

Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous!

The title is found in Psalm 33:1 and it is an oft repeated phrase in the Psalms. I have frequently mentioned that although happiness is a consistent goal for people the world, it is not an earthly objective for the saint. We are promised tribulation in this world but not happiness. There can never be a blessed satisfaction for the saint in a world full of sin, iniquity, pain and suffering, where God's name is blasphemed every minute. Yet the believer can know deep contentment, whatever his circumstances, because he has peace with God.

But there is a corollary to this lack of happiness in the world and in the flesh, which should not be forgotten. It is that the believer is able to rejoice in the Lord at any moment, whatever his pain, with a joy that is eternal and complete. The caricature of the deeply godly Puritans, that they were always dour, legalistic, dull and rigid, is far from true. There was nothing dull or dour about John Bunyan playing with his children, despite his great suffering. The godly man, though not happy in the world, is able to rejoice in the things of God.

Now if I asked you to list the things that made you happy, I wonder what we would find. This may be a good discipline for believer to probe their true feelings. There are many believers who would find it very difficult to be happy in the week if they were prohibited from watching soccer matches. There are many more Christian ladies who would find life hard if they could not watch their TV soaps. The great danger is that we find solace in worldly things to take our minds off hard work, responsibilities and pain. To a degree there is nothing wrong with this if the thing is neutral; but that is the problem with worldly things, so few things are neutral and so many have hidden agendas. To take soaps alone – the agenda here is to mollify, to make believers soporific; they act like a drug to calm and dumb people down, to distract them and make them ineffective and malleable.

The important matter is for believers to understand that their joy is in the Lord. We will examine this further.

Rejoicing

There are over 200 references to rejoicing in the Bible and this high number should not be ignored. It is an important subject; indeed it will be a central feature of the new world. There will be no pain or tears in the new world and a heavenly existence involves constant joy. The hope of the believer is that at the end of this life there awaits a paradise of rejoicing in God and all his works. This needs to be understood – joy in the Lord, true rejoicing, belongs to resurrection life and not earthly life. In practical terms this joy belongs to the future resurrection and restoration of all things; however, in spiritual terms today the joy of the believer is in his resurrection life, that is, his new nature, and not in his old earthly nature.

The great problem with believers who are poorly taught or who have been deceived by false teaching is that joy is found in providing certain conditions for the old nature to be at peace. These would include such things as: financial security with lots of money; being in good health, receiving adulation, such as that which comes with celebrity status (and yes, believers do fall for this especially regarding preachers) or having a certain comfort zone, such as a large social network. When these things are taken away the person is left bereft, comfortless and lacking in joy; there is no spiritual strength in such folk.

On the contrary, in times past believers experienced the loss of everything, even their lives in martyrdom, and still had great joy because it was founded in the right thing; they rejoiced in the Lord and not in their circumstances. Joy based on things in this world will profit nothing; joy based in God will profit everything.

How is this joy in the Lord expressed?

Joy in God's sacrifice

Rejoicing is first mentioned in the Bible in connection with God's appointed offerings, feasts and sacrifices:

There you shall take your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, your vowed offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. And there you shall eat before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice. Deut 12:6-7

Many verses speak about rejoicing being a counterpart of atonement; the forgiveness of sin through God's appointed sacrifice is the basis of our joy. Just as the Israelite was able to find peace with God, forgiveness and then rejoice over the slain lamb, so also modern believers should know not only peace and a clean conscience, but also joy as a result of what Christ has done for us in redemption.

Joy in God's provision

The second thing identified in Scripture which should prompt rejoicing is the good things which God provides for his children. These should lead not only to thanksgiving to God for his goodness, but also joy in our hearts that he so cares for us.

So you shall rejoice in every good *thing* which the LORD your God has given to you and your house. Deut 26:11

Joy in God's control of his enemies

The next thing we find is that we should rejoice in that God has total control of his enemies and he will repay them with vengeance in his time, but spare us.

