

Spiritual Joy

By Dr Peter Masters

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How spiritual joy may be spoiled or increased

When the Holy Spirit first works in our lives, he does not communicate joy, but sorrow. He stirs our complacent and indifferent hearts, giving a deep sense of spiritual bankruptcy and need, and enabling us to see ourselves as we would never choose to do – as condemned sinners in the sight of God. He brings us to repentance and faith, and we experience a transforming work in our lives, including the bestowing of spiritual joy.

Before this, we only possess earthly joy, which comes and goes, unlike the joy which is related to eternal things.

Spiritual joy is a deep cheerfulness and gladness of heart. It is happiness and a calm spirit. It comes to us as the direct result of knowing Christ Jesus, along with all that he has done for us, and will do, not just in this life, but eternally.[1]

Christian joy has a constant property. It can be outwardly eclipsed sometimes by grief or shock, or fear or sin, but nevertheless it is, or should be, something that abides in the life of the believer. On occasions it may rise to very great heights. It can flourish in the worst soil, coexisting with fierce conflict, disappointment and loss.

Christ has given us a permanent joy, saying, 'Your joy no man taketh from you.'[2] Alongside the most severe setbacks we may always know and rejoice in the purposes of God, and be calm and glad in his great goodness.

So the command comes to us, 'Rejoice in the Lord always,' a command given in the context of troubles. [3] Paul adds – 'Let your moderation be known unto all men,' meaning, let your magnanimity, your sweet reasonableness, or your deep calm be visible to all. He has in view a situation when we are in distress and difficulty, and tempted to react testily, impatiently or despairingly. Yet we should at the same time be able to rejoice in the Lord. This is about a joy that has a variety of forms.

At times this gladness is beyond description, described by the apostle Peter as 'joy unspeakable and full of glory'.[4] Yet, and here is another characteristic, this joy never ceases to be thoughtful, rational and substantial. It is not like taking a drug, or going into a trance. It is not as if we are carried away by some powerful emotional, manipulating force. No, it is always thoughtful, and operating in the mind. We know why we rejoice.

Furthermore, this joy does not have to be fed by earthly, material, costly things or pleasures. We may have our Christian joy in poverty. Countless believers through the history of the world have been happy while enduring degrees of privation that we know little about in our modern western world. Earthly joy needs a constant diet of stimulation, and as soon as this vanishes, so does the joy.

Spiritual joy can also be known irrespective of personality. Believers who possess a very serious disposition have joy in a deep inward form, while those who are more extrovert possess it in a different shape. It accommodates wonderfully to different personalities.

Qualities and benefits

Before we speak of how joy may be either blighted or developed, let us think of its qualities and benefits. It is undoubtedly a form of worship, as well as being a component of worship. Even outside services of worship, God desires that his children are happy and appreciative towards him, and consciously buoyed up by his love. Hourly Christian joy is a precious act of worship.

It is also the vital component of formal worship, David saying, 'Therefore will I offer in his

tabernacle sacrifices of joy.’[5] Joy is part of the offering to be developed and brought before the Lord. ‘I went...to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise,’ says the psalmist.[6]

God is not honoured by unhappy Christians. Of course, there are times when there are setbacks in our spiritual warfare or our labours for the Lord, but we must not allow our underlying trust in the Lord, our calm, and our thankfulness for spiritual blessings to be swept away by such things.

Among the achievements of spiritual joy is its strengthening power. When the devil attacks and things are going against us, spiritual joy helps us through and gains for us a strength beyond our own.

Another achievement of joy is that it makes us more useful to God. The witness of a rejoicing person is far more effective than the witness of someone with a heavy spirit. When there is joy in our hearts, this is sensed by people. We hear so many testimonies of unsaved people who became envious of believers, because they clearly had a firm hold upon the Lord, upon divine resources; and they were happy people. A downcast Christian is also unlikely to have much room in his heart for the souls of others, because gloom turns us in upon ourselves. A rejoicing believer is, therefore, much more useful in the service of the Lord.

Christian joy delivers us from so much. You are much less likely to be tempted to great covetousness if you are a satisfied, rejoicing person. The Christian who loses, little by little, grateful rejoicing in Christ must increasingly make up for lost joy with material things – perhaps more possessions, or a bigger home and better car. The road to covetousness begins where the path of joy becomes covered with weeds.

