

Sermon 22: Philippians 4:4: Rejoice

OUTLINE

Rejoicing in prison
Rejoicing in the Lord

INTRODUCTION

'The joy of the LORD is your strength', Neh. 8:10. Our strength is directly linked to our joy. If you are joyless you will be weak; if you are joyful you will be strong. For this reason Paul commands the Philippians to rejoice, 4:4, 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.' Here is a church facing great difficulty; Paul is calling them to stand firm, and he is outlining a list of how to do this. Last week we saw that we stand firm by standing united; today we see that to stand firm we must rejoice.

Even unbelievers see the necessity for joy to sustain us. Recently, the Whisky giant Johnny Walker changed their advertising campaign. If you don't know who they are you might recognize them by the walking man on their square whiskey bottle. Their old advertising slogan was 'Keep Walking', this was a slogan pointing to how determination will win the day and bring results. Recently they hired a psychologist who studies human happiness to help them rethink their advertising, and now their new tagline is, 'Joy will take you further.'¹ There is very little dispute that happy people are healthier and more productive, 'Forbes published the results from one study that revealed happy employees are as much as 20% more productive in the workplace than unhappy employees.'²

Generally speaking, apart from the immature and the insane, we all want to be joyful. But joy is incredibly illusive. We lose our joy because of broken relationships; failing health; job dissatisfaction; unrealized dreams; guilt; lost opportunities; bad governments; economic recessions; uncertainties about the future; being oppressed; the overwhelming amount of suffering in the world; loneliness; depression; bearing the burdens of loved ones, etc. And then Paul arrives and commands us to rejoice. Many have commented on seeming impossibility of the command. How can you command someone to feel an emotion? Emotion we know is not like water, you can't just turn a tap on or off and there it is. Not only does he command us to have an emotion; he commands us to have joy always. Paul is well aware of the awkwardness of his command, and just to make sure you know he is not kidding around he repeats himself, 'again I will say, rejoice.'

The joy that Paul commands is a joy that is available to every Christian. He talks about rejoicing 'in the Lord.' This is the third time in the first 4 verses of this chapter that this refrain has come up, 'stand firm in the Lord;' 'agree in the Lord;' and now 'rejoice in the Lord.' The joy Paul is talking about here is not to be confused with the joy of a joyride; or the common joys that every human being experiences. This is a joy that is a fruit of the Spirit; not as the world gives but as Christ gives (John 15:11); this is the joy of our salvation; a joy that is

¹ <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/joy-marketing-campaigns> accessed 9/7/2023

² <https://www.wellsteps.com/blog/2022/05/17/happy-employees-more-productive/#:~:text=Does%20Employee%20Happiness%20Have%20an,the%20workplace%20than%20unhappy%20employees.> Accessed 9/7/2023

inexpressible and full of glory. This is a joy that can be had in the midst of sorrows because it is not dependent upon our circumstances. As we consider this command we will look at it in two points, rejoicing in prison; and rejoicing in the Lord.

Rejoicing in prison

We are all familiar with the concept of the armchair expert. We can see it in our minds now, that middle aged, unfit, overweight guy sitting in his armchair with a beer shouting at his TV as he is watching a rugby match telling the All Blacks exactly how to play the game. No rugby player in his right mind would take his advice seriously. But if Steve Hansen or Graham Henry was handing out advice then any All Black would be all ears. When it comes to joy Paul is no armchair expert but the real deal. Paul is a man writing from prison, writing what has been called the epistle of joy. Paul has seeded this letter with joy. Paul prays for the Philippians with joy 1:4 his joy is fed by the health of the church; Even though Paul is in prison he is rejoicing in the preaching of Christ because he loves it when the gospel goes forward; and that his example has emboldened others to stand, he is grateful that his suffering has benefitted others. He will rejoice whether his future results in release from prison or release from this life to be with Christ, 1:18, future service or future glory are both sources of joy for Paul. Paul models having joy in the best things when he calls the divided Philippians to complete his joy by being united in the gospel, 2:2. He is glad and rejoices in being poured out as a drink offering to advance their faith, 2:17; and asks the Philippians to rejoice in the same way, 2:18, to make sure that their joy is in being a servant for others. Paul commands the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord as an antidote to the false teaching that was attacking the gospel, in 3:1. Twice in the verses before us he commands us to rejoice in the Lord as part of our standing firm. And in 4:10 Paul rejoices at the generosity of the Philippians to him, not because he needed it but because of their spiritual growth. Joy in servanthood; joy in sacrifice; joy in others salvation; joy in others growth; joy in prison; joy in death.

