

A Real Christmas 3) Results in Great Joy

Philippians 4:4-7 • 2024-12-15 • Advent Series: A Real Christmas



A lot of Christmas songs invite people to “be of good cheer” and to “have a holly jolly” Christmas. But you can’t just tell someone to be happy. When the Israelites were in captivity their captors tormented them by asking them to sing music. They lamented, “How can we sing joyful songs as we weep in exile?” At times telling someone to “lighten up” or “cheer up” can even be entirely out of place. How would you feel if it was Christmas Day, and you knew you were dying, and someone came up to you and said, “It’s Christmas. Be happy! Have some candy!” It just doesn’t cut it. If someone is having a blue, blue Christmas can words really help?

Sheer willpower can’t generate happiness. So, what can? Charles’ Schultz’s wrote in his Peanuts comics a series on “Happiness is...” If you’re two years-old, “Happiness is a warm thumb and a secure blanket.” For older ones, “Happiness is a warm puppy.” And “Happiness is waking up, looking at the clock and finding that you still have two hours left to sleep.” After reading that one I wasn’t surprised to see Schultz had five children. What’s your happiness? Is it when your favorite team wins? Is it something you can buy? Another humorist pokes at this idea when he depicts a cartoon where a rich man is excitedly walking out of a store and back to his limo. The caption reads, “His friends told him he could never buy it, but Mr. Crawley surmised they just didn’t know where to look.” The sign above the store he’s leaving reads, “Happiness.” You can sometimes buy a degree of happiness. But there is no satisfaction guarantee, and it expires quickly.

Some sadly try to find joy in entirely wrong places. The world urges the man not finding joy in his marriage to turn to the attention another woman is giving him. He’ll leave behind his wife, the woman God gave him, for another. It won’t bring real or lasting joy, but a broken heart and home. The world tells young men to chase after women as mere objects rather than to seek a godly marriage and someone to love. Even secular psychology has shown that this attitude and things like pornography only lead to depression and unsatisfied hearts.

The world even tries to force joy into the heart and mind. Don’t misunderstand me; I know that some people have medical conditions that require drugs to help balance the mind. But far too often the mind is abused by substances which people think will bring joy. Many people numb the mind to ignore things that are painful. Pill-popping, however, can’t forever stave off grief, guilt, or pain. You can’t buy, force, or command rejoicing. And you can’t medicate it, not for long.

None of these efforts to secure happiness or joy will last. The retreat of a cozy warm blanket can’t stave off reality for long. Great success in business doesn’t cover the miserable failure of sin. The side effects of alcohol and pills catch up. The problems remain. A broken family or marriage can’t fill or fix a broken heart. What is left? God feels far away. The mind is filled with anxious thoughts. And there is a constant, futile struggle to find joy. Sin grips us and robs us of joy.

When Paul tells the Christian reader to rejoice, he calls for a higher joy on a whole different level. He says, “Rejoice always.” This is a command for joy in any and every situation. Firstly, let’s get this straight. He isn’t telling Christians to hide the sorrow or mask the pain. This is not some sort of command to “Snap out of it and smile, Christian!” as if we are soldiers falling into line. Christians face debt, depression, unanswered love, failures, loneliness, and the pain of loss. In this world we will indeed have, as Solomon correctly states, “a time for sorrow.”

So how can Paul say, “Rejoice always; I will say again rejoice!”? He says, “Rejoice in the Lord,” not “rejoice in food, in success in work, in friends, in flattery, in that which fades.” Rejoice, brother, that you are in the Lord, you belong to God. Rejoice that no matter what worth or wealth you own, you are an heir of the riches of heaven. Rejoice that even when your comfort is low you have the hope of everlasting comfort at God’s right hand. Rejoice that even though you might lose all this earth has to offer, God has given you the gift of eternal life and the gift of his Spirit. Rejoice even as your eyes fail you that you will see God with eyes that you will use forever! “Rejoice in the Lord” changes everything. It is a rejoicing that finds its source in the one who created and gives us all that is good.

And we should note that this isn’t just a call to rejoice from someone sitting on a high throne of comfort. Paul isn’t a spoiled aristocrat telling starving peasants they can just eat cake. He walked the walk. When he first met the Philippians, it quickly spiraled down into the pits. It didn’t take too long before the city magistrates arrested Paul and Silas and had them stripped and beaten and severely flogged. And imagine the public disgrace and humiliation of being stripped and punished in front of everyone! Then they were tossed into prison. There they were, in a foreign city, hated by many of the people, wallowing in as much pain as you can imagine, in the darkness of one of the most inner cells. But imagine then how that jailer was shocked after he locked these two away and at midnight heard them singing hymns to their God. Even while in misery in chains in the dark, they sang of the one who came to set them free from sin and disgrace. They sang because they still had reason to rejoice!

