

Rejoice!

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Date: 18 September 2011

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[0 : 0 0] The Bible is very honest. It presents the human condition with a gritty realism. Even this morning we were noting the words of Jesus that He directed to His disciples, you are evil. It is also very honest in its recognition that the Christian life can be a real struggle. We can be assailed by doubts and fears of different kinds. We can be confronted, if not at every turn, at many turns, with those who would oppose us or perhaps circumstances that would drag us down. We can be sad. We can be discouraged. We can be downcast. And in all of these things we are not alone. These are experiences recorded for us in the Scriptures of countless men and women of God. We think of the Psalms in particular and how they vividly portray a whole range of trying human emotions that were the experience of the authors of David in particular.

Even more tellingly, our Lord Himself experienced the full range of human emotions, and with an uncommon intensity, loneliness and sadness, being let down, discouraged, anguish, heartbreak, these are experiences that our Lord went through. And as I say, in an intensity and in a measure that we have perhaps been largely spared. And in our struggles, it's good to remember that being a Christian does not require a permanent smile. We're not letting the side down when we are sad. Now, I imagine that in all that I've said thus far, there wouldn't be many here who would need much persuading that what I've said is largely reasonable and true. And yet, all that I have said, or much that I have said, would appear to fly in the face of the exhortation delivered by Paul to the Philippians, and that we read a moment ago.

There in Philippians chapter 4 and verse 4, Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, rejoice.

It's almost as if Paul, as he writes this exhortation, rejoice in the Lord always, he's aware, he's conscious that among his hearers there will be some rather incredulously asking, did he really say that?

And so, he repeats it to increase the intensity of it and to assure us that he really does mean it. Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, rejoice.

[3 : 2 2] Well, what do we make of Paul's command? I want to briefly consider this command this evening. We pose the question, or at least the question arises in our mind, is it reasonable? Is it possible to obey this command? Is this not something that really is beyond even a reasonable attempt that could be made by us? I think in response to the question, is it reasonable? Is it possible?

We are almost obliged to reply in the affirmative, and we're obliged to reply in the affirmative because it's quite inconceivable that God, through Paul, would require of us that which is impossible.

So, it must be possible. But how? How are we to respond? How are we to obey this exhortation that's delivered to us? Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, rejoice. To help answer that question, and really what I will bring this evening is only perhaps a little help, I hope, in answering the question. It is not and is not intended to be an exhaustive and thorough answer to that question, but I hope in a measure a small help in answering the question. We need to do two things. I think the first thing that we need to do, or certainly I think will be helpful for us to do, is to understand what kind of joy Paul is speaking about and thus requiring of us. What kind of joy is it that we are asked to experience and to express, rejoice in the Lord always? That's the first thing we can do.

The second thing that I think is helpful to do is to notice two, what we might call, accompanying demands that need to be met, or in any case, in the measure that they're met, help us to fully experience the joy that Paul is speaking of. And these demands, or at least a suggestion towards these demands, are found in the following verse, and we'll come to that in a moment. But first of all, let us consider for a moment what kind of joy Paul is exhorting us to experience. Rejoice in the Lord always. Well, the rejoicing is qualified, or in any case, its nature is established by a little phrase found at the very heart of the command. Rejoice in the Lord always. Now, what does it mean to rejoice in the Lord? How is that to be distinguished from other forms or causes, I suppose, of joy? What does it mean? Well, in answering that question, we don't need to resort to speculation or our own thoughts or to mystical musings as to what such joy looks like or involves. Rather, we can do a much better thing, and that is identify in this very letter those occasions where Paul pinpoints what it is that provokes rejoicing in his own life, rejoicing in the Lord. The letter in its totality is very helpful because the theme of joy is a recurring one. And so when we find here at the end of the letter, very near the end, this exhortation, rejoice in the Lord always, and we're thinking, well, what kind of joy is that? I think we can do no better than look through the letter and discover those occasions where Paul speaks of his own joy rejoicing and identify what it is that provokes in Paul, what it is that caused in Paul rejoicing.

