

THE SCRIPTURES AND JOY

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The ungodly are ever seeking after joy, but they find it not: they busy and weary themselves in the pursuit of it, yet all in vain. Their hearts being turned from the Lord, they look downward for joy, where it is not; rejecting Substance, they diligently run after the shadow, only to be mocked by it. It is the sovereign decree of heaven that nothing can make sinners truly happy but God in Christ; but this they will not believe, and therefore they go from creature to creature, from one broken cistern to another, inquiring where is the best joy to be found.

Each worldly thing which attracts them says, It is found in me; but each disappoints. Nevertheless, they go on seeking it afresh today in the very thing which deceived them yesterday. If after many trails they discover the emptiness of one creature comfort, then they turn to another, only to verify our Lord's word, "Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again" (John 4:13). Going now to the other extreme: there are some Christians who suppose it is sinful to rejoice. No doubt many of our readers will be surprised to hear this, but let them be thankful they have been brought up in sunnier surroundings, and bear with us while we labour with those less favored. Some have been taught - largely by implication and example, rather than by plain inculcation - that it is their duty to be gloomy. They imagine that feelings of joy are produced by the Devil appearing as an angel of light. They conclude that it is well - nigh a species of wickedness to be happy in such a world of sin as we are in. They think it presumptuous to rejoice in the knowledge of sins forgiven, and if they see young Christians so doing they tell them it will not be long before they are floundering in the Slough of Despond. To all such we tenderly urge the prayerful pondering of the remainder of this article. "Rejoice evermore" (I Thess. 5:16). It surely cannot be unsafe to do what God has commanded us. The Lord has placed no embargo on rejoicing.

No, it is Satan who strives to make us hang up our harps. There is no precept in Scripture bidding us "Grieve in the Lord always: and again I say, Grieve;" but there is an exhortation which bids us, "Rejoice in the Lord, O ye righteous: for praise is comely for the upright" (Psalm 33:1). Reader, if you be a real Christian (and it is high time you tested yourself by Scripture and made sure of the point), then Christ is yours, all that is in Him is yours. He bids you "Eat, O friends; drink, yea, drink abundantly, O beloved" (Song of Sol. 5:1); the only sin you may commit against His banquet of love is to stint yourself. "Let your soul delight itself in fatness" (Isaiah 55:2) is spoken not to those already in heaven, but to saints still on earth. This leads us to say that:

1. JOY IS A DUTY

We profit from the Word when we perceive that *joy is a duty*. "Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice" (Phil. 4:4). The Holy Spirit here speaks of rejoicing as a personal, present and permanent duty for the people of God to carry out. The Lord has not left it to our option whether we should be glad or sad, but has made happiness an obligation. Not to rejoice is a sin of omission. Next time you meet with a radiant Christian, do not chide him, ye dwellers in Doubting Castle, but chide yourselves; instead of being ready to call into question the Divine spring of his mirth, judge yourselves for your doleful state. It is not a carnal joy which we are here urging, by which we mean a joy which comes from carnal sources. It is useless to seek joy in earthly riches for frequently they take unto themselves wings and fly away. Some seek their joy in the family circle, but that remains entire for only a few years at most. No, if we are to "rejoice evermore" it must be in an object that lasts forevermore.

Nor is it a fanatical joy we have reference to. There are some with an excitable nature who are happy only when they are half out of their minds; but terrible is the reaction. No, it is an intelligent,

steady, heart delight in God Himself. Every attribute of God, when contemplated by faith, will make the heart sing. Every doctrine of the Gospel, when truly apprehended, will call forth gladness and praise. Joy is a matter of Christian duty. Perhaps the reader is ready to exclaim, "my emotions of joy and sorrow are not under my control; I cannot help being glad or sad as circumstances dictate." But we repeat, "Rejoice in the Lord" is a Divine command, and to a large extent obedience to it lies in one's own power. I am responsible to control my emotions. True, I cannot help being sorrowful in the presence of sorrowful thoughts, but I can refuse to let my mind dwell upon them. I can pour out my heart for relief unto the Lord, and cast my burden upon Him. I can seek grace to meditate upon His goodness, His promises, the glorious future awaiting me. I have to decide whether I will go and stand in the light or hide among the shadows. Not to rejoice in the Lord is more than a misfortune, it is a fruit which needs to be confessed and forsaken.

