

Joy that Transcends Circumstances

2 Corinthians 11:24-28 (NIV)

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In 2012, a group of us went to New York City to help process victims from 9-11. A friend of mine was out on the street in a line to purchase a hotdog from one of the hotdog vendors and his Southern accent caused one of the people in line to say, "Hey, you aren't from around here. Where are you from?"

Of course, coming from South Georgia, we thought this was a bit comical because in New York City, you can hear all kinds of different languages spoken, but I guess if you speak Southern, people know you are not from New York City.

Sometimes when I read the Apostle Paul's writings, I think he's not from around here. I wonder if he lives in the same world that I live in? Is he from the same planet I'm from?

That's what I think when I read his closing remarks to the church of Thessalonica: "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." 1 Thessalonians 5:16.

Is Paul saying that we should be happy all the time, pray all the time, and to give thanks for everything that happens? Should we take these words literally? If so, Paul lives on a different planet than I do. He's making demands that I cannot live up to.

Today I want to spend time exploring one part of this verse: Paul's command to be joyful always.

The American Heritage Dictionary describes joy as a condition or feeling of high pleasure or delight. It is happiness or gladness. Is Paul saying that God wants us to always feel pleasure, delight, happiness, or gladness? That does not fit with other parts of the Bible or even with good common sense.

When Job was suffering with the death of his family, the loss of his health, the loss of his possessions, the abandonment of his friends, the loss of hope and a will to live, was there any joy in his life?

When Elijah was suffering from depression and sequestered himself in a cave, was there any joy to lift his spirits?

When David's firstborn son died, was there joy in the King's court?

When Jesus received the news that his friend Lazarus had died and then met the sisters of Lazarus, Mary and Martha on his way to the grave, was there joy? No, there weeping and a feeling of great loss.

Surely Paul would not so insensitive as to suggest that we should be joyful on such days.

When Jesus hung on the cross and cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" was there joy found anywhere on Golgotha on that black Friday?

This is why I cannot take Paul's words literally: "Be joyful always." So what is Paul suggesting?

I turned to my Greek helps and found that "chairō," the Greek word used by Paul for joy is a verb. It is not a noun. When we hear joy, we think, "feeling."

Instead, Paul wants us to develop an underlying attitude of joy that is the baseline for living.

Paul isn't saying that we should feel joy in all circumstances.

Instead, Paul wants us to have joy as a part of our foundation so that no matter what happens to us, at the core of our lives is joy.

Life will dump its share of unhappy moments, disappointing days, grief, and difficult circumstances that cause us to weep instead of laugh.

However, if joy is at the foundation of our souls, these things cannot extinguish our joy.

Joy will push itself through like sunshine pushing its way through a cloudy day, like a flower growing out of the cement.

This is described well in a children's book, "THE TREE THAT SURVIVED THE WINTER."

It is one of those children's books that may be more for adults than children.

It chronicles the thoughts of a tree that realizes it has survived the hardships of winter.

Listen to this part of the book about the tree: "Her roots seemed to be extending further and more firmly into the soil. Her arms seemed to embrace more of the world, not with the timid gestures of a sapling afraid of tangling with the wind, but with the freedom of knowing that the wind could not topple her. 'I have survived the winter,' she marveled aloud.

When we look as see what we have survived, we are reminded that God is Emmanuel. God is with us and because God is with us, we have been sustained and enabled through the difficult times. While there were not easy, we learn that God did not abandon us.

The Apostle Paul is not from another world after all. He could write about this kind of joy because he experienced it. He experienced this kind of joy even though he experienced great pain, grief, and suffering himself. In fact, he could write these things because he experienced them.

There was no joy in any of the circumstances Paul experienced, which he shared with the church from Corinth: beatings, shipwrecks, constantly in danger, sleepless nights, hunger, not enough money for food or clothing, people lying about him, and no support from the churches he had started.

Yet Paul never said we had to be joyful because of our circumstances.

While our circumstances can bring joy, the joy that Paul speaks of in 1 Thess. 5:16 is deeper than circumstances. Paul's joy is rooted in the person of Christ.

