
UNBROKEN JOY
THE TRAGEDY OF JOYLESSNESS
Philippians 4:4

“The Tragedy of Joylessness” – Philippians 4:4. We are looking at one simple verse to examine an important topic. The title is “The Tragedy of Joylessness.”

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.

Joy is the theme of our study through the book of Philippians. It is one of the major themes of the book of Philippians. We have entitled our series “Unbroken Joy,” and we come to a verse, which you could set aside or highlight as a verse that captures the theme of the entire book. So, what is joy? What do we mean by the word “joy?” Is it happiness? Or is it something different?

Miroslav Volf is a theologian at Yale. In fact, he is the founder of the Center for Faith and Culture. Recently, he was commissioned by the John Templeton Foundation to do a study on the topic of “Joy and the Good Life.” He is doing actually a three-year study on this topic, and he has, I think, rightly observed that joy is thicker than happiness.

I think that’s a clever way to describe it for us, to get us started in a discussion about the nature of joy. Happiness can be a simple feeling, a pleasantness, a passing emotion. It can be drug induced. It can be just a physical feeling or experience. It can be based on fleeting circumstances. But joy is deeper. It is thicker. I think it is incorrect to say that it is completely separated from circumstances, but it’s deeper than a superficial feeling or pleasantness.

Jesus, in one of his parables, told the faithful servant that he anticipated a day when the faithful servant would hear these words: “Enter into the joy of your master.” Joy is pictured or portrayed as a state, a realm, a kingdom that we enter into in Christ, that we live in a place of joy. We live in the atmosphere of joy. Our existence is defined by joy. Paul said in Romans 14:17, “...the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

The experience of joy is so profound, we might even say “overwhelming,” that it is where you find yourself saying, “Life is better than I ever thought possible,” or “This is completely exceeding my expectations.” In John 7:38, Jesus said, “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of

his heart will flow rivers of living water.” The Spirit of God is living in us, dwelling in us; life, abundant life, experienced in the Lord Jesus Christ. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”

So today, as we dig deeper into this verse, we will look at three points:

1. The Importance of Joy
2. The Source of Joy, and
3. The Practice of Joy

Let’s begin with #1.

1. The Importance of Joy

Notice two words: “always” and “again.” In our verse, these two words point toward the critical nature of joy. Paul tells us to rejoice in the Lord always. We are to always be rejoicing.

“The Tragedy of Joylessness.” The tragedy of joyless mothering, joyless fathering, joyless taking out the garbage, joyless bookkeeping, joyless football playing, joyless existence. We are to be a people who are expressing and living in the joy of Jesus Christ always. And he repeats it! He repeats this simple phrase, and this is not the only place that it’s found in Philippians. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” Paul is driving down this critical truth: We are to be characterized by joy.

Frankly, Paul would not hesitate to say that it is a poor witness when we are grumbling and complaining and griping, not giving thanks, always seeing the negative, always acting and living without faith. God wants us to be characterized by joy, so would you just get happy for a change?! Right? Joy, whether you like it or not, is what God calls us to as Christians.

To really grasp and to think deeper about joy, it will help you if we could do a brief bible study on this section. Paul is getting ready to close out this section, and verses 4 through 9 give a promise of peace. I want you to look at this section of scripture. It’s really peace in two parts. We look at verse 4. Let’s just read through this. I want you to see that there are two paragraphs, and each paragraph ends with a promise of peace. I’ve given it this simple description: Peace in two parts.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

And here is the first promise of peace:

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

So that's Part One, and we continue in verse 8:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things...

And here is the second promise of peace:

...and the God of peace will be with you.

So, you have peace in two parts. In verses 4-7, let's look at Part One. I want you to see that three things are highlighted here. What are those three things? They are: joy, prayer, and thanksgiving.

We just heard one of our elders talk to us about how prayer is a value for us. He used the word "discipline." It's a spiritual discipline. A number of books, great books, have been written on the subject of spiritual disciplines. These would be practices that we discipline ourselves to do as a means of experiencing God and experiencing God's grace. They are to be a regular part of our practice. We talk about them. We talk about prayer, bible study, fasting, fellowship, and various disciplines that characterize our lives. In this first section, Paul gives a triad of disciplines, if you will. This is Paul's prescription for a life devoted to God -- a pious life. Piet, devotion to God, is characterized by these three things: joy, prayer, and thanksgiving.