2. THE SECRET OF TRUE JOY

We profit from the Word when we learn the *secret of true joy*. That secret is revealed in 1 John 1:3,4. "Truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full." Ah, when we consider the littleness of our fellowship with God, the shallowness of it, it is not to be wondered at that so many Christians are comparatively joyless. We sometimes sing, "O happy day that fixed my choice on Thee my Saviour and my God! Well may this glowing heart rejoice and tell its raptures all abroad." Yes, but if that happiness is to be maintained there must be a continued steadfast occupation of the heart and mind with Christ. It is only where there is much faith and consequent love that there is much joy. "Rejoice in the Lord alway." There is no other object in which we can rejoice "alway." Everything else varies and is inconstant. What pleases us today may pall on us tomorrow. But God is always the same, to be enjoyed in seasons of adversity as much as in seasons of prosperity. As an aid to this, the very next verse says, "Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand" (Phil. 4:5). Be temperate in connection with all eternal things; do not be taken with them when they seem most pleasing, nor troubled when displeasing.

Be not exalted when the world smiles upon you, nor dejected when it scowls. Maintain a stoical indifference to outward comforts: why be so occupied with them when the Lord Himself "is at hand?" If persecution be violent, if temporal losses be heavy, the Lord is "a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1) - ready to support and succour those who cast themselves upon Him. He will care for you, so "be anxious for nothing" (Phil. 4:6). Worldlings are haunted with carking cares, but the Christian should not be. "These things have I spoken unto you, that your joy might be full" (John 15:11). As these precious words of Christ are pondered by the mind and treasured in the heart, they cannot but produce joy. A rejoicing heart comes from an increasing knowledge of and love for the truth as it is in Jesus. "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and Thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart" (Jer. 15:16). Yes, it is by feeding and feasting upon the words of the Lord that the soul is made fat, and we are made to sing and make melody in our hearts unto Him. "Then will I go unto the altar of God my exceeding Joy" (Psalm 43:4). As Spurgeon well said, "With what exultation should believers draw near unto Christ, who is the antitype of the altar! Clearer light should give a greater intensity of desire. It was not the altar as such that the Psalmist cared for, for he was no believer in the heathenism of ritualism: his soul desired spiritual fellowship, fellowship with God Himself in very deed. What are all the rites of religion unless the Lord be in them; what, indeed, but empty shells and dry husks? Note the holy rapture with which David regards his Lord! He is not his joy alone, but his exceeding joy; not the fountain of joy, the

giver of joy, or the maintainer of joy, but the joy itself. The margin hath it, "The gladness of my joy"; i.e. the soul, the essence, the very bowels of my joy." "Although the fig tree shall not blossom neither fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation" (Heb. 3:17,18). Ah, that is something of which the worldling knows nothing; alas, that it is an experience to which so many professing Christians are strangers. It is in God that the fount of spiritual and everlasting joy originates: from Him it all flows forth. This was acknowledged of old by the Church when it said, "All my springs are in Thee" (Psalm 87:7). Happy is the soul who has been truly taught this secret.