Now we don't get it, we are trained by our sinful hearts to think that joy can only come when my wishlist is fulfilled; when everyone does things my way; when there is no pain or disappointment in my life; we might think that this command is impossible or naïve. We need to remember that Paul is a man who is full of the spiritual fruit of joy in the midst of many difficulties. In 2 Cor. 4:8-10 and 6:4-10 he lists some of his many difficulties, 'We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.' 'but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; ⁷ by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.' Sorrowful yet always rejoicing, there it is. Paul is a model that reminds us that joy is not something only to be had in the absence of pain and loss, but something that can be had in it.

This is a radical perspective both in Paul's day and our own. In Paul's day the Epicureans taught ataraxia, 'ataraxia was a goal that could be achieved through the avoidance of pain which comes primarily from social and political life.'³ This would be similar to people trying to find peace by simplifying their lives, through avoiding technology and the modern world, pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain, etc. An opposing school of thought was Stoicism who taught apatheia, this is a type of contentedness that comes from virtue and detachment. Both had a version of emotionlessness as a path to joy. This is not the Christian way. Christian joy is not a denial of the realities of sin and suffering; it is not a detachment from the harsh realities of life in a fallen world in a fallen body. Instead Christian joy is something that flowers despite the difficulty; a joy that can be had in the midst of sorrows, that comes in to alleviate the crushing weight of what could otherwise consume us. It is not a constant feeling of happiness, but an unconquerable buoy that no earthly difficulty can drown. We learn from Paul that it is a joy with different priorities; and otherworldly in that it does not follow the worldly patterns of joy. Christian joy is different because it is in the Lord and not in circumstance.

Rejoicing in prison

What is the key to be able to rejoice in any situation? What is the key to being able to rejoice, always? The answer is found in those key words, 'in the Lord.' Now we recognize that this joy is not automatic. Paul would not have had to issue it as a command if it were automatic. There are many things that hinder and suppress our joy, but Paul is telling us by this command that this is possible because we rejoice in the Lord. This joy that Paul is talking about is the joy that only comes as a fruit of the Spirit. It is a joy that can only come when we are saved. This is not the joy of us fulfilling our bucket list or even of our best earthly experiences. Paul is talking about a joy that we once could not have and now can have in any situation. Being born sinners we all feel our dislocation from ourselves, our neighbours, our world and our God. We are born dysfunctional and empty. Our lives are driven by this emptiness as we chase things down to fill it. But now we have joy. Because we have this joy we can say not to temptation knowing we have something better; we can cope with pain because we know there is more than this. There are several types of joy that we experience.

We experience the joy of our salvation. What is the relief of a man on death row who is suddenly acquitted and released? This is nothing compared to the salvation we have received. The Spirit and the word exposed our sins to us, we knew real and inescapable despair when we saw that we were irretrievably lost in sin. Eternal condemnation hung over us and was like chains and anchors on our legs pulling us deeper and deeper. And then we received Jesus Christ as Saviour and we were forgiven, justified and adopted. The joy of sins forgiven is immense is so great because the state of our lostness was so great. We have not only been saved, but saved to the uttermost. We have a righteousness that cannot become unrighteous; a judgement day verdict that will never be overturned; an adoption that will never result in alienation; a sufficient sacrifice that satisfies in full all that God's law demands in payment. Our salvation does not depend on our own goodness but the goodness of the perfect God-man, Rom. 8:38-39, 'For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apatheia>

anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' Maybe you are here today and you have never known this joy. Christ has died for sinners and promises that if any come to Him, casting themselves upon His mercy for salvation from sin and its consequences, He will receive and save us.

We can lose the joy of our salvation through sin, that is why David prays for its restoration, Ps. 51:12, 'Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.' And if we do not think deeply about our wonderful salvation this joy will not be at the forefront of our minds. Our failure to think about the gospel; to think deeply about the gospel; to know the technical aspects and realities of the gospel robs us of the joy that we need as a ballast and a shield.

