

June 3, 2012
The Summer of Joy
“Joy ... Always!”
Philippians 4:4 (NIV)

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Philippians 4:4 (AMP)
Rejoice in the Lord always [delight, gladden yourselves in Him];
again I say, Rejoice!

Philippians 4:4 (NLT)
Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice!

I remember a while ago seeing a bumper sticker that said, “Sometimes I wake up grumpy, and other times I let her sleep.”

Is it possible to be full of joy ... always? I’ve heard people say, “You can’t be happy *all* the time,” but why not? The Bible says we can. As a matter of fact it commands us to! “Rejoice in the Lord always.” It’s a command. There are other commands in the Bible that we wouldn’t question. For example we’re exhorted to always have hope, to always keep God’s commands, to always love. Do we argue that we should love sometimes but not all the time? And how about this scripture?

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NLT)
Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.

Not only are we told to always be joyful, but to never stop praying (we wouldn’t disagree with never stop praying, would we? Then why should we disagree with “Always be joyful?”). We are also commanded to be thankful in all circumstances. You will notice that it is not thankful *for* all circumstances but *in* all circumstances. Even when bad things happen we are thankful for God’s presence and for the good He will accomplish through the circumstance. Perhaps that has something to do with being able to be joyful...always.

Joy, prayer, and being thankful in all circumstances depend on each of other; and all these are commands, or as Paul puts it: “for this is God’s will for you who belong to Christ Jesus. These three: joy, prayer, and thanks ought to be in our lives always and should not depend on our circumstances or feelings. These are commands to obey. Obeying these three commands goes against our natural inclinations, so we have to make a conscious decision to do what God says. When these three are present in believers we will be dynamic witnesses to the world. A few weeks ago we looked at this scripture:

John 15:9-12, 16

"I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love ... I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you... I appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit.

Jesus loves you with a perfect love; to remain in His perfect love (and who wouldn't?), and to remain in Him, you must receive Him by faith, and obey His command to love as He loves; when you do, you will become His witness and produce lasting fruit. And why does Jesus tell you this? So that you will be filled with joy, so that your joy will overflow and be complete. Jesus wants you to have complete joy, not partial, not joyful at times, but not at other times. Be joyful always, I will say it again, rejoice!

We read this verse from Philippians: "Always be full of joy" and we get hung up on the word, "always." Always? How can that be possible? The answer is found at the end of the sentence in the key phrase, "in the Lord." Nowhere does the Bible tell us to do anything on our own strength, but only "in the Lord." Any happiness we produce ourselves will not last, real happiness comes from the Lord. I don't expect anyone to be joyful always without the Lord, but "in the Lord," why not? Who wouldn't be overjoyed with a God who, as Peter wrote (2 Pet 1:3 NIV): "has given us everything we need for life and godliness"

A Sunday school teacher decided to have her young class memorize one of the most quoted passages in the Bible - Psalm 23. She gave the youngsters a month to learn the chapter.

Little Rick was excited about the task - but he just couldn't remember the Psalm. After much practice, he could barely get past the first line.

On the day that the kids were scheduled to recite Psalm 23 in front of the congregation, Ricky was so nervous. When it was his turn, he stepped up to the microphone and said proudly, "The Lord is my shepherd, and that's all I need to know."

Little Rick has a point.

Is it possible to live everyday in joy? Well, we'll never know if we don't try. I'm calling for the Summer of 2012 to be "The Summer of Joy." Today I would like to propose to you a 90-day experiment (from June thru August); an experiment in joy. Why 90-days? It takes that long to have a true change in character take effect. Now, I'm not the first one to come up with the idea of experimenting with joy.

I officiated at a funeral not long ago and a Catholic woman who was there wanted to meet me and talk to me. She asked someone who knew me if they would introduce her to me. To be honest I don't remember the details of our conversation, but she said there was a book she wanted to send me. She sent me the book and it was a book about celebrating God's gift of joy, it was called "Champagne for the Soul," by Mike Mason, and it was about a 90 day experiment he had with joy. Now, I don't know why this woman thought I needed a book on joy, but after she sent it I wondered what I may have said during our conversation. I started to read the book and decided to begin my own experiment with joy. It was ...well, a joyful experience!

I liked the idea that it was an experiment because that meant it could fail. So there was no pressure, if there were times I did not feel joyful, I didn't see the experiment as a failure and give up. Instead, I persistently would do my best to return my focus on joy.