3. THE GREAT VALUE OF JOY

We profit from the Word when we are taught the *great value of joy*. Joy is to the soul what wings are to the bird, enabling us to soar above the dregs of earth. This is brought out plainly in Nehemiah 8:10: "The joy of the Lord is your strength." The days of Nehemiah marked a turning-point in the history of Israel. A remnant had been freed from Babylon and returned to Palestine. The Law, long ignored by the captives, was now to be established again as the rule of the newly formed commonwealth. There had become a remembrance of the many sins of the past, and tears not unnaturally mingled with the thankfulness that they were again a nation, having a Divine worship and a Divine law in their midst. Their leader, knowing full well that if the spirit of the people began to flag they could not face and conquer the difficulties of their position, said unto them: "This day is holy unto the Lord: this feast we are keeping is a day of devout worship: therefore, mourn not, neither be ye sorry, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. "Confession of sin and mourning over the same have their place, and communion with God cannot be maintained without them. Nevertheless, when true repentance has been exercised, and things put right with God, we must forget "those things which are behind" and reach forth unto "those things which are before" (Phil. 3:13). And we can only press forward with alacrity as our hearts are joyful. How heavy the steps of him who approaches the place where a loved one lies cold in death! How energetic his movements as he goes forth to meet his bride! Lamentation unfits for the battles of life. Where there is despire there is no longer power for obedience. If there be no joy, there can be no worship. My dear readers, there are tasks needing to be performed, service to others requiring to be rendered, temptations to be overcome, battles to be fought; and we are only experimentally fitted for them as our hearts are rejoicing in the Lord. If our souls are resting in Christ, if our hearts be filled with a tranquil gladness, work will be easy, duties pleasant, sorrow bearable, endurance possible. Neither contrite remembrance of past failures nor vehement resolutions will carry us through. If the arm is to smite with vigor, it must smite at the bidding of a light heart. Of the Saviour Himself it is recorded, "Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb. 12:2).

4. THE ROOT OF JOY

We profit from the Word when we attend to the *root of joy*. The spring of joy is faith: "Now the God of hope fill you with all peace and joy in believing" (Romans 15:13). There is a wondrous provision in the Gospel, both by what it takes from us and what it brings to us, to give a calm and settled glow to the Christian's heart. It takes away the load of guilt by speaking peace to the stricken conscience. It removes the dread of God and the terror of death which weighs on the soul while it is under condemnation. It gives us God Himself as the potion of our hearts, as an Object of

our communion. The Gospel works joy, because the soul is at rest in God. But these blessings become our own only by personal appropriation. Faith must receive them, and when it does so the heart is filled with peace and joy. And the secret of sustained joy is to keep the channel open, to continue as we began. It is unbelief which clogs the channel. If there be but little heat around the bulb of the thermometer, no wonder that the mercury marks so low a degree. If there is a weak faith, joy cannot be strong. Daily do we need to pray for afresh realization of the preciousness of the Gospel, a fresh appropriation of its blessed contents; and then there will be a renewing of our joy.

5. CAREFUL TO MAINTAIN JOY

We profit from the Word when we are *careful to maintain our joy*. "Joy in the Holy Spirit" is altogether different from a natural buoyancy of spirit. It is the product of the Comforter dwelling in the hearts and bodies, revealing Christ to us, answering all our need for pardon and cleansing, and so setting us at peace with God; and forming Christ in us, so that He reigns in our souls, subduing us to His control. There are no circumstances of trial and temptation in which we may refrain from it, for the command is, "Rejoice in the Lord always." He who gave this command knows all about the dark side of our lives, the sins and sorrows which beset us, the "much tribulation" through which we must enter the kingdom of God. Natural hilarity leaves the woes of our earthly lot out of reckoning. It soon relaxes in presence of life's hardships: it cannot survive the loss of friends or health.

