

Joy, Joy – My Heart is Full of Joy

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In our world, "negative stressors" have become a very natural part of life. As true as that may be, these negative stressors are unnatural and unhealthy. Negative stress destroys the body and causes emotions to crack – far from the existence God originally intended for His children.

Regrettably, no one is immune from negative stress – it is not a respecter of persons – it is the result of sin. We have all experienced it, but if you claim that you have remained unscathed by stress thus far in life, then you just have not lived long enough.

The statistical probabilities are against us all! You can be sure that one day, if it hasn't happened already, heartbreaking news will be dumped on your doorstep. Tragedy abounds, life-threatening trauma happens every day.

People are hurting, lonely, frustrated, and grieving – a son killed in an accident, a young daughter brutally raped, one parent struggling to remain brave as he fights a terminal illness while the other parent battles the rising fear of raising three young children alone.

Stress is a monster that raises its ugly head in almost every aspect of life. It may be work-related, money-related or family-related, but for many people, these negative stressors sap the joy right out of living.

The fallout from the fall of man is relentless, but in spite of it all, Christians should be known for their irrepressible, contagious, conspicuous joy! Yet, it seems that the sound of laughter and inexpressible joy is noticeably missing from many Christians' countenance. Has the task of coping in a sin-full world overcome even the followers of Christ? Let's face it; Christians are human. Is it realistic to believe that it is possible to maintain a sense of inner gladness, even when troubles and sorrow come our way?

The secret to experiencing such happiness occurs when we discover what I refer to as **biblical joy**. When we possess biblical joy, we are connected to an energy source that gives us an enthusiasm for life, a determination to hang-in-there, and a strong desire to be an encouragement to others. Biblical joy not only helps us develop these types of characteristics, but it also helps make life bearable when waves of hardship surge over us, paralyzing us with fear.

The "secret" for living above the trials of life instead of under them, should be no "secret" at all for the Christian! Simply stated: It is remaining connected to Jesus and **His joy!** Jesus said: **"These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full."** (John 15:11 (KJV) emphasis mine)

Obviously, Jesus intended His disciples to live joy-full lives, even though He knew how stressful it would be for them immediately after His death and in the future as "fishers-of-men." And of

course, when Jesus spoke these words, the anticipation of His own terrible death hovered before Him.

He said to His disciples: "**My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.**" (Matthew 26:38, emphasis mine) Years later, Paul wrote about Jesus' victory saying: "**Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.**" (Hebrews 12:2,3, emphasis mine)

Paul demonstrated the *power* of joyful living as he wrote Philippians. Eleven times in the letter to the Philippians he told them to "rejoice" and five more times he told them to have "joy." In this particular letter, Paul shared with his readers that there is joy in living (chapter one), joy in serving (chapter two), joy in sharing (chapter 3), and joy in resting which brings personal contentment (chapter four).

Paul had learned how to be happy, despite terrible circumstances. "**I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.**" (Philippians 4:11-13)

His words reflect an incredible attitude, especially when we realize that Paul wrote this letter when he was bound in chains and in prison for no other reason than his faith and witness for Jesus Christ. Tradition traces the last ten years of Paul life in the following way:

AD 61-63 – Confined in Caesar's custody – chained to guard 24 hrs/day

AD 63-64 – Released

AD 64-68 – Re-incarcerated and confined to the Mamertine Prison in Rome

This prison was known for its horrible conditions – no windows, no bed, no table or chairs – just a deep, underground stone cave, with only a small opening in the ceiling.

AD 68 - Beheaded by Nero

For ten years, Paul's life hung in the balance, yet Paul refused to let the possibility of an impending death steal his joy and he urged his friends to rejoice in the same way!

Recently, I read a story about a man who was in a terrible accident. Immediately after the accident, his wife found him in the emergency room of a local hospital. His head had swollen almost twice the size it should be, every rib was broken, and both kneecaps and legs were

broken badly.

Overcome with the emotions that accompany such situations, his wife asked the silly question: "How do you feel?" His answer, however, reflects his experience: "I feel terrible pain in my body, but I am happy in my soul and spirit." I marvel at such a response. Surely, this is the tough-minded approach to Christian living that maintains joy regardless of circumstances.

