

Galatians 5:22
Habakkuk 3:17, 18
“THE JOY OF THE LORD IS OUR STRENGTH”

Illustration about miners in the west during the Gold Rush who could not hide their joy after having discovered gold. People followed them despite their best efforts to hide their discovery from them.

There is something very attractive about joy. It is contagious. People are drawn to those that are joyful and positive. The opposite of joy is grief, negativity and depression.

Just thinking about its opposite helps us to understand why joy should be the spiritual state that would normally accompany the life of a believer. A person who cannot express or experience the joy of the Lord needs to reassess their spiritual health and their relationship to the Lord.

It is possible to go through seasons of grief and anxiety, of course. But they should be just that—seasons, temporary periods, to be succeeded eventually by joy.

I don't want to be simplistic here. When we speak of joy in biblical terms, we are not talking about a superficial emotional state. This is why I chose the text from Habakkuk, which speaks about rejoicing in the midst of negative circumstances. I will have much more to say about this in a moment.

I truly believe that only those that have been saved by Jesus Christ can experience true joy. I think of the passage in **Isaiah**

9:2-6. It states, “the people who lived in darkness saw a great light”, etc.

You can imagine the state of the pagan world before Christ came into the world. It was a world of violence, uncertainty and physical misery, without any sense of what awaited you when you died. It was a world of sinister gods and even more sinister demons.

But when Jesus came into the world, everything changed. He brought us news of a God who loved us, who had created the world for our enjoyment, who was willing to die for us, and who went to prepare a place for us after we died.

It spoke of the victory of Jesus over death and Satan. It spoke of forgiveness, acceptance, and our self worth in Jesus. One can easily understand why Isaiah expresses things this way, that the people who dwelt in darkness saw a great light and rejoiced.

The joy that the believer experiences is not a neutral, simple joy. It is joy with a context. It is the joy of of a person who has been condemned to death and then has been pardoned. From that moment on, that person rejoices in the knowledge that their life is a gift, that whatever they live from then on is pure grace, that they should have been dead but are alive instead.

You could see why it might be easier for the kind of person to experience joy, even once in a while. You could also understand why that person might be more able than most not to be too affected by the annoyances and inconveniences of

life. The alternative, which should've been death, makes everything else seem small and quite tolerable by comparison.

I've just said that the joy of the believer is not neutral or simple. That it always has a context. I've said that as people who have been forgiven, and who have received freedom and meaning through our adoption into the kingdom of a loving God, it should be somewhat easy to experience joy, and to be able to explain it.

I will also add that biblical Joy is not something that we can produce out of some compartment in our psyche. It is, after all, the fruit of the spirit. In other words, it is produced by the Spirit, not by us. The Spirit of God that dwells in us produces the joy. We merely channel it and experience it within ourselves.

So joy is not necessarily tied to positive circumstances, financial prosperity or physical health. None of these things can produce real joy. They might produce a positive feeling, or a temporary respite from fear or insecurity. But they cannot produce that noble, exalted feeling that the Bible calls joy.

Joy is not a passing emotional state. It is a profound, abiding feeling of fullness and sufficiency. As in the case of Habakkuk, it can be experienced when the refrigerator is empty, or when we are unemployed, or happen to be in ill health.

It can irrupt from feeling the nearness of God, as when David exploded in dance when he saw the Ark finally enter Jerusalem. We can experience joy during moments of prayer

and praise, when heaven seems to come down and for a moment we forget our problems, and every difficult situation that we are facing seems to have a solution.

Again, Joy is not a simple experience. It is always tied to something that has to do with eternity. The shepherds that heard the annunciation of the angels were brought *tidings of great joy*, that were intended for all the people.

These news were joyful because a Savior had been born, someone who would free the people from their captivity to poverty, ignorance, hopelessness and low self-worth. Again, freedom from darkness and oppression, and the awareness of it, produced joy.

Biblical joy is always tied to the presence of Christ in us. Again, this is why it is called the fruit of the Spirit. The Christ who dwells in us gives the fruit. It is he who produces the joy.

The joy resides in the Spirit. It is always there, together with love, peace, kindness, benevolence and all the other fruit that make up the character of the Spirit.

Like the colors in the palette of a painter, the attributes of the Spirit lie in waiting within us, waiting to be summoned by the Spirit according to what he prefers at a particular moment. Sometimes it may be the love of God that might want to express itself through us. At other times it might be his peace that might fill us. At another moment, we might be called to express the meekness of Jesus, or his kindness.

This is also applicable to the joy of the Spirit. There will be moments where joy will manifest itself in us. There will be other moments when it will simply lie dormant, waiting to be recalled by the Spirit.

I don't think anyone can live in a state of perpetual joy. To do so, would probably burn our nervous system to a crisp. In our present fallen state, permanent joy is probably not a realistic possibility. But it is possible for us to experience God's joy quite frequently. As a matter of fact, Joy should be a distinctive quality of every believer.

People should know us for our capacity to rejoice, to sing and celebrate, to enjoy laughter and good food, to enjoy friendship and the love of family. Our spirit should be light enough that it shouldn't take too much to bring us into a state of rejoicing and hope.

Believers should be like the gold miners that I spoke about at the beginning of this sermon. It should be difficult for us to hide the fact that we know something that many others don't — That our sins have been forgiven, that we are destined for glory, and that once we were lost but now we're found.