We experience joy in our sufferings. Our sufferings in the hands of our Father work together not to destroy us but for good. We may suffer more than the unbeliever as we have to suffer against internal sin, external enemies and persecution. But we also suffer less than any unbeliever as all we suffer is not the judgement of God to destroy us but the discipline and refining of God to make us holy. None of our suffering is meaningless but part of His hidden plan as He glorifies Himself and purifies us. We are able to see our sufferings not as a meaningless mess or indication that God is weak or does not exist, but part of a bigger story. We see God's word making sense of suffering in the world as the Bible tells us about the fall into sin. It helps us to see that all injustice will be punished assuring us that every single sin will receive its due. We learn that God's providence extends to every pain in our lives, and that in the hands of our Father pains that so often destroy are subverted to bringing about sanctification. In fact Paul reminds us that our pains can even result in benefits coming to others. 2 Cor. 4:11-12, 'For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you.' Our suffering is part of a larger spiritual battle where we get to hold Christ and His worth up as more valuable than anything in this life. Our weakness and dependence upon Him puts His strength on display, and this enables others to suffer. In God our pain is not wasted. knowing that He suffered to save us; makes us willing to suffer to glorify Him.

We experience joy in God. Think of our state in sin. We were those who would have robbed and murdered God. We want all His stuff, and none of Him. As sinners if we could have secured an eternal state of joy with no consequences of judgement for our actions we would have taken it. God was the total contradiction of our own sinful beings. We were by nature self-loving; self-enthroning; self-worshipping; God hating; law hating; sin loving, devil obeying, and every other perversity and enslavement that you can think of. We were by nature children of wrath whose only hunger and thirst was the addictive craving for sin. Like prostitutes addicted to heroin we would do anything for our fix, allowing ourselves to be manipulated because we wanted the sins we were being offered. All the while we hated God, hated holiness, despised prayer, the bible, Christians, worship and anything to do with God. Jesus Christ was our favourite swear word, and we were amongst the conceited who looked down our noses at those who needed God, and those who were truly sincere were branded as fanatics. If had the opportunity to design heaven it would be a big fat party of indulgence with no consequences, and God would be banned along with all rules and any service we would have to render. The orientation of our being was not

to rejoice in God, but to loathe Him, not to boast in Him but to blaspheme. And this inner emptiness drove us on in the futile chasing of sin.

But now, we have found the truth. And now along with Augustine we have found the everlasting fountain. We who were driven and enslaved by a deep emptiness of being, a fervent hunger that drove us to things with a hunger greater than they could satisfy; now in having God through Christ we have the truest and fullest joy. Our hearts had always been made for Him, our joys were always intended to be satisfied by who He is. Our hearts were restless and could never find their fulfilment until we found Him, and having found Him nothing else now satisfies. We rejoice in God. We who loved sin and hated God now deeply love God and mourn over our sins, hating the fact that some abiding desire for them still resides in us. We have found the pearl of great price and the loss of all other things means nothing, the Lord is now my portion.

And of course we rejoice in hope. We may suffer loss, and go through difficulty but our ultimate joy does not depend on anything in this life. We can view it all as light and momentary and not worthy of comparison because of the glory laid up for us. The loss of health is hard but we are sorrowful yet always rejoicing. Not only because we are saved, not only because this too will work out for good, not only because we rejoice in God enough to get us through, but also because we know that there is something so much better that cannot be taken from us in the future. 1 Cor. 2:9, 'But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him." We have been given the Holy Spirit to be with us forever, and He is the guarantee of an immeasurable inheritance that far surpasses anything we could lose in this life. 2 Cor. 4:17-18, 'For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,'¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.'

If we take these reasons for joy you can see that each one of them is true no matter what is happening to you, no matter what sad thing happens to us. Name your trouble. No matter what it is you can see that nothing can separate you from God you will always have your salvation. There is no suffering that comes to you that is not allowed by your Father who is with you in it; sustaining you in it; and working your good through it, bringing riches from poverty, health from sickness, life from death, glory from humility, etc. If you lose anything in this life, and yet have God you always have reason for rejoicing, for where your treasure is there your heart will be also. And no matter what you lose in this life you will receive an immeasurable inheritance in the next. These things do not make sufferings disappear, no but we find that we now have the emotional resources to weather whatever storm comes our way. We still have the sorrowful, we don't have to pretend that our loved one hasn't died, or that our pain doesn't hurt, or that the injustice we have suffered is not a real injustice. No, but because of the joy of our salvation, our suffering, the joy we have in God and in hope, we are now sorrowful, yet ALWAYS rejoicing. And one day even the sorrow will come to an end as He Himself will wipe every tear from our eyes.