But the joy to which we are exhorted is not limited to any set of circumstances or type of temperament; nor does it fluctuate with our varying moods and fortunes. Nature may assert itself in the subjects of it, as even Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus; nevertheless, they can exclaim with Paul, "As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (II Cor. 6:10). The Christian may be loaded with heavy responsibilities, his life may have a series of reverses, his plans may be thwarted and his hopes blighted, the grave may close over the loved ones who gave his earthly life its cheer and sweetness, and yet, under all his disappointments and sorrows, his Lord still bids him "Rejoice." Behold the apostles in Philippi's prison, in the innermost dungeon, with feet fast in the stocks, and backs bleeding and smarting from the terrible scourging they had received: how they were occupied? In grumbling and growling, in asking what they had done to deserve such treatment? No, "At midnight Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises unto God" (Acts 16:25). Ah, there was no sin in their lives, they were walking obediently, and so the Holy Spirit was free to take of the things of Christ, and show them unto their hearts, so that they were filled to overflowing. If we are to maintain our joy, we must keep from grieving the Holy Spirit. When Christ is supreme in the heart, joy fills it. When He is Lord of every desire, the Source of every motive, the Subjugator of every lust, then will joy fill the heart and praise ascend from the lips. The possession of this involves taking up the cross every hour of the day; God has so ordered it that we cannot have the one without the other. Self-sacrifice, the cutting off of the right hand, the plucking out of a right eye, are the avenues through which the Spirit enters the soul, bringing with Him the joy's of God's approving smile and the assurance of His love and abiding presence. Much also depends upon the spirit in which we enter the world each day. If we expect people to pet and pamper us, disappointment will make us fretful. If we desire our pride to be ministered unto, we are dejected when it is not. The secret of happiness is forgetting self and seeking to minister unto the happiness of others. "It is more blessed to give than to receive," so it is a happier thing to minister unto others than to be ministered unto.

6. AVOIDING HINDRANCES TO JOY

We profit from the Word when we are sedulous in *avoiding the hindrances to joy*. Why is it that so many Christians have so little joy? Are they not all born children of the light and of the day? This term “light,” which is so often used in Scripture to describe to us the nature of God, our relations to Him and our future destiny, is more suggestive of joy and gladness. What other thing in nature is as beneficent and beautiful as the light: “God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all” (I John 1:5). Ah, it is only as we walk with God, in the light, that the heart can truly be joyous. It is the deliberate allowance of things which mar our fellowship with Him that chills and darkens our souls. It is the indulgence of the flesh, the fraternizing with the world, the entering of forbidden paths which blight our spiritual lives and make us cheerless. David had to cry, “Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation” (Psalm 51:12).

He had grown lax and self-indulgent. Temptation presented itself and he had no power to resist. He yielded, and one sin led to another. He was a backslider, out of touch with God. Unconfessed sin lay heavy on his conscience. Oh my brethren and sisters, if we are to be kept from such a fall, if we are not to lose our joy, then self must be denied, the affections and lusts of the flesh crucified. We must ever be on our watch against temptation. We must spend much time upon our knees. We must drink frequently from the Fountain of living water. We must be out and out for the Lord.

7. PRESERVE THE BALANCE BETWEEN SORROW AND JOY

We profit from the Word when we diligently *preserve the balance between sorrow and joy*. If the Christian faith has a marked adaptation to produce joy, it has an almost equal design and tendency to produce sorrow a sorrow that is solemn, manly, nobel. “As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (II Cor. 6:10) is the rule of the Christian’s life. If faith casts its light upon our condition, our nature, our sins, sadness must be one of the effects. There is nothing more contemptible in itself, and there is no surer mark of a superficial character and trivial round of occupation, than unshaded gladness, that rests on no deep foundations of quiet, patient grief - grief because I know what I am and what I ought to be; grief because I look out on the world and see hell’s fire burning at the back of mirth and laughter, and know what it is that men are hurrying to. Ah, He who is anointed with the oil of gladness above His fellows (Psalm 45:7) was also “the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” And both of these characters are (in measure) repeated in the operations of His Gospel upon every heart that really receives it. And if, by the fears it removes from us and the hopes it breathes into us, and the fellowship into which it introduces us, we are anointed with the oil of gladness; on the other hand, by the sense of our own vileness which it teaches us, by the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit, there is infused a sadness which finds expression in “O wretched man that I am!” (Romans 7:24). These two are not contradictory but complimentary. The Lamb must be eaten with “bitter herbs” (Exodus 12:8).