You can learn to live with joy. How do I know? First and foremost, the Bible commands it; second others have experimented and found it to be so, and I too am learning to live with joy. I hope you join the experiment. Does living with joy mean we never have problems, or that we are always happy? Well, let me say this, I have discovered a new determination to face the challenges of each day and persistently probe for joy. But I've also learned it isn't easy and anyone who wants joy will have to fight for it.

As a matter of fact, one thing I learned about the joy of the Lord is that it nestles itself in our sadness, weakness, and grief. Wherever your wounds are most tender, joy finds a soft place to settle. No one has a greater capacity for joy than one like Jesus:
A man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. (Isaiah 53:3)

Here's what I mean, the greatest danger of happiness is the tendency to not face the reality of the world's sorrows, perhaps even distancing ourselves from people who are hurting and in need. I'm not talking about trying to remain positive by pretending things are better than they are or by not facing the reality of tragedy. You can't separate joy from sorrow. Joy must arise out of the midst of sorrow or it will not arise at all. After all isn't the happiest thought in the world the shed blood of the sacrificed Christ on the cross? Christian joy comes through that sad and tragic event. As a matter of fact ...

Hebrews 12:2 NIV

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross.

We need to talk more about that verse, and we will, at another time. But for now, let's look at a significant mentioning of joy in the Bible.

Leviticus 9:24

Fire blazed forth from the LORD's presence and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar. When the people saw this, they shouted with joy and fell face down on the ground.

Why did the people shout for joy and fall face down to the ground? Because they received the goal of their faith, to be with God; God had accepted their sacrifice and was present with them. Fire from the Lord's presence came down and consumed their sacrifice, burning what separated them from God, assuring them that their sins were forgiven, and that they were holy. And what is the response to the Lord's acceptance and presence? Joy! The people fell down and worshipped in the presence and glory of the Lord, and they rejoiced because God had responded to them, accepting their sacrifice. Has God accepted your sacrifice? Christ is our sacrifice and repentance and faith is how we receive Him.

Repentance has two parts? Did you know that? Because many settle for only the first part. Repentance means to turn from sin (that's the first part) and turn to God; but many get stuck halfway. They get convicted of sin, and experience guilt and sorrow, but repentance is not complete until you know that God has consumed your offering and has sets you free. God wants your repentance to end in joy and freedom. In the Old Testament the ultimate goal of the sacrifice was not to make the people sad, but to make them happy, because having been thoroughly cleansed from sin they could experience the presence of God. The blood of animals could not accomplish that perfectly, but the blood of Jesus has. If you have grown tired of repenting it is because you haven't followed through to joy. Full repentance is joyful, if you're not joyful you haven't finished repenting. The sign that you have repented well is joy. God consumes the sacrifice of sorrow and exchanges it for joy.

In Galatians Paul asks the Christians this question:

Galatians 4:15 NIV

What has happened to all your joy?

First, Paul implies in this question that Christians should be living a joyful life, and if not, then something is wrong. If you are a Christian and you aren't joyful, you need to ask yourself, "What happened?" How did you get off track? How did we lose our joy? And how do we get it back? Well, what do we do when we've lost something? We retrace our steps. You go to the last place you remember having the thing you lost. If you've lost joy, and want to regain it, go back to where you first found it. Go back to when you first opened your heart to Jesus. Go back to that wonderful time when you knew that Jesus had died for you. Jesus was willing to take your misery and replace it with joy, it's called forgiveness. The Good News of Jesus Christ is so wonderful that it's always received with joy. Well listen, the joy of an authentic conversion to Christ is not a flash in the pan. It keeps coming. Do you remember that glorious moment you welcomed Christ into your life? Do you remember the joy unspeakable and full of glory, the joy beyond understanding? Why should you settle for anything less now?

Are you still a Christian? Yes, and even further along in your walk with Christ; so you should have more joy! Paul wrote:

Galatians 3:1a, 5:7

Oh, foolish Galatians! ... You were running the race so well. Who has held you back from following the truth?

He sounds exasperated doesn't he?

Don't hold back from following the truth. If we had joy once we can have it again, and how did we have it in the first place? By faith. By hearing and believing the astonishing message of Jesus Christ.

It's time for God's people to recover the joy of salvation, the joy of the Lord. Are you willing to try a 90-day experiment? I want you to be convinced, no matter who you are or what your circumstances that you, today, this very moment, can take hold of joy. For the Bible says, **Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice!**