

The Joy of God's Provision

The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA

Philippians 4:4-7

December 11, 2016

I. Intro

I used to teach kids to memorize Bible verses by singing songs. Now whenever I read Philippians 4:4 I hear “Rejoice in the Lord always! And again, I say rejoice!”

When I was younger and hadn't lived long enough to have bigger problems than simply writing term papers and paying for film for my 35mm camera, it was easy to dance around singing “Rejoice! Rejoice! And again I say rejoice!”

But these days I start my morning by reading the New York Times, and that certainly does not make me feel like rejoicing! Here are a few of last Sunday's headlines:

- Protesters from the Standing Rock Sioux reservation face off with police over the building of the North Dakota Access oil pipeline.
- Global banks have financed projects that destroyed the critical rain forest habitat of endangered orangutans.
- China sees new ambiguity with Trump's Taiwan call
- White ethno-centrists, nationalists, and neo-Nazis see Russian president Vladimir Putin as a symbol of strength, racial purity, and traditional Christian values.

Those were just the front-page articles. Of course, other terrible things continue to happen every week, like terrorist attacks, wild fires, floods, earthquakes, epidemics.

Pastor Stu and I worked together on a preaching plan for Advent that looks at the theme of Joy: the **Joy of God's restoration** thru Jesus' birth; the **Joy of God's plan** in Mary's life; the **Joy of God's Provision** for Joseph, and the **Joy of God's Providence** in our lives. The scripture lesson for today tells us to “*Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice.*” How can anyone be expected to rejoice in the midst of awful circumstances? Was Joseph able to rejoice?

II. Joseph

During Advent, churches spend most of their time talking about Mary and the angels and the shepherds and the wise-men and the OT prophecies. We know *they* all “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy”. The Gospel of Matthew says so! But what about Joseph? Even the Bible commentaries don't say much about him, except that he was “from the house and lineage of David.”

Imagine his dilemma – his fiancé was pregnant and he knew *he* was not the father. She had just returned from a three-month visit to her cousin Elizabeth in another town. Mary told Joseph she was three months pregnant and the father is the Holy Spirit! It took God's intervention by sending an angel in a dream for Joseph to believe that one!

Joseph was a righteous Jew who obeyed all the Jewish laws, paid his taxes, and earned his living by working as a carpenter. He was very aware that the laws of Moses stated: “*If a woman is pledged to be married and sleeps with another man, they are both to be taken to the gate of the town and stoned to death.*”¹ 2000 years ago, sleeping around was a capital offense. The men would kill a woman who dishonors the family. Joseph's relatives and neighbors would have been ready to stone her. By protecting Mary from being executed, Joseph was breaking the law of Moses, quite a traumatic decision for a righteous Jew.

How do you think Joseph felt, wondering how someone who seemed as innocent and pure as Mary could do something like that?

There are so many questions about Joseph that just aren't answered in the Bible!

What we *do* know is that Joseph obeyed the Lord and took Mary to be his wife, protected her from those who wanted to execute her, and raised Jesus as his own. However, none of that really answers the question “Did Joseph rejoice in the Lord always?”

III. Paul

Perhaps it would be better to start by looking at the life of the Apostle Paul, the man who wrote this letter to the Philippian church. Paul was able to say “*Rejoice in the Lord always!*”ⁱⁱⁱ even while he was under house arrest in Rome.

He wrote “*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present all your requests to God*” while hand-cuffed 24-7 to a Roman guard. A few paragraphs later he wrote: “*I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.*”ⁱⁱⁱ

How could someone who prayed faithfully for healing yet never received it^{iv}, say “*Rejoice in the Lord always*”? Paul’s response was “*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*.”^v How can we develop that kind of confidence and apply our faith to our own daily problems? What is Paul’s secret? How can we learn to be that joyful?

In his younger days, Paul was a very righteous, law-abiding Jew who was so zealous that he traveled from town to town seeking out Christians to arrest, torture and execute. But one day Paul had a dramatic vision of the resurrected Jesus Christ, which totally turned his life around and convinced him to worship Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

Paul spent the rest of his life traveling around the Middle East preaching about Jesus. Some people liked what he had to say, and became Christians and started churches. But most of the time he was thrown in prison, flogged or whipped. Several times the crowds tried to kill him by throwing stones at him. He was shipwrecked three times, in danger everywhere, hungry, thirsty, and cold. He worked constantly at two jobs – one to earn a living, and the other traveling all over preaching, teaching, and starting churches.

Paul was joyful even when he was in prison, because it gave him the opportunity to reach people who otherwise would never hear about Jesus. The night Paul and Silas were arrested and beaten and thrown into prison, they sat on the floor of the cell in chains praying and singing hymns to God. Through their testimony, the jailer and all his household became Christians.

During his third missionary journey Paul was arrested and accused by the Jewish leaders of stirring up riots against the Romans. He wrote this letter to the Philippians while he was in prison, thanking them for the gift they sent to him, telling them about his own circumstances, and encouraging the Philippians to remain strong under their persecution and to rejoice regardless of their circumstances!

IV. Define Rejoice

Paul uses the word *joy* or *rejoice* 16 times in this letter to the Philippians. I looked up the definition of the word *rejoice*, which means “to experience joy.” Next I looked up the word *joy*. Webster’s definition said: “the emotion evoked by well-being, success or good fortune, or by the prospect of possessing what one desires. Delight or happiness.”

But that can’t be what Paul meant when he used the word *joy*, because being in prison doesn’t sound like “well-being, success or good fortune” to me!