And as we identify those things, I think that will help us to have a better understanding of what this is about, what this joy is all about, this rejoicing in the Lord. Well, let's try and find some of the occasions where Paul speaks of his own rejoicing and notice what it is that caused him to rejoice.

[7 : 36] We begin in chapter 1. I think the first occasion where we'll find Paul speaking of rejoicing is in verse 4. And follow with me the reading there in chapter 1 in verse 4. We read, In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. What is it that provokes joy in Paul as he relates it and describes it to us here in these verses? Well, he tells us, because of your partnership in the gospel. That is why I rejoice. That is why I am able to pray with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel, because of the Christian fellowship that I enjoy with you. And a Christian fellowship that isn't just about Christian friendship, important though that is, not just about gathering together with other believers and enjoying fellowship, as we would sometimes use the terminology, but fellowship in the gospel in the sense of working together. The language that is used here in the version that we're using, your partnership in the gospel. I rejoice because of the work that we were able to do together for the Lord. This fellowship in the work of the gospel produced in Paul, even as he recalls it, joy. It was a source of rejoicing for him to be able to work together with other believers in the work of the gospel. This was one source of his rejoicing in the

Lord. The application doesn't need to be labored in the measure that we work together with other believers in the gospel. We too, with Paul, will experience something of this joy. I'm sure many of you can think to maybe occasions when you were working together, maybe at a camp or a mission or in some ministry within the life of the congregation, working together with other Christians, and the encouragement that that brought to you, the joy that you experienced in so working.

But we can go on in chapter 1 and find other examples. I think the next time Paul makes reference to rejoicing is in verse 18. The context is of those who are causing trouble for Paul, and yet what does Paul go on to say? But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached, and because of this I rejoice. He rejoices in the Lord for this reason, that Christ is preached, that Christ is being made known, that the one He loves so dearly, the name that is above every name is being proclaimed, it's being announced, it's being made known.

And even though the motives may be questionable, or indeed more than questionable, nonetheless, he is able to rejoice that the name of Jesus is being proclaimed, and that causes him great joy.

And so for us, if we shared Paul's rejoicing in the fact that Christ is being preached, would there ever be a day when we did not have cause to rejoice? For we live in a day and in a generation where, thank God, the name of Jesus has been proclaimed in our own land, yes, even in our own land, and certainly to the ends of the earth by so many and in so many different circumstances. And so we have so much cause to rejoice. Christ has been preached. It is always good to recognize that and not be so concerned as sometimes we can be. Well, you know, who is doing the preaching, and what are they saying, and do we agree with everything they say? Do they cross their T's and dot their I's just as we think they should? And we can be, rather than rejoicing, we can be downcast because, well, it's just not the way it should be according to our perspective. Paul doesn't seem to be that concerned, not that he's not concerned for doctrine and for sound doctrine, but nonetheless, if Christ has been preached, that was sufficient cause for him to rejoice. He goes on in the following verse to speak of another cause of rejoicing.

[12:10] Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. Why does he continue to rejoice? Well, he rejoices in the prospect of his own deliverance, but particularly that was his own particular circumstance. But if we take a step back and see how that applies to us, we can speak of rejoicing in the trust that we have in God's providence in our lives. In Paul's case, it was this assurance that he would be delivered from captivity that he was in. For us, our circumstances will be different, but as we are persuaded and as we experience God's gracious providence in our lives, how he orders all things together for good, so with Paul we can rejoice in that, and indeed rejoice in the means that God uses to guide us or direct us or, in the case of Paul, secure his deliverance. He identifies the means. He speaks about the prayers of God's people on his behalf. He rejoices in the fact that they are praying for him. He recognizes the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, and that is a cause of rejoicing for Paul, that the Spirit of Jesus Christ is helping him, that God's people are praying for him, and all of these things used of God to secure the end that God has in mind. For this, he rejoices.