When Christ comes to live within us, we discover a lasting joy and an inward joy that transcends our circumstances.

For many people, Christmas is a depressing time of the year. It reminds them of sad times, of people who are no longer here, of broken relationships, of their loneliness, and a lack of resources.

Some are looking for the lights, the shopping, the decorating, the songs, and the gifts to bring them joy. Not finding it there, some people reach for the numbing effects of alcohol or they spend way too much money, or escape life and travel somewhere where the pain and loneliness of broken relationships will not be as great.

The season is filled with a lot of promise but it is very short on filling the real desires of our hearts, which is one of the reasons it is so depressing for so many people. Paul offers us something deeper.

Paul wants us to find a joy that runs deep, a joy that penetrates deeper than the season, deeper than the event, deeper than any gift that can be bought online or in a store. Paul tells us that such joy can be experienced all the time, every day, despite our circumstances.

When studying those occasions in the New Testament where such joy is mentioned, we should note that it is often equated with the gift of Jesus.

This list tells us to rejoice in his birth (Luke 1:14); to rejoice in his power (13:17); to rejoice in your enrollment in Heaven (10:20); to rejoice in receiving the Lord (19:6); to rejoice in the gospel harvest (John 4:36); to rejoice because of his presence (John 14:28); to rejoice because of his ultimate triumph (8:56); to rejoice in suffering with Christ (Acts 5:31); to rejoice in hearing the gospel (13:48); and to rejoice in your salvation (8:39).

When the Apostle Paul said "Rejoice always" he was referring to the foundation we have in Christ.

There are plenty of circumstances in which there is no joy but there are no circumstances that can take away our foundation of joy.

It is established to moment we invite Jesus into our hearts.

Every time a writer in the New Testament refers to joy, he refers to a joy that goes deep, a joy that is embodied in the personhood and deity of Christ, a joy that cannot be taken away regardless of the circumstances that come our way.

This does not mean we are never sad, are never depressed, that we never grieve, hurt, become afraid or that we do not sometimes doubt.

It does mean that whatever life throws at us, we can trust Christ more than we trust ourselves. We can believe that the Good News is life-changing and sustaining even when we have received bad news that is life changing and threatening.

Even in the birth narrative of Jesus, there are a lot of things that are far from joyful experiences. The trip to Bethlehem for nine-months-pregnant Mary must have been miserable for her only to find out there were no vacant rooms.

Matthew's account of Joseph and Mary having to flee into Egypt with Jesus in fear of being killed by King Herod is an account void of joy as Herod ordered the death of many innocent babies in an attempt to kill Jesus.

This is a reminder that every Christmas some mother and father are crying for their child. There has never been a Christmas of pure peace and happiness.

Part of the miracle of Christmas is that "Joy to the World" is sung at all because it is never sung in the absence of pain and suffering.

But it is sung. For some it is a confession that joy is here already. For others, it is a song of hope that Christ will break through all that is wrong, painful, and sad in this world of ours.

If you are looking for circumstances, people, or things to fill the void in your life and bring you lasting joy, you may end up like the writer of Ecclesiastes who discovered that is like chasing the wind.

Instead, the joy which Paul speaks of and says we should always have is built on the foundation of Jesus. It is not dependent on circumstances but is built on Christ, the solid Rock.

Jesus can impart that joy to us when we accept Him into our lives.

When we learn to trust him daily and walk in His promises, that joy rises and reminds us that God has us in His hands and is going to take care of us even when our lives seem to be overwhelmed by the world.

If life has taken away a lot of joy because of some things that have happened lately, I pray for God to give you the strength to make it through these difficult times, for wisdom to deal with the

conditions, or to make changes if possible.

However, most importantly, I pray that if Jesus is not a part of your foundation, that you would allow Jesus into your life, so that you might have a joy that transcends your circumstances, so that you can understand that while you might not find any joy in what is happening at the moment, you can still know and understand what it means to have a joyful heart –because Jesus lives within you.

If you don't understand that or cannot confess that, I invite you to come and allow Justin to pray with you and ask God to give you a joy that transcends all circumstances.

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