The Bible has much to say about joy and joyful living. Consider the following texts (emphasis mine):

1 Chronicles: 16: 27-33: "**Splendor and majesty are before him; *strength and joy in his dwelling place. Ascribe to the LORD, O families of nations, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength, ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name . . . Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let them say among the nations, 'The LORD reigns!' Let the sea resound, and all that is in it; let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them! Then the trees of the forest will sing, they will sing for joy before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth.***"

Isaiah 12:3 -6: "***With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. In that day you will say: "Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing to the LORD, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world. Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you.***"

These texts reveal something about God's character. Joy, happiness, rejoicing, peace – words describing the positive environment that surrounds the very presence of God in the throne room of Heaven. It also gives us insight into the way God expects His children to naturally respond to His goodness.

This is just the opposite of what today's popular positive thinking-motivational type seminars present. A few dynamic, confident personalities make millions of dollars teaching people how to obtain positive attitudes. Many people equate joy as simply a good feeling – a sense of happiness.

But if you believe you can maintain your happiness by placing your faith in what YOU can achieve, or by simply embracing positive attitudes and believing YOU can overcome fear through a sense of confidence, your happiness will be short-lived. If you don't believe it, consider what has happened recently to various top executives and some rich and famous people. Social scientists have noted an increasing correlation between the "rise to the top," with clinical depression and suicide.

Positive, motivated people push themselves until they reach the pinnacle of success in their field. After finally attaining their goals, they realize it lacks what they thought achievement would bring and ask: "Is that all there is?" All too soon, the thrill that accompanies a conquered challenge wains and depression and despair set in. This is not to say that attitude has nothing to do with happiness. The Bible calls for a soaring lifestyle based on a positive attitude. But few, if any, "self-made" people find true happiness.

Why? Because true joy, at the highest level, is something completely unique. Oh, that we could understand that true joy originates with God's presence in our life. **"We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete."** (1 John 1:3,4)

Joy is an inward journey that comes from responding to the Holy Spirit's prompting. True joy and the Holy Spirit are inseparable. Galatians 5:22 tells us that one indication (fruit) of the indwelling Holy Spirit is joy. Show me a person whose attitude is positive and whose heart is full of cheer and I will show you a person who is in tune with the Holy Spirit.

Consider the following texts (emphasis mine): **"For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."** (Romans 14:17) **"And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit."** (Acts 13:52) This last text is especially interesting because it describes the state-of-mind and heart that Paul, Barnabas and other believers had after being persecuted and expelled from the church and the entire region of Pisidian Antioch.

What an example! If anybody lived in a pressure-cooker, it was Paul, and his response teaches that rejection is not a reason for long faces and self-absorbed pity. Religion without joy is counterfeit and when the Holy Spirit takes possession of the heart, it transforms the whole life – love, hope and joy thrive where irritability, anger and sadness once lived. **"You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit."** (1 Thessalonians 1:6) **"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."** (Romans 15:13)

The opposite of trust is worry. Worry is very prevalent in our society today. Barbara Johnson, in her book *I'm so Glad You Told Me What I Didn't Want to Hear* jokingly defines worry in the following way: "Today is the tomorrow you worried about yesterday – but not nearly enough."

She also quips that she has learned to accept birth and death, but sometimes worries about what lies between. One liners like that often bring a smile to our face because they are so blatantly true. Worry is like a pesky virus that slowly saps a person's physical, emotional and spiritual energy.

We get the English word "worry" from the German word "würgen" which means to strangle and choke. What an appropriate description. When telling the parable about the sower, Jesus said: ". . . **Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful . . .**" (Mark 4:14-19 emphasis mine)

When a person begins to sense they are losing "control," worry sets in and penetrates the mental outlook. Worry cuts off your lifeline to joy, causing tension to build and laughter to cease. When worry grabs your heart, prayer simply becomes a formality.

The devil fans the fire of worry, because he knows it chokes out truth. The "father of lies" says, "This situation is more than you can bear. What if this happens, what if that happens, what if . . . ?" However, Jesus' words are truth: ". . . **And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.**" (Matthew 28:20) And further, ". . . **And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.**" - (1 Corinthians 10:13 emphasis mine)

Worry is nothing more than a person's refusal to let go of problems. For some reason we believe that if we fidget and fuss about it long enough, the problem will just evaporate. The Holy Spirit wants to bring relief – longs to bring peace – but we stubbornly insist on dwelling on the problem itself, instead of focusing on the One who can fix the problem.