'If I whet my glittering sword, and my hand takes hold on judgment, I will render vengeance to my enemies, and repay those who hate me. I will make my arrows drunk with blood, and my sword shall devour flesh, with the blood of the slain and the captives, from the heads of the leaders of the enemy.' Rejoice, O Gentiles, *with* His people; for He will avenge the blood of His servants, and render vengeance to His adversaries; He will provide atonement for His land *and* His people. Deut 32:41-43

The daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments, O LORD. Ps 97:8

The fact that God is a sovereign judge should give us cause for joy. We ought to rejoice that God is in control of his enemies and will bring justice in his time. We have joy in that God has control over the end of all things and will bring judgment and condemnation on all evil. Though God's enemies may seem to prevail in time for a while, and though our circumstances appear to be complex and unjust, we can delight in the fact that God will bring vengeance on all the wicked. Though it goes against modern sensibilities, we ought to rejoice in the vengeance of God; firstly because we are told to; secondly because it is a celebration of the righteousness of God in meting out just judgment; it is an upholding of God's perfection.

Rejoice in God's salvation

Then we rejoice in the salvation that is in God and provided for us by God. This is different from having joy in the sacrificial offering that God has provided; our first job is to rejoice in

Jesus, God's sacrificial Lamb; but then we must go on to rejoice because of everything God has provided in a complete salvation. The redemption we have in Christ leads to a full salvation of all our faculties and leads to a full provision of blessing. In salvation God gives us a future and a hope and promises the restoration of all things and our place in this restoration.

And Hannah prayed and said: 'My heart rejoices in the LORD; my horn is exalted in the LORD. I smile at my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation. No one is holy like the LORD, for *there is none besides you, nor is there any rock like our God.*' 1 Sam 2:1-2

I will rejoice in your salvation. Ps 9:14

God is not only our sacrifice but he is also our rock; he is the foundation of our lives and the stability of our days. In salvation we are not only forgiven our sins but are united to Christ and given a place in the family of God, given privileges, authority and blessings. What greater reason to rejoice than in the greatness of our salvation?

Joy in seeking the Lord

Glory in His holy name; let the hearts of those rejoice who seek the LORD! Seek the LORD and His strength; seek His face evermore! 1 Chron 16:10-11

The saved person has the great joy of being able to seek the Lord. The Christian not only knows God from a distance but also is able to press on into communion with him in fulness, through Christ. Those who seek the Lord can rejoice; there is great joy in communing with God. The great blessing of worship is that we can rejoice in our intimate fellowship with God.

Joy in goodness

Now therefore, arise, O LORD God, to your resting place, you and the ark of your strength. Let your priests, O LORD God, be clothed with salvation, and let your saints rejoice in goodness. 2 Chron 6:41

The converted believer is able to rejoice in goodness because he sees God's hand behind all the good things in this world. Christians above all should be rejoicing in the wonders of nature far more than unbelievers because they do not see evolution at work but the hand of a creator God, who is their Father. Seeing the wonders of a great mountain against a red evening sky, or a blackbird making a nest with its mate, or the wind whipping up waves against a rocky cliff face in Cornwall ought to make us rejoice. It is our God and Father who made all these things and goodness, wherever we find it in this world, ought to make us joyful in the Lord.

Joy in the defeat of our enemies

Then they returned, every man of Judah and Jerusalem, with Jehoshaphat in front of them, to go back to Jerusalem with joy, for the LORD had made them rejoice over their enemies. 2 Chron 20:27

We have seen that God is in sovereign control of his enemies, but here we see the temporal sovereignty of God in defeating our enemies and relieving our persecution. It is a cause of great rejoicing for us that we see God defeating our enemies in front of us and causing us to rejoice instead of fear. At one point it looked as though we would be completely overthrown and crushed, and then suddenly God defeats all our enemies in front of us and peace is restored. This is a cause of great joy.

Joy in the exposition of God's word

And Nehemiah, who *was* the governor, Ezra the priest *and* scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day *is* holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn nor weep.' For

all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, 'Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for *this day is* holy to our LORD. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.' So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, 'Be still, for the day *is* holy; do not be grieved.' And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them. Neh 8:9-12

I rejoice at your word as one who finds great treasure. Ps 119:62

The explanation of Biblical doctrine is a means of great joy. There is no better panacea for the strife and sadness caused by our time in the world than hearing the sound preaching of God's word. But it is not just preaching; it is not just having ears tickled with novelty; it is not being impressed by the style of the preacher. Certainly not! Joy only results from the sound exposition and explanation of God's word. Edification comes by the proper teaching and instruction of God's word applied to consciences. People rejoice greatly when they understand God's word as a result of a good teacher expounding it to them.