What's interesting, fascinating for me, is that in my reading, in my study on the disciplines, I almost never read about joy as a spiritual discipline. But Paul gives emphasis to it as a practice that is to characterize our day in and day out devotion to God. Alright? So, I'm going to call Part One "A Life of Devotion." Spiritual disciplines: joy, prayer, and thanksgiving. We will come back to this in just in a minute.

But let me first of all give you Part Two, an overview of Part Two. Part Two is verses 8 and 9. Again, there is a promise of peace, but here the emphasis is on ethics. The emphasis is on thinking and doing. Did you hear Paul say, "...think about these things..." in verse 8? And he gives a list, calling us to take control of our thinking and our mind, so that our thoughts would be on commendable things. Then he tells us to practice these things, to do what we have seen him do and to follow his example, so that our lives are characterized by the proper thinking and the proper practice.

Would you look at me for just a moment? Do you desire to have peace in your life? Do you find yourself at times lacking peace? Do you ever find yourself making this statement: "All I want is peace; it is so hard, and it is so elusive"?

Well, you have here two very powerful promises, and really an overview of a life that lives in the wholeness of God, the peace of God, the peace, which exceeds your ability to comprehend apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. Supernatural peace -- so that that peace cannot be taken from you in a moment of frustration, but you live in peace. Here is what Paul tells you to do: "I want you to rejoice. I want you to pray. I want you to give thanks. This is your daily practice. This is your life. I want you to think about the right things and practice the right things."

Now we are going to go back to Part One. I want you to see - stay with me, this is our bible study section. If you grasp this context and the importance of joy and how it fits into scripture, it is going to serve you. It is going to help you see, "Wow, yeah, I kind of know that joy is important, but I see scripturally here how it's very important."

If you compare this passage with 1 Thessalonians 5, look at these verses: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." What three things do you see there? What do you see? You see joy. You see prayer. You see giving thanks. You see the same spiritual disciplines clumped together as a description for how you and I are to live our lives as Christians. Remember, this is the end of 1 Thessalonians 5. He is doing the identical thing he is doing as he closes out Philippians.

It's kind of like your wise Father, who has been such a gift to you, is on the driveway. He is saying goodbye. Here is his parting wisdom: "Remember: Rejoice always! Pray without ceasing! Give thanks in all circumstances!"

Notice not just how these line up, but hear the comprehensive language: Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances. You guys are a little slow. I'm going to preach all day long if you do not get with it, alright? Rejoice...ALWAYS. Pray...WITHOUT CEASING. Give thanks...IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES. Alright?

Joy is not an add-on in your life. It's not a "nice to have." It's not an appendage. It's not the tail pinned on the donkey. It's a critical aspect of your life of devotion to God. Listen to this promise: Give yourself to the practice of joy and you will experience the peace of God, a peace that surpasses understanding. Oh, this is good. You guys are starting to finish my sentences. Alright.

I'm going to show you one more thing. We are going to go back to Philippians. Do you remember one of our early messages in Chapter One, verses 3 and 4? This is Paul starting the letter of Philippians. Look at what he says, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy..." Now, what three things do you see there? How does Paul begin the letter of Philippians? By telling them what he does, right? You see the same three things: thanksgiving – "I thank my God for you, in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all, making my prayer with...joy."

We have a context now. We have a context for understanding that prayer, with thanksgiving, with joy – these are the blocking and tackling for us of everyday life as we live a life of devotion to the Lord. The Importance of Joy. This aspect of true spirituality cannot afford to be neglected in our lives. It's not only a poor witness, a poor representation of Jesus, but it's also robbing us of our experience of God as we walk with God. That's #1.

2. The Source of Joy

Rejoice in the Lord. The source of joy is the Lord Jesus Christ. There's a certain observation here that joy always has an object. We do not just rejoice in general. This is not just, "Don't worry, be happy." There is an object of our joy. We rejoice over something or over someone. For the Christian, we are to rejoice over the Lord. We are to rejoice about the Lord.