How may joy be lost?

How may we lose this joy? Sin, obviously, deprives us of joy, and particularly the sins of the flesh. The explanation for this is easy to see. Although we must take steps to maintain joy, it is really a gift given by the Spirit of God, and the Holy Spirit will withdraw it if there is sin. That is why David prayed in *Psalms 51*, ‘Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation.’ He had sinned, and his assurance and his spiritual joy had been withdrawn.

Among the sins of the flesh listed as opposites of the fruit of the Spirit is wrath or anger, including proud, angry responses. This eliminates Christian joy. If sin has brought this about, and we have been plunged into gloom, it is no use looking for a Christian psychiatrist. Only God can forgive and restore joy. He will not allow us to have spiritual joy when there is unconfessed and repeated sin, such as unkind anger within marriage, with loss of courtesy, affection and respect. Do we think the Holy Spirit will give spiritual joy if these things have been allowed, and cruel behaviour has been given free rein?

Other sins also affect spiritual joy. It cannot, for example, coexist with pride. Nor can it live with envy or resentment. Self-pity also causes us to lose joy, because self-pity consumes the entire capacity of human emotions, leaving no room for gratitude, love and joy. When we go about our working day allowing self-pity to go round and round in the mind, we forfeit all joy.

Forfeited when faith fails

A major cause of the loss of joy is the failure to apply faith. This is a lesson we all learn over the years. In so many hard situations we fail to exercise faith, and so we are overwhelmed, and forfeit joy. We should say, ‘This is hard, but I hold on to the Lord; I will bring my situation before him. I will trust him to either lift me over it, or strengthen me through it. My trust will be in him. I will reflect upon his goodness in time past, and praise and thank him. I will meditate on his promise that “all things work together for good to them that love God”.’[7]

Forfeited by lack of thought

Perhaps the most unnecessary cause of lost joy is the failure of appreciation and reflection. Do we reflect day by day on our privileges, blessings, opportunities and future? Or do we take all our blessings for granted? Do we, through the hours of the day, whenever we have opportunity, thank the Lord for what he has done for us; how he has delivered us and what he has brought us through? Do we thank him for both temporal and spiritual blessings in any detail? This is a key source of spiritual joy, and we will consider others in a moment.

Forfeited by bad pursuits

We have already mentioned worldliness as damaging to spiritual joy. If we let the powerful rhythms of this world fill our head every hour of our day, our joy will be physical, biological and earthly, and that is all. Spiritual joy runs away from sin-based entertainment; it is one or the other. We can't have both.

Do we keep bad company? This will surely take away spiritual joy, because 'evil communications corrupt good manners,'[8] or, 'evil company corrupts good actions, thoughts and feelings.'

How may we increase joy?

The Holy Spirit, who is the source of spiritual joy, conveys it to us by various means. Firstly he places a measure of joy directly into our hearts. Then, as a parent puts food before a child, which the child must take and eat, the Spirit provides sources of joy that we must draw from.

Joy in worship

First of these, as we have already seen, is worship. As we sing of the attributes of God, directing our adoration to him, we at the same time are filled with comfort and happiness at having such a Lord, Saviour, Guardian and Friend. As we praise God for Calvary, our hearts are melted and filled with love and gladness. Whether we are worshipping with others, or privately, there is nothing more elevating to the soul's happiness than sincere worship.

Joy by repentance

Repentance, in a strange way, is also a source of immense joy, because the conscience is settled, the burden of sin removed, and we have peace with God, a peace which passes all understanding. 'We joy in God,' says the apostle, 'through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.'[9] Our Saviour has taken the punishment, our sin has gone, and God will remember it no more. Our conscience has been purged and made clean. These are amazing blessings! They can only bring great gladness.

Sometimes we are reminded of sins we committed long ago. How terrible that episode was: the things we did, thought and said! We feel we must repent of them all over again. But we should never do that. We should praise and thank God that when we repented, he forgave. We should direct our praise and gratitude to the Christ who has died for us, borne the consequences, and washed his sinful disciple clean.

What relief, wonder and gladness wells up in the heart when we think – 'God took away my guilt and gave me a new start, and new opportunities, and by his help I will live to honour and obey him.' Even in repentance there is joy.