Let’s check out how Paul used the words *joy* and *rejoice*. Context usually helps to determine meaning. Paul rejoices when Christ is being preached, even when those who are preaching are trying to compete with Paul. He feels joy whenever the good news about Jesus gets to many people in many places, no matter who is preaching. Paul has joy in the conversion of sinners, and rejoices when an excommunicated member repented and came back to church.

Paul rejoices in the spiritual growth of those whom he led to Christ. He writes of the joy he felt when his friend Epaphroditus returned to health. Paul even takes delight in his own suffering, because he knows from experience that when he is weak on his own then Christ’s strength will make him strong.^{vi}

After looking at Paul's example, Joy apparently means "the enjoyment of God and of the good things that come from the hand of God."^{vii}

V. How can we have that kind of Joy? By Praying

To encourage the Philippian Christians to rejoice, Paul wrote: "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*"^{viii} Paul prayed for people in the various churches by name. He prayed that they would grow in their faith, that they would be protected from false teachings. He prayed that their love for one another would increase and that the name of Jesus would be glorified in them. He gave assurance that God indeed answers prayers, although not always the way we want.

We live in a fallen world, and Christians will experience suffering, persecution and death. Pray in faith, believing that God hears your prayers and will answer them. Share with God every joy and every concern, praying for those you meet, thanking God for his blessings, asking for help or guidance, acknowledging that you are totally dependent on God for everything. Pray for healing. Pray for those who preach and teach, that they may proclaim the Word of God boldly. Trust His wisdom, his love for you, his kindness. God who hears your prayers is faithful.

VI. How can we have that kind of Joy?

Be grateful for God's good gifts.

Paul reminded the Philippians that when they pray, remember to pray with thanksgiving. Gratitude increases joy. Whenever I wonder about how to rejoice, I am reminded of my Grandmother. She was filled with the kind of joy about which Paul writes. Grandma and Bampa Peterson lost all their savings when their financial advisor embezzled their funds. They started over, only to lose it all during the depression. Bampa was a Methodist minister, and back then his salary was whatever came in the collection basket. Many times their only meal was a can of beans. Several times Bampa went cold in winter because he had given his coat away again. Grandma out-lived three husbands – she lived to be 96 years old. Macular degeneration took away her eyesight, and osteoporosis took away her mobility. Yet all her life Grandma was always smiling and cheerful. Every day she thanked God for his provision. She would often sing while we were doing dishes together:

*"Are you ever burdened with a load of care?
Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?
count your many blessings name them one by one,
and it will surprise you what the Lord has done."*

My grandmother was able to rejoice because she focused on the good things and thanked God for all her blessings.

VII. How can we have that kind of Joy? Faith in Jesus Christ.

The most effective way to fill your heart with rejoicing is to meditate on all that Jesus Christ has done for us. Then, as Paul said, "*The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*"^{ix}

Jesus left his position on the throne of heaven to come down to earth as a man and live among us. Jesus died on the cross to take the punishment we deserved for our sins. Jesus was buried and then rose from the dead, victorious over sin and death. Jesus reigns in heaven, and has gone to prepare a place for all who believe in Him. Never forget that God loves you, and that you have the Holy Spirit within you to give you strength and hope and encouragement in all circumstances. Trust what you know to be true about God – that he is good and loving, righteous and just. God is merciful and kind. Those who believe in Jesus Christ have complete assurance that all the promises of God will be fulfilled. We have hope in the future because of Jesus. We, too, will be able to rejoice in spite of our suffering because of the hope and promise of resurrection and eternal life.

VIII. Back to Joseph

While working on this sermon and thinking about what enables us to rejoice always, I thought again about Joseph. Maybe as he experienced God at work he actually *was* able to rejoice in spite of his circumstances.

God chose Joseph to be Mary's husband and the guardian of God's son Jesus. If joy comes from "the enjoyment of God and of the good things that come from the hand of God," then I imagine that Joseph must have had a deep sense of joyful gratitude as he acknowledged all the ways that God provided for him and his wife Mary.

- God sent angel messengers from heaven to tell Mary and Joseph the news of God's plan for their lives. An angel came to Joseph in a dream to reassure him that Mary was indeed telling the truth, and that Joseph did not need to fear taking her to be his wife. *Mary was pure faithful and truthful.*
- God gave Joseph the strength of personality to protect Mary from those who judged her as sinful and wanted to stone her.
- God gave Mary & Joseph signs of confirmation about Jesus: from Mary's cousin Elizabeth, and later from the visits of shepherds and Wisemen, and then in the temple from Simeon and Anna.
- God warned Joseph to flee to Egypt because King Herod wanted to destroy the child. Perhaps those unique and valuable gifts from the Wisemen paid for the trip to Egypt and for provisions for Joseph and his family while they were there.

Perhaps Joseph *was* able to Rejoice in the Lord after all.

IX. Conclusion

Whenever we see God at work in our lives;
 whenever we count our blessings with a grateful heart;
 As we remember to not be anxious about anything but rather to pray with thanksgiving;
 whenever we trust fully in the love Jesus has for us, even in the midst of storms and fires and floods,
 persecution and suffering and even death itself,
 it is then that we will be able to
 "Rejoice in the Lord Always! Rejoice! Rejoice! And again I say, Rejoice!"

ⁱ Deut 22

ⁱⁱ Phil 4:4

ⁱⁱⁱ Phil 4:12

^{iv} 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

^v Phil 4:13

^{vi} 2 Corinthians 12:10

^{vii} Chuck Swindoll, *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart*, p. 323; "Sherwood Wirt: Jesus Man of Joy."

^{viii} Phil 4:6

^{ix} Phil 4:7