Some time ago (some of you may still remember), I told you of this weird encounter that my son and I had as we were walking out of my office one day. My son is here, sitting in the front row, and he happens to have darker skin than I have, if you haven't noticed. We were walking out, and a lady, who happened to be a black lady, was driving by. She rolls down her window and sees this

old white man with gray hair and this young, good-looking, black man. Out of nowhere, at the top of her lungs, she yells, “Obama reigns!” She just starts yelling, “Obama reigns!!” And I am thinking, “What in the world is going on?” I’m looking at my son, and I’m never speechless, but I was speechless. I was trying to figure out what was going on here. Is she assuming we are going to agree? Is she saying, “Young black man don’t let that old white man lead you astray, because Obama reigns and he may not get it?”

I don’t know what her thinking is. But I know this, and I want to give her the benefit of the doubt -- there was this exaltation. I wonder if just maybe she was celebrating something good, maybe, right? -- that, hey, with our history of oppression and racial division, at last we have someone of color in the White House. Maybe she was seeing something good happening and changing. I don’t know. I obviously don’t know what was going on in her mind. I thought about it, and I thought, “Lord, I just feel like I completely failed in the moment.” My son was no help in figuring this out. He just got in the car and looked at me like, “Wow, what was that?”

Then it came to me. I don’t know what her goal was. This is not a statement for or against President Obama, but I want to tell you who does reign: Jesus reigns. Right? Again, that is not a political statement, alright? Do not send me emails. Do not! Do not approve or disapprove of what you think my politics are, because you probably don’t know. Jesus reigns! And when that rises up in you, you roll down the window and you shout like a lunatic! You’ve just got to say it!

It’s here in the scripture. We read it already. Philippians 3:20-21 – listen to this – “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.”

I am getting a new body! He reigns! Everything is subject to him, and the day will come when that will be undeniable. Just because he has chosen to provide space for sinners to repent, and sinners to be saved, do not be deceived and think that Jesus Christ does not reign. He is Lord of all.

And there is a place where the Christian says, “Everything that I fear, everything that I’ve done wrong, everything that I don’t want to happen is okay, because the Lord Jesus Christ reigns.” And we get happy, but it’s thicker, because we see it in the circumstances. Even in the bad circumstances, we are able to connect and rejoice because God has a purpose even in our suffering, even in our trials.

Think about Jesus preaching his first sermon recorded in the book of Luke, where he goes to his hometown. He takes the scroll of Isaiah and stands up in the synagogue and he reads the prophet Isaiah. He reads these words. Luke 4:18-19, quoting Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Jesus read this passage. It was the prophet Isaiah looking at the year of Jubilee. Do you know about the pattern that God set into the Jewish calendar for the Jewish people? Every seventh day they were to rest. Every seventh year they were not to work the land, but it was to be a year where they rested. Then after seven sevens, after 49 years, the 50th year was a year of Jubilee and all debts were canceled.

God, in book of Leviticus, would say to his people, “If you will in faith practice a Sabbath year, I will command a blessing on you.” The prophet Isaiah took that glorious truth, that glorious practice, and he looked to a time when what it represented would be spiritually, fully experienced and fulfilled; that the blind would see, the oppressed, the captive would be set at liberty; that everything that’s represented by your debts being fully canceled, physically, emotionally, and spiritually happens in Jesus Christ. Jesus, then, hundreds of years later, stands up in his hometown, reads that prophet, and says, “I am the fulfillment of that prophecy.”

Jesus is your year of Jubilee. By faith in Jesus Christ, you are given spiritual sight. By faith you are set at liberty from the oppression and penalty of sin. You live in the Lord’s favor. The Lord commands his blessing.

Those of you who have been here long enough to know our understanding of the word of God, you know that I’m not saying that we will never suffer or we will never have trials. You have to rip out major sections of your bible to come up with that teaching. But even the suffering, even the trial is purposeful and it is laced with blessing from on high. The source of joy is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now let's go to our last point:

3. The Practice of Joy

We are told in the text to do it. We are told this word. I'm not even sure we know how to interpret this word "rejoice." Rejoice. There is an expression, a practice, an activity of joy. I think it's more than just, "Praise the Lord." That would certainly be included in giving voice to the good things about God and what he has done. We rejoice today in the Lord. Did we not, when we sang songs and from our hearts worshipped him? Did we not?! We rejoice in the Lord.