Paul encourages us to worry about nothing and pray about everything: "**Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**" (Philippians 4:4-7 emphasis mine)

Here in a few short sentences, we find the very source of joy – the security of knowing that God cares, God listens, and God gives peace. Joy is a response of faith in the Father as our security source. This reminds me of a story I recently read that was about a British grandmother who lived through WWII.

When London was being bombed, she refused to leave her apartment. Every day her son urged her to move to his home in the suburbs away from London, but she stubbornly refused. She would always assure her son that she would be all right and point to a plaque on her wall that said: "Don't worry – it may never happen!" But one day it did happen – her apartment was hit with a falling bomb and two-thirds of it was demolished. When the son heard about the barrage of shelling and what quadrant of the city it hit, he hurriedly made his way to London.

Arriving at what remained of her apartment, the son found his mother sitting in her rocking chair, her Bible in her lap and singing her favorite hymn. In exasperation he shouted at her, "Now what about your motto? It didn't seem to get you through this time!" "Oh my goodness," she said. "I forgot to turn it over." On the other side it said: "Don't worry – you can take it!" Whether this story is true or not, I hope it makes you chuckle. But the point I believe the story illustrates is that confidence in God only comes from an intimate relationship with Him.

While times of trial and testing are not pleasant to endure, we must wait patiently for God to accomplish His purposes. "**Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.**" (Hebrews 12:7-11 emphasis mine)

If we trust God and believe He is in control, He will turn all situations around to ultimately glorify Himself through our faith in Him. **"In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory."** (Ephesians 1:11,12 emphasis mine)

Dr. Paul Walker, in his book *How To Keep Your Joy*, introduces his readers to a man called Martin, who lived liked he trusted God. Martin has inoperable cancer. Yet Martin wrote the following words: "You are free – free in spirit, mind and expression. You are free to care, to be happy, to be loving, free to be what Christ created you to be. I have learned that God whispers in our pleasures, but shouts to you when you are in pain.

The Lord forces us, by our distresses, to pay attention to His voice." Martin's story teaches us that biblical joy does not negate pain or heartache, nor should Christians maintain a "false optimism" or a "happy appearance facade." Martin's experience, however, is a good example of how God uses unpleasant circumstances in life as part of the sanctification process, teaching us to trust Him.

True joy comes from this type of internal confidence in God. (Psalms 16:7-11, 37:7-8) Peter says: **"Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."** (1 Peter 5:6,7) When we follow Peter's advice, the Holy Spirit will exchange His joy for our anxiety. As we commune with Him, He will begin to work things out, help us clear our thinking and point us in the right direction.

Peter's formula teaches us that we can learn to relax, tension can be released and we can laugh once again. Jesus is our equilibrium in life – when you release your cares, disappointments and heartaches to Him, He helps you find your balance – your equilibrium – your joy!

In God's economy, nothing is wasted (remember the twelve baskets of leftover loaves and fishes). God is purposeful in all He does and allows. He can turn your sorrow into joy – a joy that will put a gleam in your eye, a song in your heart and a bounce in your step. You see, God created us in such a way that we learn best by "experiencing." When we experience pain, we become much more compassionate toward others who are experiencing a similar situation.

The circumstances of life mold us, allowing God to let His love – His Heavenly, selfless love – flow through us to touch other people's lives.

When we begin to understand how this works, 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 becomes alive and personal: **"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we**

suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort." (emphasis mine)

Pursue an attitude of exalting Christ! Get involved with helping others and before you know it, your focus will be turned inside out. **"Is there any such thing as Christians cheering each other up? Do you love me enough to want to help me? Does it mean anything to you that we are brothers in the Lord, sharing the same Spirit? Are your hearts tender and sympathetic at all? Then make me truly happy by loving each other and agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, working together with one heart and mind and purpose."** (Philippians 2:1,2 Living Bible) The attitude of unselfishness and giving of oneself is the secret of releasing true joy!

In a book called *Quote/Unquote*, author Jan Canfield wrote: "The happiest people are rarely the richest, or the most beautiful, or even the most talented. Happy people do not depend on excitement and 'fun' supplied by externals. They enjoy the fundamental, often very simple things of life.