Joy in trusting in God

But let all those rejoice who put their trust in you; let them ever shout for joy, because you defend them; let those also who love your name be joyful in you. Ps 5:11

For our heart shall rejoice in Him, because we have trusted in his holy name. Ps 33:21

What greater cause for joy than being found in God, protected in his love. All those who trust in the Lord will be joyful and this joy ought to start now in this life; for it will certainly be a chief feature of the life to come.

Joy in God's mercy

I will be glad and rejoice in your mercy, for you have considered my trouble; you have known my soul in adversities, and have not shut me up into the hand of the enemy; you have set my feet in a wide place. Ps 31:7-8

This is a counterpart to rejoicing in God's salvation, but chiefly focusing upon the grace that God freely gives us in Christ. When we consider our sin and rebellion against God's law; when we reflect that we are nothing but rebellious dust in ourselves; it is a cause of great rejoicing to then consider the great mercy of God in reaching down and saving 'a wretch like me'. Truly God's gracious mercy, a component of his goodness, is a cause of great joy to us.

Joy expressed in worship

But let the righteous be glad; let them rejoice before God; yes, let them rejoice exceedingly. Sing to God, sing praises to his name; extol him who rides on the clouds, by his name YAH, and rejoice before Him. Ps 68:3-4

Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth; break forth in song, rejoice, and sing praises. Ps 98:4

As well as our personal communion and worship, joy is associated with our corporately expressed worship.

Joy on the Lord's Day

This *is* the day the LORD has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it. Ps 118:24

The Lord's Day is the time we gather together to worship God, edify one another and break bread. It is a cause of great rejoicing that we can do this freely, and we should make the most of it.

Joy in the coming of the Lord

'Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion! For behold, I am coming and I will dwell in your midst,' says the LORD. Zech 2:10

Who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice. 1 Pt 1:5-6

The Day of the Lord will be glorious and it is not to be feared by God's people. The eschatology of some denominations is so fearful that it creates a bunker mentality and great anxiety about the future. But the Lord's people are to rejoice in the coming of Jesus and to look forward to it with great anticipation. The Second Coming signifies the end of all things as they are, the beginning of God's new world and the consummation of salvation. It is a time of fulness of blessing and great rejoicing.

Joy in our reward

Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven. Matt 5:12

So that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or laboured in vain. Phil 2:16

The fulness of our salvation is something to be eagerly expected and a cause of great rejoicing. In that day the Lord will reward us for our obedience to his word.

Joy in our election

Rejoice because your names are written in heaven. Lk 10:20

The prior cause of our salvation is the love which God had for us in Christ in eternity. He chose us in him, in love that we should be saved when others are lost. This election ought to be a cause of great joy, as well as a great mystery.

Rejoice in our hope in Christ

Rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Rm 5:2

Believers are partakers of the glory of God; the fulness of our salvation is to share in God's glory. Not that we ever become divine, for we will never have the fulness of God's attributes such as infinity or self-existence, but God does share his glory with us in a derived way. What greater cause for rejoicing that to be intimately connected with God's glory?

Joy in Christ preached

Whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice. Phil 1:18

Whenever we see or hear Christ truly preached in the Gospel we have cause for great joy. Sadly this is rare in these days, but even now there are those who preach Christ in a Biblical manner. We should rejoice in this.

Rejoice in suffering

Rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. 1 Pt 4:13

So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. Acts 5:41

Our sufferings are a part of the sufferings of Christ, appointed for his body on earth, as a testimony to God's glory. If we are called to suffer for Christ in any way we should rejoice because there is a great purpose in it, even if we do not see it at the time.

Conclusion: ‘The joy of the LORD is your strength.’ Neh 8:10

The joy of the Lord is our strength because it testifies to the fact that we are on resurrection ground and not walking in the flesh. There is little to rejoice over in this world, apart from God’s creation, and believers only enter the kingdom through much tribulation. It takes power from God to be able to rejoice in all circumstances and the presence of heavenly joy is a testimony that we have God’s grace (Col 1:11). Those who have the grace and strength of God are able to manifest joy. Joy is an indication that we are walking in the Spirit and not the flesh, especially when we are actually in the midst of great troubles.

The joy we have in the Lord is a constant in the Christian life; it is always there to be accessed whatever our circumstances. The believer can be in great suffering and yet still know the joy of the Lord and for this reason Paul tells us to rejoice always because then we are walking by faith and not by sight.

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God. Isa 61:10

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