Joy by reflection

In the exercise of regular reflection there is considerable joy. 'Consider it in thine heart,' said Moses, 'that the Lord he is God...there is none else.'[10] 'Consider it in thine heart.' Think upon it thoughtfully and at length. Study it; weigh it. And this is what we must do, for without this our joy will be limited. Reflection is an appointed source of joy. One may greatly appreciate receiving a gift of flowers, but the real pleasure comes from looking at them once displayed.

Give time to reflect on the history of redemption; on the promises of God, and on the great doctrines of the faith. Think, for example, of the doctrine of perseverance. Learn the texts, know them, and be able to turn to them, for these assure us that in Christ none shall ever pluck us out of his hands; we are his now and for ever. Here is an unfailing source of gladness – to reflect on spiritual things.

Joy by prayer

Then there is the amazing facility of prayer. ‘Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name,’ said the Saviour, ‘that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.’[11] Not, of course, material things just for myself, but if I have in my mind such things as the blessing of others, the proclamation of the Gospel, the help and support of workers for Christ, and my own sanctification, then my prayers will be answered.

With such a promise from my Lord should I not be a happy, glad, and rejoicing person? God himself has said that he will hear our every cry, and respond in his wisdom, his chosen way, and in his time.

We have the incomprehensible privilege of having power to prevail with the sovereign God, and he may yield to our cries, because we are his children and he loves to do so. In the great mystery of his will, he heard our prayers before the foundation of the world, and with the smile of a father, in his own sovereign purpose, he determined to grant even our requests. That is an astonishing privilege beyond human understanding. Can we be gloomy, pessimistic people?

If someone said to us, ‘I have the ear of the Prime Minister,’ we might well reply, ‘How much can he do?’ But if someone says, ‘I have the ear of the most high God,’ that is an amazing privilege. Then why are we ever crushed and defeated by any situation? When we grasp our privilege of prayer, we have tremendous joy.

We may intercede for someone we love, someone who will not turn to Christ, and who seems to fill his or her head with more doubts and antagonistic thoughts as the years go by. But we may say to ourselves, ‘The God to whom we pray is the God who determines all things. And so, my dear relative or friend, you may think what you like, but if God hears my prayer, you will be changed, because he is a sovereign God.’ Does this not give calm, and peace, and joy in believing? Of course it does.

And then we may take to the Lord all our deepest sorrows and burdens. This is yet another priceless privilege, that we can share with the Creator God, the Ruler of Heaven and earth, our sorrows and griefs and burdens! To have these blessings is to have greater riches than the most powerful, and the wealthiest people of all history.

And are we so foolish that we forget an answer to prayer the very next day or the very next week? So many of God’s answers we should diary and deeply inscribe in our memories, so that we can review them often, because answers to prayer are astonishing. And do they not come almost hour by hour, day by day, week by week?

Sometimes we pray for someone for months, even years, until our prayers for that person peter out. And then, suddenly, the prayer is answered. Are we moved for more than a day? Do we not count these things as glorious? The God of Heaven and earth intervenes in my life, hears my faltering ministry of intercession for others, and people are delivered from an eternity of hell, and brought into the kingdom of love and light. These things are stupendous matters, and they lift up our hearts to God in thankfulness, adoration, and happiness.

Joy in the Word

Here is another great source of rejoicing – the exploration of the Word. It is a sad thing if my Bible reading is limited to five verses a day, accompanied by light consideration. O dear friends, read the Word. If you have no other help, read Matthew Henry to stimulate thought, and let him show

you how to read it, and how to delight in it. 'I will delight myself in thy statutes,' says the psalmist, 'Thy law is my delight.' [12] Can we say that?

Even the structure of the Bible is powerful, and a source of joy. All the doctrines of grace are to be found in the book of *Genesis*. Let us spot them, recognise them for ourselves and thank God for them as we see them. Love the Word of God, its astonishing depths, and its wonderful consistency. Every day ask – what doctrine do I learn here? What reproof do I find? What duty and encouragement and promise is presented? And is my Lord and Saviour in the passage?

Christ is the mighty backbone or cable running right through from *Genesis* to *Revelation*. And there are so very many deep observations and insights into human nature and behaviour. In every historical passage, if we look carefully, we will see them. Here is the highest imaginable learning and wisdom, the Book of God, the divine Word, and we have been anointed to enter in, and to grasp it. Let us give thanks, smile and rejoice at every understanding gained.

