask, where does happiness come from? Does it come from one's circumstances? Does it come from the things that happen to us? Or is true happiness something that is apart from that?

To those of us on this phone hookup that are in the United States, which is a place where material, physical things abound, I say, look around you. How many happy people do you see? When you go out in public, when you're at work or at the grocery store or the bank, do you see a lot of people with smiles on their faces? I don't. I'm sometimes on autopilot and I don't pay much attention, but every so often I look at the expressions on the faces of the people around me. They don't look happy. And yet we live in a place where the abundance of physical, material things is overwhelming.

I have done a little bit of traveling in my life. When I was younger, I traveled internationally as part of my job. I've been to places in the world where they didn't have very much, in terms of material physical things. I saw a lot more smiles on the faces of those people than I do here.

Let's turn to Hebrews chapter 12. I want to read a passage here that I think is very familiar to us, but I want to draw something out of it that I think might be a little bit different than how you've looked at this passage before.

Hebrews 12:2: "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 is set down at the right hand of the throne of God."

What was this joy that was set before Jesus Christ? Was it simply what he was going to receive? In other words, we know that Christ has been glorified. He was resurrected from the grave, given a spiritual body. He was made to look just like his father. He now has a countenance that shines like the sun in its full strength. He has been given all power. He's been given a throne to sit in. He says "I am set down with my father in his throne". I'm sure that was part of the joy that was set before him. But was that all of it? Or was there something more to it?

Let's turn to 1 Peter chapter 2. I want to remind us that we're told that we are to have the same mind as Jesus Christ had. So just as he was able to endure the suffering that he did of being scourged and crucified, we are also to have that same mind of enduring whatever afflictions come our way, whatever chastening God deems necessary for us, for the joy that is set before us.

1 Peter 2:17-18: "Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king. Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward."

I have worked for some people in the past that were froward. I imagine that some of you have also had that same experience. You know that it is not easy to be subject to somebody that is froward. I am blessed in that the person that I work for now is, for the most part, good and gentle.

1 Peter 2:19: "For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully."

Again, we've probably all been through circumstances where we encountered grief because of things that other people did to us. We've probably all suffered as well for our own faults, from time to time. But it is not uncommon for us to suffer wrongfully. For us to be doing well, doing good, and to have somebody do something to us where we suffer wrongfully. And what are we told to do? We're told to take it patiently.

1 Peter 2:20: "For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God."

This is what Jesus Christ did. This is the mind that we are told we're to have.

1 Peter 2:21-23: "For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously:"

How was Jesus Christ able to do this? I believe that this is probably the most difficult thing there is to do, what Peter is talking about here in chapter 2. Like he said, it's difficult enough to take it patiently when you're buffeted for your faults. Nobody likes to be criticized. Nobody likes to be called on the carpet. Nobody likes to be chewed out or corrected. It's difficult enough when that happens to take that patiently, knowing that you did something you need to be corrected for. But when you haven't done anything wrong and you suffer wrongfully for it, to take that patiently... I believe this is the most difficult test of being a Christian. How do we do this? How do we even have joy in the midst of this? James says "count it all joy when you fall into various temptations or trials". By way of answering this, I want to take a little bit of a detour.

We're commanded at the Feast of Tabernacles each year to rejoice. To be filled with joy. We know that the Feast of Tabernacles is a picture of the kingdom of God and the millennial rule of Jesus Christ here on the earth, where we will be part of that government. If we were to go back just a few verses in 1 Peter, we'd find that we're called to be a part of that government.

1 Peter 2:5: "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood -"

Priests are teachers. We're to be teachers in the millennium with Jesus Christ. Verse 9 says "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood" - not just a priesthood but a royal priesthood, implying kingship. We are to rule and teach. We're called to be a holy nation, a peculiar people.

At the Feast of Tabernacles each year, we picture this time, and we're told to rejoice. Part of the Feast of Tabernacles is that we spend our second tithe on food and drink and whatsoever our heart desires. It's a time of tremendous physical abundance. Again I ask, is our joy in the kingdom going to be solely based on physical abundance? Is it really just going to be based on what we can get and receive? Is that what our rejoicing at the Feast of Tabernacles is all about? Anecdotally, the evidence seems otherwise, looking around at the people in this country that have so much, yet seem so unhappy. Upwards of 25% of the population in the United States is on some sort of antidepressant. Why is that?

We have preserved for us in the scriptures as an example the story of a man who had everything: Solomon. Solomon had everything you could possibly imagine, physically. It did not make him happy. It actually made him miserable. He thought that's where happiness came from, or he at least wanted to find out if that's where happiness came from. And like so many people in our modern world that achieve so-called success, he found out that's not where happiness really comes from. I mean, sure, having physical things can add to our joy. But that's not the real source of joy and happiness. Solomon actually was depressed, after all was said and done. Just like so many people in our modern society are depressed and go to the doctor for a pill to try to make them feel happy. Because all the things and all the stuff they've gotten doesn't make them happy.

As I've said, we're told to have the same mind as Jesus Christ.

Philippians 2:1-5: "If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:"

Now, contained in those verses is a wealth of information about joy and about the mind of Christ.

One of the things that's puzzled me in the past, and I think others have debated this, is in verse 3. It says "let each esteem other better than themselves", and people have said well, how do we square this with Jesus' instruction to love your neighbor as yourself? How can you love your neighbor as yourself, but also esteem others better than yourself? What is he saying here?

