

Essays in Philippians 7- Rejoice in the Lord

Philippians 3:1

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In the last section of Philippians chapter two, Paul reassured the saints of his condition (Phil. 2:18-30). He was in prison, but was well. He planned to send Timothy to help them. Earlier, the Philippians had sent one of their members, Epaphroditus, to take money to help Paul. However, Epaphroditus had not returned to the church. They did not know of his whereabouts. It appeared as if he had taken the money and ran. For this reason, Paul tells the church to receive Epaphroditus upon his return. This good saint had risked his life for Paul, but had been delayed in his travels due to a grave illness. If any at Philippi doubted Epaphroditus's story, they could rest assured by Paul's letter. This explanation is book-ended by Paul telling the saints at Philippi to rejoice.

Phil. 2:18: "Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me."

Phil. 3:1: "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord..."

Joy is one of the surprising themes of this letter. Paul was imprisoned, yet, he invited the Philippians to share in his joy. How could Paul be joyful while imprisoned? Or, how could Paul be joyful knowing there were free Christians speaking against him throughout the brotherhood (Phil. 1:15-18)? Perhaps some of our surprise stems from misunderstandings about the nature of joy.

The Elusiveness of Joy

Why is joy elusive for so many people? Obviously, we struggle when bad things happen to us in life. However, life can be perfectly normal and we can become discontent. Jesus once likened a group of Galileans to petulant children: nothing He did pleased them (Matt. 11:16-17). This is often the case with us. Everything could be going well in our lives; yet, we can find reasons to complain. We are given to cynicism. Or, like the Christians who were speaking against Paul, some may have selfish agendas. They cannot rejoice over the successes of others. If the spotlight is not on themselves, they are jealous. As long as we are blinded by pessimism and selfishness, joy will remain elusive.

Also, joy is often elusive due to how we confuse joy with happiness. Happiness is momentary. This emotion is the result of something good happening to us. Happiness is related to joy, but the two are not synonymous. We do not have to be happy to have joy. For example, Paul was not happy he was in a Roman prison. He was not happy he was being treated unjustly. He was not happy that other Christians were speaking against him. Yet, he was joyful. As he will explain later, he had developed contentment in Christ (Phil. 4:11). As a result, Paul's joy was unaffected by his changing circumstances.

About Joy

Christians are to be known for joy. As a matter of fact, we are to be the most joyful people in the world. Joy is to sustain us in life. Joy can attract the down-trodden to Jesus. To help clarify misconceptions about joy, consider the following aspects of joy.

1. Joy comes by faith. Joy is a perspective shaped by an awareness of what God accomplished through the Messiah. The information of the Messiah Poem of chapter two was Paul's reason for joy (Phil. 2:6-11). Jesus had come to earth, obediently sacrificed His life on the cross, and had been exalted by God through the resurrection and ascension to Heaven. Therefore, Paul and the rest of the world could be saved. Joy comes from the knowledge of our salvation.

2. Joy is a choice. Paul could have chosen to be angry and bitter towards those who had done him wrong. Instead, he chose joy. The result of his choice was significant. Paul was not angrily rotting away in prison. Instead, joy gave him motivation to be useful. He was writing letters to encourage churches. He was teaching the Gospel to his captors.

When we confuse happiness for joy, we fail to realize that we can choose joy even when something bad happens to us. Doing what we are able where we are in life will bring us joy. Life was not easy Paul. By faith, he chose joy.

3. Joy is a fruit of our labor. In life, we often are satisfied with a job well done. After we have worked hard and completed a project, a sense of accomplishment brings us joy. Solomon wrote, "I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man...So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot...(Eccl. 3:12-13, 22).

As Christians, we are to be hard-working. We are to put our heart into our work (Col. 3:23-24). This is especially true regarding our efforts to advance the Gospel. Seeing members of Caesar's household obey the Gospel brought Paul tremendous joy. The apostle John wrote, "For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth" (3 John 1:3-4).

Regrettably, some expect to experience joy without any effort. They anxiously wait for something good to miraculously happen in their lives. Do not be deceived by this trap. Joy does not come to those who lazily sit on the sidelines of life. Joy comes to those who work hard.

4. Joy is found in the Lord. To experience joy to the fullest extent, we must be in the Lord. All spiritual blessings are provided for us in Christ (Eph. 1:3). Being in the Lord is the result of our obedience to the Gospel. If we do not obey the Gospel, we will never experience joy to its full extent. For example, everyone can experience the joy which comes from a job well done.

Anyone who works hard can accomplish a task. However, the joy of salvation comes only to those who obey the Gospel of Christ.

God wants everyone to experience the joy of salvation. He wants everyone to know the peace that comes from living in Christ. Being in the Lord will give us motivation in all seasons of life. No matter what happens to us, no one can take away the joy of our salvation. Being in the Lord will bring contentment in death. We can die with the hope of eternal life.

In the Lord, we have good reasons to rejoice. We have a Creator who loves us. Our sins have been forgiven. We are not alone: we have a family in the Lord. By the risen Lord, we have hope of eternal life.

Conclusion

Are you joyful? Or, are you letting the world rob your joy? Paul was unwilling to let the world steal his joy. Instead of turning inward and focusing on what is wrong in our lives, Paul teaches us how to focus on what we have in the Lord. In so doing, we can find the strength needed to serve Christ by serving others. No matter what happens to us in life, we can learn to be useful. Paul exemplifies how to have joy. If we trust this approach, we will experience joy.