Joy in other believers

Then we could point to the enjoyment of Christian character, the very handiwork of God, that we see in other believers. We sometimes have cause to grumble about each other. We shouldn't, but we may have cause, because we still all bear the scars of the Fall.

Nevertheless, towering above all causes of complaint, we should be moved by the work of grace in other Christians. Look at some Christians, and marvel at their evenness of bearing and thought, their depth of character, their strengths, their unfailing godly reaction to difficulties, their persistent kindnesses, and their grace and courtesy. They were not always like this. This is the touch of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. If only we could all be more like such Christians. We love them, because we see Christ manifested, and we are confirmed in our faith, and rejoice.

And how we love to be together, because we have so much in common, and true filial bonds. We largely think the same way, share the same tastes for spiritual things, have the same objectives, love the same things. We talk in spiritual language to each other, and we don't have to explain ourselves to each other.

We are never stabbed in the back by each other, and we walk in trust. What a wonderful thing it is to be able to take joy in Christian character. How greatly King David valued the godly – so much that he says in *Psalms 141*, 'Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness.' That is how it is when we derive joy from the accomplishments of Christ, even in one another. 'We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren' (*1 John 3.14*).

Joy in God's handiwork

We should also derive joy from creation around us. This is something we lack here in London, living in a huge city, and our senses are possibly dulled. But when we do have opportunity to see natural wonders, we should pause and rejoice in them. We think of David as a boy and as a young man, looking after sheep. We read of him at night looking into the liquid depths of the sky, observing God's creation. We hear him say, 'When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; what is man?' [13]

Mankind shrank in his estimation as he gazed into the vastness of the universe, and the wonders of the heavens. 'The works of the Lord are great, sought out of all them that have pleasure therein.' [14]

We ought to be among those who take pleasure in the works of God. If you are somewhere beautiful, pause, take it in, and reflect. There are certainly ugly things in the world, evidences of the Fall, and even such things confirm our understanding of the Bible, but there are also astonishingly beautiful places. Just admire them, worship God, and say, 'This is my Saviour's handiwork.' Then wonder what it will be like when we soar into the future realm and see the uninhibited marvels of our Creator.

Why, the most wonderful scenes in this present world are nothing to be compared with what will be seen everywhere in the eternal glory. So don't rush by, but learn more and more to value every wonder of God's power, for Scripture says these are a source of pleasure and joy to admirers of the Lord.

Joy in trials

This article is part of a study series on the Epistle to the Galatians, which we think was the first of the apostle Paul's letters. But there was a letter before any of those written by Paul, and this was the Epistle of James who had been the pastor-teacher at the great church of Jerusalem for thirty years when he wrote. And right at the beginning of the letter – the very first exhortation – he gives these remarkable words: 'My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations,' meaning trials.

The first instruction in a New Testament epistle says, in effect, 'When you fall into trials and troubles and difficulties – count it all joy, because you are about to prove the Lord as at no other time. He is going to see you through, and you are going to bless him and praise him as he answers your trusting prayers.'

Joy in Christ

These are the major sources of spiritual joy, which make us pleasing to God, strengthen our witness, and keep us through all temptation. The supreme source of joy, however, is reflection upon Christ himself. We may and do reflect on the Father, but the Father has perfectly revealed himself in the Son, who is God manifested in the flesh, and we see the very heart of the Godhead in Jesus Christ our Lord.

We see Christ with the eye of faith, making intercession for us in the heavenly places, planning our lives and planning our future. And we can say – and this is always astonishing to this writer – we can say, 'He is the Lord of glory, the Creator of all worlds, the Judge of all the earth, the author and finisher of our faith, the landlord of the universe, and yet, I am his, and he is mine.'

Could anything in earth or sky or sea be more moving than this? Should we not be filled with happiness and gladness and joy?

Derived from a sermon preached by Dr Masters on *Galatians 5.22*.

[1] 'Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost' (*Romans 15.13*).

[2] *John 16.22*

[3] *Philippians 4.4*

[4] *1 Peter 1.8*

[5] *Psalms 27.6*

[6] *Psalms 42.4*

[7] *Romans 8.28*

[8] *1 Corinthians 15.33*

[9] *Romans 5.11*

[10] *Deuteronomy 4.39*

[11] *John 14.13*

[12] *Psalms 119.16, 174*

[13] *Psalms 8.3-4*

[14] *Psalms 111.2*