I think the answer is this: we as human beings, because of our physical nature, and also because of the spirit that pervades this world – the spirit of Satan, which is a spirit of self-centeredness, the way of get – we are automatically attuned to seeking what we need and what we want. Those two things are not exactly the same, there may be some overlap, but we all need certain things to survive. We need food, clothing, shelter. Our natural mind – that is, the human mind apart from the spirit of God – is automatically attuned to that.

Jesus put it this way. He said, these things are what the Gentiles seek after. He told us not to be like that. He said, "take no thought for your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, for all these things the Gentiles seek after. Your father in heaven knows that you have need of these things." We are not to have our minds focused on trying to get what we need. This is what the minds of everybody in the world is focused on. And this is one of the reasons why they're not happy. They're constantly worried about whether they're going to get what they need. We should not be like that. We should have enough trust in our heavenly father to know that he will provide those things that we need. He won't always provide us with everything that we want right now, but he will provide us with everything that we need. So we, like the apostle Paul, should learn to be content in whatever state we find ourselves, whether we are abased or whether we abound.

Of course, the trap is that once a person has what they need, then they begin to focus on what they want. This is the state that we find ourselves in, by and large, in this country. In this country, most people have everything that they need. Now they're not just focused on getting what they need, now they're focused on getting what they want, and that is naturally where our mind goes.

What Paul is saying here in Philippians chapter 2 is, look on the things of others. Don't just be focused on getting what you want and what you need. Focus on trying to help others with what they need and with what they want. This is what he means by "esteem others better than yourselves". We don't have to think about esteeming ourselves. We already do that. We automatically are focused on things that we need and that we want. We need to focus outward.

Jesus said, "seek you first the kingdom of God and his righteousness". What is God's righteousness? Jesus said that this was the other side of the coin from seeking the physical things that we need and want. God's righteousness is outlined by the Ten Commandments – love God, love neighbor. It is through the love of God shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit that we are able to look on the things of others and think about what others need and want. That should be our focus.

That is the key to joy. That is the key to happiness. Because if you're focused on trying to get what you want and what you need, you're going to constantly be upset. Because other people, intentionally or unintentionally, are constantly going to be thwarting you from getting what you want, where you want, when you want and how you want it.

Have you ever seen how people behave in traffic? Have you ever found yourself behaving in traffic badly? Why? Well, it's because you want to get someplace and somebody gets in front of you and makes you slow down. Oh, so it took you ten seconds longer to get where you're going because this guy pulled over in front of you and you had to slow down a little bit. Why does that upset us so much? Because our minds are focused on the wrong place. If you are focused on what you want, you are never going to be happy. Because in this physical life, you are never going to get everything just the way you want it. I see people that are quite wealthy, and yet the littlest thing will upset them because they're used to getting everything they want how they want it, but it doesn't even always happen for them. The lunch comes and somebody forgot to add the extra cheese, or the peppers they wanted, or it had mustard on it and they said they didn't want mustard, and they're all upset. I'm not kidding – this happens all the time where I work. The people I work for are pretty wealthy, and you cannot imagine the little things that upset them.

The same goes for us. If we are focused on what we want, and what we need, we're never going to be happy. Happiness only comes from focusing on helping others.

I submit to you that this was a major part of the joy that was set before Jesus Christ. I submit to you that this was a major part of how he was able to endure suffering wrongfully. He knew that what he was going through at that time was going to help a lot of people.

I submit to you that our rejoicing at the Feast of Tabernacles should not be based on what we're getting at the Feast of Tabernacles, nor should it be about picturing what we're going to get in the millennium. Sure, part of our joy is that we're going to be glorified with spiritual bodies, given great power and no doubt have, as it says about God, pleasures forevermore. I'm sure that there are going to be many things pleasurable about being a spirit being, having a glorified body and having that kind of power. But I think that a large part, and maybe the major part of our joy and rejoicing at the Feast of Tabernacles, should be about the fact that we finally, at that time, are going to be able to help a lot of people.

Most people can't be helped now. They're not ready. There's a saying in education which, when you first hear it, sounds simplistic, but the more you think about it, the more profound it is. "Nobody can learn anything until they're ready." The people that we come in contact with outside our fellowship aren't ready. But in the world to come, they will be ready, and we will be able to help them, as a royal priesthood. Ruling and teaching with love.

That is what we really should be rejoicing about at the Feast of Tabernacles, picturing that time.

This, I believe, was a large part of the joy that was set before Jesus Christ. I think this was a large part of how he was able to endure grief. Patiently suffering wrongfully. Just as when we are tried and chastened, we can rejoice, knowing that it is creating something of great value in us, that in the future, this character, this nature that is being developed in us - God's nature - will allow us to help a lot of people.

In conclusion, Jesus said, "I came not to do my own will, but the will of him that sent me". Again, this is a statement that, when you start to meditate on it, is very powerful. Jesus Christ was a human being just like we are. Just as we have, built into us, self-pervations, so did he. He didn't want to die. He prayed in great agony, that night in the garden of Gethsemane, before his arrest. He knew what was coming. But he chose to set his mind, not on getting those things that he needed and wanted, but on helping others. That was what enabled him, in large part, to do what he did. That was the joy that was set before him.

If we want to follow in his footsteps, if we want to be filled with joy, this is what we must do also. We must set our minds, not to seek our own will, but to seek to serve our father in heaven, and to seek to serve those around us in any way that we can. Because although we can't really help people now in the ways that we will be able to in the kingdom, we can still seek to serve others, whether it be our spouses, our friends, those that we work with or otherwise come in contact with.

We can seek to help others, and in so doing, the spirit of God in us, the love of God shed abroad in our heart, then will enable us to do that in ways that we cannot do ourselves. And it is in so doing that we will be filled with joy - the joy that comes through God's spirit.