There is a practice of joy, and I think maybe the most helpful way to make this last point is to talk about what keeps us from expressing joy. So, I'm going to give you some joy blockers. That's just what you want, isn't it? More joy blockers. But maybe the understanding of it will help us. I am not going to give you the list on screen, so you are going to have to listen carefully.

- 1) Superficial Christianity. Superficial Christianity. We have little to rejoice over because we are not deeply connected to Jesus Christ when our understanding of Christ is superficial.

Do you remember the little story we told a couple of weeks ago? You are on a plane, in the mountains. One pilot dies, the second pilot passes out, the plane is spiraling down, you are sure you are going to die. Someone runs from the back of the plane and says, "I'm a pilot." He jumps in, pulls the pilot out of his seat, gets in, and retrieves the plane. Everyone is screaming for joy, and then you wake up. You were asleep the whole time. You wake up and are like, "Hey, what's all the fuss over?" That is a picture of superficial Christianity, where we live our lives and we don't really grasp it.

What do we not grasp? We don't grasp how deep our sin is. We don't have a real understanding of the wrath of God poured out in judgment on our sin. We don't, then, have a real understanding of the cross that took the consummation of God's wrath in judgment against sin; where Jesus, the Lamb of God, died in my place, that I am completely forgiven! Completely restored to a position of wholeness with God, without shame, without guilt, without condemnation, rejoicing before the Lord, "I'm saved! I'm saved!"

There is no joy because our understanding is superficial. There is no joy because there hasn't been the transformation that then leads us to transformed relationships, where we don't allow ourselves to live in unforgiveness and unconfessed and undealt-with sin. #1 is Superficial Christianity.

- 2) #2 on this list of joy blockers is: We fail to embrace the work of the Holy Spirit. There is a whole lesson here, but I just want to make a simple and obvious connection that the Holy Spirit brings to us the experience of joy in the Christian life.

One text that states this, but there is text after text after text, is 1 Thessalonians 1:6: "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit..." When you look at Acts, Chapter 2, the Holy Spirit is poured out on the Church, and the Church is birthed in a moment. The disciples there are overcome with the joy of the Lord as they speak forth boldly the works and the wonders of God. That is a picture of the activity of the Holy Spirit at work in the life of the believer. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace..." – Galatians 5:22-23. #2 is just failing to embrace the work of the Holy Spirit.

- 3) #3 in terms of our list of joy blockers is: An improper understanding of success. An improper understanding of success.

We perceive ourselves to not be successful. I'm not successful in business, I'm not successful as a mom, I'm not successful as a husband, I'm not successful in marriage, or friendships, or as a single man or woman. We feel incomplete, living as if we cannot be happy until something happens. We have these superficial benchmarks in our thinking where we say, "When I make this much money, when I own my own _____ (fill in the blank), when I have this, when I'm in a meaningful relationship, when I get out of this relationship, when I....." It's a misunderstanding of the whole idea of success.

I just want, if God will allow me, to inspire you for a moment with a proper understanding of success: God calls you to be faithful in Christ, and you are successful in Christ.

Jesus taught it this way in Matthew 13. We are not going to turn there, but he told a series of parables to teach us about the kingdom. There are two little parables; one was

the parable of the mustard seed. He said, “The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. It’s the smallest of seeds, but what does it do? It grows into the largest of plants.” In the second parable, the kingdom of God is like leaven. It is hidden in the flour, but it leavens the whole batch of dough. Jesus is teaching that once the kingdom is genuinely in you, it will take over. It will not fail.

Your perceived lack of success is the belief that God cannot be counted on, that God will not come through, that his kingdom power is not enough, that it’s not sufficient, that God just needs a little bit of help from you. Or worse, it is the misplaced thinking that I can’t be happy with God alone. I must have God and that promotion that I want so badly.

