

Christian Joy

By Dennis Cornish

I find joy in serving the Lord, but thankfully the true joy that I feel is not a prideful joy, which is just my sinful arrogance masked as joy. Rather it is a joy that finds at its very root a jubilant peace that is only found in my delight in the Lord. It resides within the condition of my soul that experiences a profound serenity in abiding in Him. It is a joy that emanates from the fruitful works of obedience to His calling, and the recognition that any light that shines forth from those works is His light and none of my own. All glory is His alone for He is the light of the world. My prayer is that through my works of obedience in serving Him, that the joy in the Lord that is mine, is felt by others.

True joy can only be experienced from that which is ours in Christ Jesus. This joy that is ours is because of the eternal rest that He beckons us to. Joy is a gift from God that comes from the peace that He imparts to us, and because it is a divinely transcendent characteristic, it is beyond our understanding. Joy emanates from God, and we cannot begin to comprehend the depth of it until we start living within the duty bound, yet voluntary, constraints of the abiding love that is ours because He first loved us. It is His love that effectually called us out of the darkness and into His glorious light. That calling led us to willingly surrender ourselves to the state of regeneration that He had chosen for us from before all creation, it is a special grace that is set aside for those who are His elect.

Joy isn't the absence of sadness or the elation that we feel from some type of temporal or emotional high, it is found solely in the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. Joy comes from having a repentant heart and the forgiveness that we experience through the relationship we have with Christ. It is ours when we daily look to Christ as the source of our being as we live for His glory. To begin to live for His glory we must humble ourselves before Him, praising Him for the ultimate sacrifice that He bore on the cross for our sins. Joy is ours when we realize the fullness of His Divine forgiveness and

begin to understand that He alone is our only means of salvation. It is ours through Christ alone and not by anything we could ever do to merit His mercy and grace.

One of the mercies that we have received is the gift of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who Christ sent to us as another comforter, and one of the fruits of the Spirit is joy, (Galatians 5:22). John Calvin says that the joy Paul speaks of in this passage from Galatians, refers to the disposition of one's personality toward cheerfulness. Christians are not to be morbid or endlessly despairing; rather, they are to possess an inner reserve of joy.

Earlier I touched upon God's grace, and Scripture tells us that God provides mankind with two types of grace. One is called Common Grace, and it is comprised of all the good and joyous gifts that God blesses everyone with regardless of their spiritual state. These graces include many types of blessings, such as family, the beauty of nature, prosperity, health, and personal achievements. These graces speak to the truth of our eternal God but are not seen as such by unbelievers. For them these graces are a fading joy that can only be possessed in this temporal world, and they will be separated from them forever in the second death. Their fading joy leaves them with a crushed spirit and a relentless dryness that withers their whole being, whereas the joyful heart of a Christian not only glorifies God, but it is also a good medicine that heals the soul (Proverbs 17:22). Non-believers are often driven by a persistent emptiness that they cannot explain, and they often seek joy or fulfillment externally, such as in buying a new car, or in climbing the corporate ladder, not knowing the warning found in Mark 8:36 where we read: *"For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?"*

The same joys found in Common Grace are also realized in a Christian's life but differ in that they are subsumed within a greater grace which theologians call Special Grace. Special Grace is a term used in Reformed theology, and it refers to the working of God in the lives of His elect when He regenerates them, it is the favor of God that results in salvation. They are called special graces in that they are reserved for faithful Christians. By faith we have been justified and these special

graces are now ours and they are eternal in nature, and they will not only be carried with us when we are called to our heavenly home, but they will be magnified as we glorify God forever more.

If you have been a part of a loving Christian community group that you share life with, there is a joy to this fellowship that cannot be known outside that group setting. Obviously, the gospel is the source and the fuel that sustains our joy, but as we meet in homes as a community group, “we find that just as a piece of coal burns hotter in a mound of other coals, the Christian knows greater joy in the tightly knit unity of the local church and the community groups that are supported by their church.”¹ This joy comes through the mountainous peaks of rejoicing with those who rejoice and the valley lows of weeping with those who weep (Rom. 12:15). This happens when we experience how God’s hand sustains His people, how His Word is proven true, and how the Holy Spirit turns people away from their own self-interests to the care and compassion of others in their local church family. The joy of church membership and in unifying ourselves with our brothers and sisters in Christ is that we can refocus away from ourselves and fully immerse our hearts and minds in the life of another and rejoice in how God is working in and through them. We are to love one another in such a way as to minister to other’s needs in the spirit of self-sacrificial love by putting their feelings, concerns, and cares above our own. In this we can find great joy because the source of joy is always found in the gospel, and we can more fully experience its message of loving our neighbor as we learn to walk together in the precepts that are set forth in Scripture. In our obedience to these commands, we will find that it is both a joyous and transformative work.

However, if we live each day clutching tightly to the shame of the sin that we committed in the past, and in weighing ourselves down with the anxieties of tomorrow, we will never experience the joys of today. To have the joy that is ours in Christ we must fully embrace His promises of forgiveness. 1 John 1:9 is one of those promises and reminds us that: *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* It is in the

¹ Paraphrased from an article by Eric Bancroft in *Tabletalk Magazine* (Sanford, FL, Ligonier Ministries, Inc., February 2017).

cleansing of our sins through His forgiveness that we can realize the joy that is ours as we find ourselves cloaked in His righteousness and cherish the fact that we are no longer children of wrath.

