

Keys to Joy

There are two groups of people in this world. The first group is made up of people who never get past the hurts, disappointments or tragedies of their lives. They go through life in a state of gloom interspersed with fleeting moments of happiness.

A new pastor met someone like that in his congregation. He dropped by the home of one elderly church member, and the conversation quickly turned to the hardships of her life. She recounted all her bitter memories, including sicknesses, tragedies and unresolved conflicts with other people. The woman concluded her tale of woe by confessing, "Preacher I've had a bitter and disappointing life. Lots of my family and friends have died. Those that are left never come to see me anymore." She sighed and said, "Yep, I've had a hard life ..." Then she turned, looked the pastor in the eye and said "... but thank the Lord, I'm saved!" To this the new preacher asked himself, "Saved? Saved from what?"

That's a good question. The salvation God offers is more than just a ticket to heaven. It is a new way of living that should bring joy and peace. In spite of that truth, some people seem to never get past the negative in life. The second group is made up of people who seem like nothing can keep them down for long. They have their share of trials and maybe even more than their share, yet they're able to get past it all. They are delightful to be around because they have an inner joy.

I am convinced that there is one great difference between those who get knocked down and stay down and those who get knocked down but get up. It is the ability to look beyond yourself.

Abraham Maslow said, "Without exception, I have found that every person who was sincerely happy, radiantly alive, was living for a purpose or a cause beyond himself." We are going to continue looking at the book of Philippians in order to learn how to have the joy of the Lord in our lives.

1. True joy is an inward thing

As a young man, Paul was very ambitious. He learned at the feet of one of the greatest teachers of his time. He then went on to become a Pharisee who was quickly rising to the top. If he had lived in our world, he no doubt would have been the head of some successful company and would have become a very wealthy man. But there was a time when Paul stepped down off the throne of his life so that Jesus Christ could sit on it and rule his life.

Philippians 3:7-8, "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ."

Paul said, "All of the things that meant so much to me before I was saved are nothing in comparison with the relationship I now have with Christ. All of my years of training and hard work I gladly give up so that Christ may do his will in my life." In spiritual terminology, what Paul did is called the "exchanged life."

We all know what it is to exchange something. Right after Christmas, people are standing in line to exchange unwanted presents for something more desirable. In spiritual terms, the "exchanged life" refers to the decision to no longer allow self to reign in your life. It is to put Christ on the throne in your life so that He can live His life through you. Nowhere is that concept seen any more clearly than in

Galatians 2:20 which says "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

D.L. Moody was a famous evangelist who brought hundreds of thousands of people to faith in Jesus Christ. On one occasion he was asked the secret of his success. He answered, "There was a day when D.L. Moody died." That is what Paul is saying. Joy does not depend on anything in your outward circumstances. It is an inward thing that occurs when you allow Christ to rule your life.

2. True joy is a present possession

Unfortunately, most people live with the "when and then" philosophy of life. When I get married, then I'll be happy. When I have children, then I will be happy. When I get the new job, then I'll be happy. And while you are waiting for all of those "when" things to happen, life passes you by. You end up one day realizing that you are now old, and you have never really experienced the joy that you hoped to have. You were either looking back at the "good old days," or you were looking forward to what you hoped to happen in the future, and now life is almost over. The truth is that you do not have to wait for that magical day to come along when you suddenly obtain the object of your dreams. Biblical joy can be present through every season of your life, regardless of what seems to be happening at the moment because it is an inward thing.

If you think that you cannot have true joy because you are under a financial burden, remember that Paul often went hungry. If you think that you cannot have true joy because people have done you wrong, remember that Paul was persecuted, stoned and often thrown in prison. If it is health problems, remember that Paul had a thorn in his flesh which could have been poor eyesight, epilepsy, malaria, migraine headaches, or any number of things. If you think that you cannot have true joy because you have a bad

boss, remember that Paul is wrote this letter while he was a prisoner in Rome during the reign of Nero. That was not an easy time to be alive.

Nero had come to the throne at the age of 17 in 54 AD. He reached the throne when his mother Agrippina fed his stepfather Claudius some poisoned mushrooms. Having paved the way for her son to reach the throne Agrippina felt she had a right to a little more status than just mother of the emperor. She kind of liked the idea of co-emperor with her son. At first, Nero was too busy with his chariot races to be worried about mom's ambitions, but eventually he began to realize that something had to be done about her. So Nero decided to get rid of mummy dearest. First, he tried the old collapsible ceiling trick. He arranged for heavy concrete slabs to be placed over the ceiling of her bedchamber. However, mom got wind of the plot and spent the night in the closet. Nero then had mom invited to a special dinner of reconciliation at his villa across the bay. On the way home, Nero sends her home on his own special yacht, one with the special trapdoor built into the bottom. Ah but that plot fails because the door hinges on the wrong side. When the conspirators realize the failure they try to capsize it by running back and forth. Mom jumps overboard and swims home. Finally, Nero tells his underlings to finish the job, so they break down her door and murder her. And Nero was not any better to anyone else that he was to his mother. It was under those horrible conditions that Paul wrote this book of joy.