Have you faced other things that would rob you of joy? So did Paul. He had a physical ailment that he pleaded with God to take away. God didn’t. “Again, I say rejoice.” Paul had been rejected by a mob and pelted to death by stones only to survive it all. “Again, I say rejoice.” What about when he writes this letter? His plans failed. He wanted to travel to Rome as a missionary headed to Spain. He did make it to Rome, but only as a prisoner. Yet again in prison he says, “Rejoice!”

This call to rejoice is an urging and invitation to rejoice in the Lord in all circumstances. How can you rejoice in the Lord always? Paul doesn't list a "five steps to a happier life" self-help program. He doesn't direct you to mere "positive thinking" as if sheer will power is all that is needed. He lists some brief truths which go together with Christian joy.

"Let your gentleness be known to all." This isn't saying that we need to be weak and powerless. Rather it means yielding your power and right over others to display patience. Are you a father or mother? Being gentle with your children means not becoming harsh when you are tired or upset. Are you in charge of others? Do you deal with others in such a way that they resent your authority and avoid you? Or do you deal with them with gentleness and patience? Do you hold the right to sue another because of damage or harm? Harshness and anger will quickly rob you of your joy in the Lord.

"The Lord is near." He is near to judge. What do you want when the Lord comes again? Would you be proud on judgment day to hear, "He always got his way; he never lost an argument." Or would you rather it be said, "He was gentle." I recall meeting with someone a few years ago. Decades after the death of her father she recalled how her dad never really was rough or angry with anyone, but always gentle. It left an impression! Can you imagine the impression that you make on your children when you are harsh? Being around anyone who is harsh can suck the joy right out of you. But no matter who you are around remember, "The Lord is near." And his judgment comes near too! Do you want a harsh judge?

Our Lord let his gentleness be evident. He comes to sinners in a way that sets aside his right and power. He first came in gentle and lowly form to bring peace to the wrongdoer. And it is with prayer he carried the heaviest sorrow for us. When Jesus had the heaviest weight of the world's sin and the wrath of God about to be poured on him, he fell with his face down in prayer. God the Father answered that prayer and strengthened him to go on. Jesus came to bring us peace by himself bearing all the things that would rob us of joy forever. He came to face our pains and sorrows and remove our guilt by his atonement. He did this with his sacrificial death on the cross. He came near to save! "Again, I will say, rejoice!"

The Lord is also near to help and answer prayer. A big part of rejoicing is casting off all that might rob you of joy. Let the Lord handle the stress. *"Be anxious about nothing, but in prayer and request with thanksgiving present your request to God."* The Lord is near. And he is near to save. He is the one who is the real hero. He invites us to call on him in every situation. Let his gentleness and nearness be a comfort as he promises to be with you and answer your prayers. Is there anything that causes stress and would rob you of joy in the Lord? You're in the Lord! Share it with him! And at the same time thank him for all he has done all the while!

The Lord is still near! He rose to life. He who died to save lives and intercedes for us as we pray! What could give greater joy than having such a gentle and merciful God who is listening to us in our troubles? He is near and will come again soon to deliver us from sorrow forever! Soon we will enjoy the glory of his eternal kingdom with new and glorified bodies. "Again I will say, rejoice!" Not even death can rob us of such joy! In the Peanuts comic Charlie Brown once asked Linus, "If you die do you ever get to come back?" Linus' answer: "Only if they stamp your hand." This is true for us! God has placed his seal on us—his Holy Spirit. It's the guarantee that we who now believe will also one day live forever. We have the name of our God and the promise of joy everlasting. That's our source of joy today and always in Jesus!

There was a man I had been visiting and encouraging with the Scriptures when I first started in pastoral ministry. You know what he was doing even though he was near death, short on breath and energy? He went through the halls of his care facility singing Christmas carols as loud as he could on Christmas Eve. He died on Christmas day. He lived and died rejoicing in the Lord. He now rejoices in glory. So do all who die in Christ. Again, I will say 'Rejoice!'"

Paul concludes with a promise. The assurance is ours: *"The peace of God will guard your heart and mind."* Can you see the picture here? It's the peace of God standing like a soldier over your heart and mind. When the things around us cause concern or anxiety the peace of God stands like a guard, "Send it all that away. God will deal with it." Again, I say, rejoice!

Though he wrote about small things that make us happy, Mr. Schultz himself dealt with a lot of unhappiness in life. He had panic attacks, a broken marriage, and his own dark days. Charlie Brown never won a game, never had his affection for the little red-haired girl returned, never kicked the football. Many see Mr. Schultz writing his own personal life into his comics. His wife recalled something he told her in the hospital as he was dying of cancer: "You control all these characters and the lives they live. You decide when they get up in the morning, when they're going to fight with their friends, when they're going to lose the game. Isn't it amazing how you have no control over your real life?" That's true when it comes to generating our own happiness and joy. We don't control it. We can't "rejoice" by our own efforts and will. God brings it.

Again, I will say, rejoice always! Our rejoicing is "in the Lord." He is the author of our joy. He came to be near us as Savior. He comes near still to bring us real reason to rejoice. He controls all and guards our hearts and minds with his peace. In the Lord we go from worldly worries to joy in Jesus.