In addition, the Bible is replete with commands against our entrapping ourselves in the clutches of anxiety, and a good verse to help us in this area is found in Philippians 4:4-7 where it is written: *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* In these verses we are commanded to rejoice, we are to be filled with joy, and that will come if we set aside all our anxieties by bringing each of our concerns, as well as our praises, to God in both the spirit of humble petition for our needs, and in our thankfulness for all His blessings. The encouragements in this passage are followed by the promise of peace beyond understanding. We often refer to our hearts and minds as being troubled, and here we have a safeguard in Christ in that He will remove our anxiety if we turn to Him with our prayers, supplications, and with repentant hearts. We can find joy in the Lord in that He will take away our sin which is often the root cause of our grief, sorrow, and tribulation. These acts of sinful disobedience become the cause for our need to be rebuked by our heavenly Father, and we can fittingly find joy in the greatness of the divine love that He demonstrates in the performance of His chastisement because we as Christians have come to understand that His discipline is for our ultimate good.

However, we know that the world looks externally for what they deem as real joy, and it is often closely related to the allurement of sin and the nearly irresistible attraction found in the temptations that are so prevalent in society. Succumbing to the hollow promise of satisfaction that is thought to be found in temptation can seem to temporarily mask a deeper need in our lives, but these momentary delights of the flesh can never really satisfy us as they are only a pretense of true joy and quickly fade along with any fleeting pleasure we may have received, only to be quickly replaced by shame, guilt, and emptiness.

There is another counterfeit joy and that is the illusive happiness that is found in the circumstances that we find ourselves in. When all is going smoothly in our lives a sense of happiness and contentment come over us and all seems to be well in our world. But, when the other foot falls and some type of suffering overshadows us, we are suddenly overwhelmed with anxiety or fear and that transitory illusion of happiness is nowhere to be found. This is not the case in a Christians life, but that is not to say that Christians are not momentarily taken aback by something, but that the overall state of their being, their heavenly focused trendline as it were, remains upwardly joyous through both the highs and lows of what life brings to them. Our joy is found in Christ and if we abide in Him, our joy in Him is an unwavering anchor in our lives. Not only is our joy found in Christ, but Nehemiah 8:10 reminds us: *“Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”* Let that sink in, the joy of the Lord is our strength, it is our joy in Him that strengthens us in the time of our weakness as we petition Him with our prayers of supplication. The word translated “strength” can also be translated as “fortress” or “refuge.” Therefore, we can say, “The joy of the Lord is our fortress, our refuge” in the times of our troubles. “No matter what our circumstances are, if we focus on Jesus Christ, then we can have supernatural joy and peace even in the midst of sometimes very difficult circumstances”.²

The joy we have now, and the eternal joy we anticipate when Jesus welcomes us home, will never be predicated upon our current circumstance. Peter, in his first letter and in verses 3-7, outlines this truth for us when we read: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the*

² *Tabletalk Magazine* (Sanford, FL, Ligonier Ministries, Inc., December 8, 2018,).

tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

The assurance of salvation that is ours in Christ allows us to worship and serve Him in a spirit of purity of heart and to do so within the joyous reality of the salvation He has affected, and these are gifts that are ours through Him. A Christian’s joy is not an inconsequential, trivial, or false happiness as there exists an undeniable recognition of the reality of pain and suffering, as well as an accepted and appropriate time for mourning (Ecclesiastes 7:4). Yet even at these times, believers possess a real joy, a confident surety that one day all will be well because in John 16:33 Jesus tells us: *“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”* In addition, the Spirit gives us an abiding joy that comforts us even in affliction (1 Thessalonians 1:6).

Righteousness, peace, and joy are the greatest gifts we could receive in Christ. These are granted to all who are in Christ, and, by His mercy and grace, we will enjoy them this very day as the Holy Spirit continues to sanctify us, and forever more as we stand before God in His throne room in the New Jerusalem where we will experience the fullness of eternal joy in His glorious presence.

Revelation 21:3-4, in describing the new creation, further comforts us in that we are told: *“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”* Praise God that we can take joy in the fact that for us and our believing loved ones that all suffering will have been brought to an end. In all of this, we are to rejoice in the years of life that we do have, (Ecclesiastes 11:8a), as well as in anticipation of our eternal life to come. As we read in Luke 10:20b we are to: *“...rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”*

There is a strange complexity that comes with being a child of God which enables a Christian to be in a position of being juxtaposed between being both sad and joyful at the same time. We can grieve the death of loved ones because we no longer have personal communion with them, and yet at the same time, we can have a deep, abiding joy, knowing that death for the Christian is a portal leading from a temporal life to an eternal life in Christ because His death and resurrection have crushed this enemy.

We know that Christ looked forward to the joy set before Him (Hebrews 12:2), and He will welcome those who belong to Him into this joy (Matthew 25:21, 23). The sustaining joy we currently possess lies within our relationship with Christ and the anticipation of the eternal and blessed fellowship that we will have with our Triune God. We will be immersed forever in the joy of being with the Lord and worshipping Him with a purity of heart, mind, and spirit that we have never experienced before. Jesus, in John 15:11, having exhorted the disciple to abide in Him and to return His love with steadfast obedience, goes on to say: *“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”*

In all of this rejoice. We as Gentile believers can take great comfort and joy in what Luke explains in Acts 13:48, for *“as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.”* “Note how this verse speaks of those who believed in Jesus as doing so because they had been *“appointed to eternal life,”* a clear reference to divine election unto salvation”³.

Praise God for His mercy and grace.

³ *Tabletalk Magazine* (Sanford, FL, Ligonier Ministries, Inc., June 17, 2024).