We continue to try and find occasions when Paul speaks of his rejoicing in the Lord. We move on to chapter 2, and we read there, we read from the beginning through to verse 2, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Make my joy complete. I'm already rejoicing, but make my joy complete. And what will make Paul's joy complete? That the believers would be united, that they would be of one mind, that they would be one in spirit and purpose. This was a cause of rejoicing in the Lord for Paul.

Well, we leave it there. There are a sample of examples found in this very same letter. And so, when we do come to chapter 4, and we hear these words that seem perhaps at first sight rather unreasonable, rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, rejoice. And as we ponder just for a moment, what does that look like? What does that mean? What is it to rejoice in the Lord? I think we've identified in this very letter some of the causes for Christian joy, for rejoicing in the Lord. And as we grasp these causes, and as we just ponder on them for a moment, is it not true that for all of us, these things are also a reality? These are things that we too can rejoice in. We too can rejoice in Christian fellowship in partnership in the gospel, in Christ being preached, in God's gracious providence in our lives, in the growth and grace of other believers that Paul speaks of there in chapter 2, of the unity and harmony that can be experienced in the gospel. All of these things are also true of us.

And as we recognize, and as we appreciate these things, then we too have great cause for rejoicing. This is something of what is meant by joy in the Lord. Now, clearly, as we already mentioned at the beginning, and we reiterate, this joy does not preclude the presence of other parallel emotions.

I think sometimes we have difficulty grasping this idea that in parallel, we can rejoice and we can be sad. But evidently, that is something that the Christian can experience. In parallel, rejoicing over these things that are true and that bring joy to us, and yet also knowing what it is to be sad and downcast for other reasons that produce that in us, or sometimes even when we have difficulty understanding why we feel that way. So, that's the first thing I said could be helpful for us.

[16 : 34] In getting our heads around this exhortation of Paul, rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, rejoice. Having an understanding, at least in a measure, of what that is, what that looks like. But secondly, another way of helping us to understand this exhortation is to identifying two accompanying demands that need to be met to experience this joy. In verse 5, Paul immediately goes on to say two things. First of all, he says, let your gentleness be evident to all, and then he says the Lord is near.

And then he goes on to challenge the believers to a prayer. And I think these two phrases in verse 5 speak of the importance of right relationships, and the importance of right relationships for us to be able to fully experience the joy in the Lord that we're being exhorted to. First of all, a right relationship with others. This is what is behind or certainly included in Paul's demand, exhortation, let your gentleness be evident to all. He's speaking of our relationships with others and how we carry out these relationships. But I think there's also a reference here to the importance of a right relationship with God. The Lord is near. He is near. And we are to relate to Him.

We are to pray to Him. We are to be in relationship with Him. That is to be an unbroken relationship that allows for this communication that Paul goes on to speak of. And that's necessary, Paul says.

If you're to rejoice in the Lord, then your relationships need to be right. If we think first of a right relationship with others, let your gentleness be evident to all.

This is not simply a demand that Christians be nice and pleasant. Now, I'm not knocking being nice. It's nice to be nice, and it's good to be pleasant. But I think it's about the manner in which we relate to others. We are to endeavor to establish and develop healthy relationships with others, indeed with all who God would place in our path. Joy in the Lord is not a selfish or a solitary joy.

[18 : 46] It's not some self-absorbed search for my happiness. Joy in the Lord is discovered and experienced when our concern is to secure joy and blessing for others. Marriage is a good example of this. If somebody is looking for a wife or a husband, I wonder what the criteria that we have. What do we look for?

Is it a case of looking for somebody who can make me happy? Or is it rather looking for somebody that I can make happy? A very different perspective. And I think the second one is very much the Christian one. And indeed, it can be applied in other relationships. The concern in our relationships to seek the good of the other, to seek the other's joy, the other's blessing. And as we do so, we will find that we too are blessed. And we too experience this rejoicing in the Lord.