They waste no time thinking other pastures are greener, they do not yearn for yesterday or tomorrow. Rather, they savor the moment, glad to be alive, enjoying their work, their families, the good things around them. They are adaptable; they can bend with the wind, adjust to the changes in their times, enjoy the contests of life, and feel themselves in harmony with the world. Their eyes are turned outward and upward, they are aware and compassionate.

They have the capacity to love." Whether she realizes it or not, Jan Canfield has summarized in one short paragraph the attitude of joy. How ironic that so many Christian congregations spend large amounts of money to supply their members with witnessing tools and presentations on the latest soul-winning "techniques." What a waste of time and money! For the truth is, an intimate, day-to-day experience with Jesus will cause your joy to be infectious.

Your joy will be so infectious that you will have no trouble convincing people around you that Jesus is real, that He has changed your life and has the power to transform any life He comes in contact with! I think Chuck Swindoll said it best when he wrote: "Joy is the flag that flies above the castle of our hearts, telling people that the Heavenly King is in residence there!"

As we review some of the ways we can cooperate with the Holy Spirit to find true joy, I hope you will review the additional Bible texts provided. To remain joyful takes active participation on our part, as well as the Lord's. We must recognize that the Kingdom of God is within us as we "abide" in Jesus through the Holy Spirit. (Luke 17:21)

When we make a *lifestyle* decision to become a disciple of Christ, we also give Him permission to help us bear our burdens. Strive to follow the Holy Spirit, wherever He may lead, for therein is real happiness. Also realize that living for Christ in a sin-full world requires an attitude of coping and perseverance.

Anticipate that problems will come, but also anticipate receiving strength from the Lord to meet them and to hold on. (Ephesians 6:12-18, Romans 15:4, 1 Peter 5:10) The greatest tool we

have to neutralize the negative stressors in our life today is God's Word; as Paul put it: " . . . **holding fast to the Word of Life . . .**" (Philippians 2:14-16 RSV)

Bible study becomes exciting when we realize that the Holy Spirit uses the Scriptures to rejuvenate us. Read the Word, maintain an attitude of worship and praise and watch His power be released! Keep a prayerful attitude. Through prayer and communication with God, the Holy Spirit will perform the miracle of transforming your thinking. (Proverbs 23:7, Romans 8:6, Ephesians 4:20-5:1) Finally, practice finding something to laugh about every day.

Even in painful times, usually there is something that happens that can prompt a chuckle. If you can't find something to laugh about, ask the Holy Spirit to help. "**At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit,** . . ." Laughter is good medicine. (Proverbs 17:22) It takes our focus off our problems and gives us a brief reprieve.

To be sure, we live in exciting times! For people who have made Jesus their hiding place, who have sought His presence in their daily lives and trusted Him, this is a time of GREAT JOY and ANTICIPATION! Why? For so long, followers of Jesus have been sojourners, wandering in a place that is out-of-step with the principles His Kingdom maintains.

But soon, we will see our beloved Savior, Jesus Christ, face-to-face. Reunited with loved ones, sin and death will be no more. It will be a time of great joy, because for those who love Jesus, eternity will be just beginning – new bodies, new minds, new hearts, new friends, new home, new everything.

Our joy will know no bounds! But the greatest joy will be from the realization that we have been redeemed, undeserving though we may be, by the Father's love gift – His Son's life for ours. You will experience a joy that even Heaven's angels cannot experience. Yes, someday our voices will join in song with the angelic hosts – but our joy will far exceed theirs. Johnson Oatman Jr. penned the following words in 1894 for a well-known hymn that summarize this point so well.

The chorus goes like this:

Holy, holy is what the angels sing,
and I expect to help them make the courts of heaven ring;
But when I sing redemption's story, they will fold their wings,
For angels never felt the joy that our salvation brings.

So, smile! That day is nearer than when we first believed! Let your joy in Jesus bubble over into every aspect of your daily living. The Comforter anxiously awaits your permission to lift your burdens and to fill your heart with His joy and peace. Let go of your worries – release your grip – let them drift away like a helium-filled balloon on a breezy day. Allow yourself to experience the relief and freedom that only His Presence can bring!