I understand that many of these things that we attach to an understanding of success are good things, and it’s good for us to point toward them, but when they are misplaced, when they are the idol of our lives, they will rob us of joy and we will be without peace in God. Amen? Amen. Well said? Yes, well said. I’m going to encourage myself if you don’t help me. Okay?

Listen, men especially: God has made you to want to conquer. But if you want to experience the joy of God until you perceive yourself to be a success, you are not going to make it. Let me just illustrate it for you, please. How successful is the Apostle Paul? Where is he when he writes this letter? He is in prison! What kind of apostle is this? What kind of power is this? But you know what’s fantastic, is that when you read Paul’s description of how he is doing, it is sheer lunacy.

I’ll give you one of two examples. Colossians 1:5-6 -- Paul, in prison writing to the Colossians writes, “...because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel...” Hold your finger right there. Here is what Paul has said: “Hey, the hope of heaven is yours. The gospel message came to you. You heard how by faith in Jesus Christ you can be forgiven of your sin and live forever.”

Heaven. Heaven is yours! That’s the good news! That’s the kingdom. If you are here and you don’t know Jesus Christ, trust in him, repent of your sin, and you will receive the gift of eternal life. That is the good news of the bible.

That message, “which has come to you” (now we are in verse 6) “as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing...” What? Paul, you have started a handful of churches. The whole world? I mean, what do you have in Colosse? What do you have at Philippi? I mean, a few dozen believers? Is this your idea of a megachurch? You probably don’t even have a decent kids’ program! I’m sure you don’t have a single church facility. Are you crazy? You are in jail. City after city after city has never heard the gospel. There are only a few believers in the cities that have heard the gospel, and you are talking like the job is done.

The job is done because the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. The kingdom of God is like leaven. Once you get it in, you can’t get it out. And it infects everything. You cannot fail ultimately with God. Your sin is bad. His righteousness is better. So, we get our eyes on Christ. I’m not talking about a kind of Pollyanna theology where we ignore all wrong and all sin and the presence of evil, but it’s a place of faith that says, “I just need to keep my eyes on Jesus. I need to be faithful because there is a power at work that is beyond human comprehension.”

- 4) The segmenting of life. This is my last of the joy blockers. The segmenting of life. By that, I mean we separate God from other things. We separate “holy” from what we consider to be “every day.”

God wants all of our lives, and he wants to be a part of everything we do, so that we do all to the glory of God. So God can say to us from his word, on the one hand, that the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, he can tell us that whatever we do, whether we eat or drink, do all to the glory of God. He is teaching us so that we would understand, “Alright, we are not about superficial things. We don’t give our heart to the material. There is something deeper.”

It is in the heart. It is of the Spirit. But, it transforms everything so that we live to the glory of God in every area of life. We don’t segment life. We don’t separate God out. We learn to live in a rhythm, that all of life is God’s. We live with guilt-free celebration and rest. Let me say that again. We live with guilt-free celebration and rest.

Richard Foster, in his famous book *The Celebration of Discipline*, made this statement: “The carefree spirit of joyous festivity is absent in contemporary society.” We have lost that ability to just joyously celebrate. Foster makes these applications. He talks about making noise, shouting, dancing, laughing, celebrating creativity, giving priority to family celebrations and holidays.

“The joy of the Lord is our strength” -- Nehemiah 8:10. It’s interesting. Many people know that phrase, but the wider context is a curious one. Nehemiah 8:10 -- “Then he said to them, ‘Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.’”

There is a connection. I know that stretches some of you. Some of us who grew up Baptist are a little stretched by that whole verse. We want a further explanation. I am not even for a moment encouraging us to be irresponsible. I am just saying that there is a place of worship and rest and celebration that restores the soul and is a practice of rejoicing before the Lord, where we don’t separate all of life out and say, “This little bit belongs to God and everything else I do on my own.”

We learn to celebrate the goodness of God in all of life, which then doesn’t give us permission to sin. Everything belongs to him, and we enjoy it unto the Lord or we don’t enjoy it at all. We then recognize the destructive power of joylessness and we repent of it, understanding that Jesus Christ is the source of joy. Amen?