So Paul exhorts us in this regard to a gentle spirit, to a gentle manner, not always demanding our rights, not quick to be offended, not easily upset when things don't go our way.

For all of these things steal us of our joy. So a right relationship with others is an important foundational aspect, if you wish, if we are to experience this rejoicing in the Lord, but also a right relationship with God. Paul says, the Lord is near, and then goes on to challenge us and invite us to prayer. In everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. But if we think of this phrase, the Lord is near, now it's been understood in different ways, and Paul isn't entirely explicit as to what he means, and it does allow for different understandings.

Is Paul speaking of his near coming of the Lord? Is he speaking of his near providential care of his people? Is he speaking of his near presence to his people? Perhaps we don't need to choose between these possibilities. But certainly this reference to his near presence speaks of the opportunity that there is for us to be in a close, a near relationship with him. And that is confirmed, if you wish, by what Paul goes on to say concerning prayer. The Lord is near. He is near to you. You can pray to him. You can make your requests known to him. He's near. He can hear you. He is ready to listen and to respond to you.

[21 : 22] And of course, in order to have that fluid communication with God, we need to be in a right relationship to God, casting aside the obstacles that would stand in the way. And so, this evening, I asked myself the question, and I asked you the question, is the Lord near to you? Not just objectively. You know, we could all be very clever and say, of course, he's near to all of his people.

And that's an objective truth, and it's nothing to do with how I feel. He is near. And of course, that is a wonderful truth. But I'm not just asking if objectively he is near to you, but subjectively, experientially. Are there obstacles in your relationship with God? Have you drifted away from communion with him? A right and a near relationship with God is necessary to experience joy in the Lord. In such a relationship, you can bring to him all that would threaten your joy or take away your joy, unconfessed sin, problems of one kind or another in your marriage, in your family, in your work, fears and anxieties, and bring all of these things to him and experience the help and the strengthening that he is ready to grant. So, as we would seek to respond to this exhortation that, as I say, at first sight may seem unreasonable and beyond our capacity, rejoice in the Lord always.

It's important to understand what that is all about, what it looks like, but also the importance that if we are to do so, the importance of these right relationships with others and with God.

And so, as we close, I do ask you the question, how is it with you? Are you able to rejoice in the Lord always? And if you find that quite beyond your capacity, ask yourself the question, why is that?

Why is it so difficult for you? Is it because, perhaps, of broken relationships that need to be mended? Maybe there are those with whom there has been a breakdown in your relationship, in your family circle, among your circle of friends, within the community of the church, and it's a festering wound that has never healed, and it serves as an obstacle to you being able to experience this joy that God would have you experience? Perhaps in your relationship with God, things are not as they might be, perhaps not as they once were. You know, the language that Paul uses and that James uses is very helpful, I think, in describing so often our own experience when they speak of wandering from the truth. Is that not such a common experience for us as Christians? We wander from the truth, maybe nothing too dramatic, maybe not too visible to others. We still attend faithfully the means of grace. We're still involved in church in one way or another, and that's good. But we wander. We've wandered from the truth in one way or another. Our relationship with God is not as it once was.

[24 : 35] We don't pray as we once did. We don't enjoy communion with Him in the way that perhaps we have in the past. We've wandered. We're still there. We're still holding on. We still believe, but we've wandered in some measure. Perhaps that is true of you. What to do? What to do? Do we lament that? Do we say, oh, well, yes, indeed, and with great nostalgia remember better times? Or do we say, well, yes, that is my condition. That is my situation, but I am not going to remain what I am. God provides me the means and the opportunity to sort out those relationships, be it with others or be it with himself. And I would encourage you, if you recognize that in some measure there is a need for you to engage in that mending of relationships, that you would do so. For if you fail to do so, then you will also find it beyond your capacity to respond to this exhortation of Paul rejoice in the Lord always.

I will say it again, rejoice. Well, let us pray.