Paul stands as an everlasting testimony to the fact that joy is an inward thing. Who does not depend up on your circumstances. It depends upon the condition of your heart.

3. True joy is an interdependent thing

We tend to operate in one of three ways: dependence; independence; or interdependence. Dependence is focused on someone else. You began life in this phase. A parent or some other adult figure was your source of food, clean diapers, a bath, a comfortable bed, protection. Your focus was that person.

The good news is that kids generally grow out of this phase, but some people do not. They go through life dependent on other people. Dependence is a form of selfishness. You focus on the other to meet your needs. When they don't your world collapses.

Independence is focused on me. It's the attitude of "I don't need you." We sing with Frank Sinatra, "I did it my way ..." Most of us go through this in the teen years when we want to become independent from our parents. We set out to conquer the world on our own. Then, when we're twenty five we move back in with them. Dependence focuses on someone else. Independence focuses on me. Interdependence focus is on us. Interdependence recognizes that we need each other.

God did not mean for us to live the Christian life alone. His purpose is that Christians become interdependent on one another. Someone may say, "I don't have to go to church to be a Christian." That is absolutely true. It is also absolutely true that you don't have to have a family in order to be a child. You can sleep and live out on the street without a

family. But if I had my choice in the matter, I would choose the family over the street. And I would choose the church over being an isolated Christian.

Philippians 2:1-2, "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose."

Notice the attitude that we're to be, "like minded," have the "same love," and be "one in spirit and purpose." There is supposed to be a connectedness among believers that holds us together like cement. We should operate like the giant sequoias of California that tower hundreds of feet into the sky. While on a tour of these giant trees, a guide pointed out that the sequoia tree has roots just barely below the surface. "That's impossible!" exclaimed a tourist. "I'm a country boy, and I know that if the roots don't grow deep into the earth, strong winds will blow the trees over." "Not sequoia trees," said the guide. "They grow only in groves and their roots intertwine under the surface of the earth. So, when the strong winds come, they hold each other up." That's interdependence. It's the way God intended all of us to function. He wants every Christian to be a part of a church family. Having that spiritual support system is a source of a real joy.

4. True joy has an eternal perspective

One thing that becomes very obvious as you study the writings of the Apostle Paul is his belief in the life to come. He constantly makes remarks concerning such things as the "book of life," the "day of Christ," and the "judgment seat of Christ."

Philippians 1:21-24, For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

Those words sound very strange to us. How many of us live life thinking that "to die is gain?" How many of us really think it would be better to depart and be with Christ? That is an eternal perspective, and it brings joy.

One of the best examples of someone who lived life from an eternal perspective was the martyr, Jim Elliott. He was famous for saying, "he is no fool to give up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." That flows from the heart of a man who had an eternal perspective. It is from someone more concerned about the things of heaven than with the things of earth.

In his diary he said, "God I pray to you, light these idol sticks of my life, that I may burn for you. Consume my life God, for it is yours." And then he said, "I seek not a long life but a full life, like that of Jesus Christ." His prayer was answered. His life was not that

long. He died taking the Gospel to the Auka Indians.

But his life was full. His death was a stepping-stone for that tribe to come to know Christ, and he has inspired many people to live with an eternal perspective. His life was spent looking up, and he was full of joy.

Summing it up

1. None of us can be guaranteed happiness in this life

That is because happiness depends upon what is happening, and sometimes what is happening is not any fun. In fact sometimes it is very discouraging. That is life on planet earth.

2. All believers can be guaranteed joy

That is because joy depends on God. As long as God remains who he is and we allow him to rule our lives, we will experience his joy.

What that all means is joy is a choice that you make when you allow God to control your life. No one can give it to you, and no one can take it away from you. It is yours as long as you choose to have it.

“I have everything I need for joy!” Robert Reed said. His hands are twisted and his feet are useless. He can’t bathe himself. He can’t feed himself. He can’t brush his teeth, comb his hair, or put on his underwear. Strips of Velcro hold his shirts together. His speech drags like a worn out audiocassette. Robert has cerebral palsy. The disease keeps him from driving a car, riding a bike, and going for a walk. But it didn’t keep him from graduating from high school or attending Abilene Christian University, from which he graduated with a degree in Latin. Having cerebral palsy didn’t keep him from teaching at St. Louis Junior College or from going overseas on five mission trips. And Robert’s disease didn’t prevent him from becoming a missionary in Portugal. He moved to Lisbon, alone, in 1972. There he rented a hotel room and began studying Portuguese. He found a restaurant owner who would feed him after the rush hour and a tutor who would instruct him in the language. Then he stationed himself daily in a park, where he distributed brochures about Christ. Within six years he led seventy people to the Lord, one of whom became his wife, Rosa.

Max Lucado said, “I heard Robert speak recently. I watched other men carry him in his wheelchair onto the platform. I watched them lay a Bible in his lap. I watched his stiff fingers force open the pages. And I watched people in the audience wipe away tears of admiration from their faces. Robert could have asked for sympathy or pity, but he did just the opposite. He held his bent hand up in the air and boasted, “I have everything I need for joy.” His shirts are held together by Velcro, but his life is held together by joy.