There's a chorus that says: "They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love." Well, we should be able to change the words of that chorus and sing: "They will know we are Christians by our joy, by our joy."

Christian houses of worship should be places of joy and laughter. I love it when every once in a while during our services women come forward with their shoes off and dance

before the Lord. Churches should be places where people can take their shoes off and worship God freely. They should be places where people come with huge burdens and leave feeling lighter and full of hope. They should be places where jokes can be told and we can make fun of ourselves.

I personally don't like churches without windows or where the sun cannot be seen freely. Churches should be places of light and gladness.

I have nothing against incense, liturgy or fancy religious gowns. I do believe in the majesty of God, which needs to be solemnly acknowledged. But I also believe that our music and our worship should reflect the innocence of children, and the good humor of people who have the innocence of children, and who know that they have a doting Father who thinks well of them.

Like love, joy is a decision, a choice that we make. Many times, we will have to choose to rejoice rather than to resent. We will have to choose joy over depression and lament. We will have to decide to actively see ourselves as forgiven and accepted, rather than as condemned and defective.

I hear a lot of theologians these days speaking of lament. It is one of those buzz words in vogue in the Christian church these days. Personally, I think it is one more evidence of how far the modern Church has strayed from the simplicity of the gospel, and how far we have distanced ourselves from the vitality of the Holy Spirit.

When God doesn't fill our universe, it is very easy for our eyes to be overwhelmed by all the evil that is in the world. Instead, we should be so filled with the Holy Spirit that the evil and the suffering in the world, even as we remain very aware of it, cannot take away the joy of God within us.

Even as we acknowledge that the world is an evil place and that there is darkness all around us, we should at the same time celebrate the fact that Jesus has broken the power of Satan, and that this broken world is well on its way to total redemption.

We should be overcome by the knowledge that through his crucifixion Jesus defeated the principalities and powers and exhibited them publicly on the cross. What we have now in the world is the Church involved in a mop-up operation, rooting out the remaining troops of the enemy, while it waits for the Second Coming of the Lord. So if we do lament, we should do it briefly and in a hurry, and not give it more space than it deserves in the business of the church.

We need to pay a lot of attention to the generous invitation of the apostle Paul while he found himself a prisoner in a Roman jail: **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!** Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” **(Philippians 4:4-6)**

Paul's invitation is almost a command. God calls us to engage in the activity of rejoicing. If God asks us to do this it's because it is possible to decide to rejoice.

We have the freedom to rejoice. It's just a matter of whether we decide to exercise that freedom or not. We can make of joy a platform for our life if we practice it with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Actually, I believe that joy should be one of the default states of the believer. I would say that if we are not experiencing joy often, it is because we are allowing a lot of other garbage to cover our joy. What we need to do is to rescue the joy that sometimes lies deep within us, covered by the debris of life, and to bring it to the surface again, to express itself freely as God intended.

The joy is there for our taking. It is we sometimes who actively repress it, with a sense of false piety and a misplaced sense of moral responsibility. Here, I am thinking of the good son in Jesus' parable of the prodigal.

Here, we see the prodigal son, who has behaved so badly, rejoicing in the generosity of the father and preparing to enjoy the first good meal he's had in months. But we also have the miserable, resentful good son, lamenting the fact that in all his years of proper behavior he has never been able to enjoy a great party with his friends.

The father reacts in shock, puzzled as to why his son never felt free to just grab a young goat from the herd and have a feast with his friends. The problem lay in how he saw himself. He didn't see himself as beloved and empowered. He saw his relationship with his father in terms of obligation and duty, when in reality it was so much more.

The day we begin to see God as our loving, acceptant father, who rejoices over us with song, who, as Jesus says, has been pleased to give us the Kingdom, then it will probably be easy for us to rejoice in the Lord.

Let me say a couple of more random things about joy: Sometimes we have to fight for our joy. The world and the devil will do their best to rip the joy from our hearts.

Satan is a condemned being who has no hope of redemption. Therefore he cannot experience the joy that we, who are the forgiven, can experience. As a matter fact, he hates this joy that we enjoy.

Hell will do its best to drown our joy with all kinds of dark experiences and memories. He knows that the joy of the Lord is our strength, as Nehemiah said.

We need to fight with all the power in our spirit to preserve our joy, and to rebuke the grief that threatens to overcome us all the time.

Never give in to depression and negativity. Declare the joy of the Lord over yourself even if you don't feel it. Bind Satan when he tries to take away your joy. Confess the goodness of God until you feel it. Never allow depression to linger in your soul for more than a few hours or a few days. Fight for your joy until you get it back. If you resist the devil, he will indeed flee from you.

In the book of Nehemiah, chapter 8, we see the people of Israel overwhelmed with guilt add grief as they become aware of their utter sinfulness when Ezra reads the words of the Law which they have so neglected over the years.

But Nehemiah invites them instead to rejoice. He says: “Do not mourn or weep. Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. **Do not grieve for the joy of the Lord is your strength.**”

There is a time to lament and to grieve for our sins. But there’s also a time to simply rest on the grace of God, and to make a decision to rejoice in the Lord.

The joy of the Lord is indeed the source of our strength. We should practice it and treasure it. God has encoded it into our spirit, through his Spirit that now dwells in us.

I pray that Congregation Lion of Judah will become a family of joyful men and women, who will be able to transmit their joy to those who dwell in darkness. Let us be filled with the Spirit, so that the joy of the Spirit will manifest itself through us.