Joy

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‘Rejoice in the Lord’, Paul says (Philippians 4:4). How does that work?

Joy When God Has Done Great Things

Jesus’s birth was a reason for joy for people, and it remains one for us. When Mary knew that she was going to give birth to Jesus, she proclaimed, ‘My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour’. Soon after, an angel was telling some Bethlehem shepherds that he was ‘bringing them news of great joy for all the people’. It’s hardly surprising that they ran to Bethlehem to see what had happened. Then the wise men, seeing that the star had stopped at Bethlehem, were ‘overwhelmed with joy’ (see Luke 1:47; 2:10; Matthew 2:10.)

Jesus’s resurrection was reason for joy, too, and it still is. Jesus warned the disciples that they were going to weep and mourn, but he promised them that their sadness would turn into joy because they would see him again. They would forget their pain like a mother forgetting her pain when she experiences the joy of having brought her baby into the world. Their hearts would rejoice and no one would take their joy from them. In fact, they would have a bigger joy (see John 16:20 – 22).

It’s hardly surprising that the disciples as a group were full of joy when the resurrected Jesus appeared to them, though they were also disbelieving and dumbfounded (Luke 24:41). It fits that when the two Marys had found an angel sitting triumphantly outside Jesus’s empty tomb, they felt fear as well as great joy (Matthew 28:8). Their experience was shocking and overwhelming. It also fits that there is one scriptural passage that speaks of Jesus’s joy. ‘In view of the joy set before him, he endured a cross, disregarding shame, and sat at the right hand of God’s throne’ (Hebrews 12:2). ‘Rejoice in hope’, Paul says (Romans 5:2). It’s another paradoxical statement, and I imagine Jesus was rejoicing in hope, but for him, too, there was a different kind of rejoicing when hope became reality. ‘Regard it as all joy’, James urges, ‘when you face different kinds of trials’. How can that make sense? Because ‘you know that the testing of your faith generates perseverance’, which takes you on the road towards maturity (James 1:2 – 3).

Joy and Celebration

‘Give me joy in my heart, keep me praising’, the song says. So how does that work? ‘Always rejoice in the Lord’, Paul actually says. Really? Always? Okay, he goes on, ‘I will say it again: Rejoice’.

The Israelites knew that there were reasons for joyful celebration in their own experience. They knew that God was good and faithful and committed to them because he provided them with everything they needed. The instructions for their harvest festivals reminded them of it and urged them to make these festivals into occasions of joy. People were to gather as a community—fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, male and female family servants, and also people such as ministers (Levites), resident aliens, orphans, and widows, the people who might have no farm of their own. They were to bring offerings and tithes from their farms and rejoice ‘before the Lord’, because he was present with them and was involved with them in all that they undertook. They were to rejoice in the way he had fulfilled his promises to them, had answered their prayers, had done amazing things for them, had made them a free people, had made sure they had a place to live, and had blessed them in proving them with the food they needed. (You can read about this in Deuteronomy 12:7, 12, 18; 14:26; 16:11, 14; 26:1 – 11; in Deuteronomy 28:47 there is also a worrying threat that the Lord may take these blessings away if the people don’t serve him with joy).

There was a son of David who discovered something similar about joy. Being a king, he could do more or less what he liked, so he tried everything that might give him joy. He worked hard and played hard. He gave himself with energy to the demands and possibilities of each day. And as he looked back, he could claim great achievements. He was someone who made a difference. Yet it all seemed empty. There was no joy in it. And he realized that the place to find joy was in more ordinary life, in everyday work, in sitting relaxed over dinner and a drink with friends or family. That was the context in which God gave people joy. His testimony is pointing out something that those harvest festivals illustrate (you can read the testimony in Ecclesiastes 2).

Joy and Serving the Lord

‘Serve the Lord with joy’, Psalm 100 says. It might seem an odd exhortation. For one thing, serving is hard work, not something people do because it’s fun. Yet for thirteen years my stepdaughter KatieJay and her husband Gabriel gave their lives to working among refugees in Africa and Europe, and it brought them a strange sort of joy. In their case, at least, it turned out that you don’t find joy by seeking it. It’s a by-product of service.

But Psalm 100 wasn’t talking about that kind of service. It goes on, ‘Come into his presence with singing’, and it’s talking about the kind of ‘service’ that happens in a church ‘service’. In fact, some translations say ‘worship the Lord’ rather than ‘serve the Lord’. Which is not exactly wrong, but it does mean we lose something, because the psalm does use the ordinary word meaning ‘serve’. That might make the exhortation puzzling in another way. When we come to worship, we may be more aware of expecting to get something out of it than of coming to serve. But if we are concerned for ourselves in that way, what we get out of it may not be joy.

How can we come to serve with joy? The psalm goes on to say. We serve God with joy ‘because he is good’. And he is good in that ‘his commitment lasts for all time, and his faithfulness lasts for generation after generation’. On the way to church, then, we could think about these facts about God, and we might end up serving him with joy, and even find that more joy is then a by-product of our service.

Joy When Things Have Been Grim

I mentioned KatieJay and Gabriel. A week before I was asked to write this article, they died in a car accident. I don’t imagine God expects my wife and me to be full of rejoicing at the moment, and the Scriptures recognize that sometimes we know unadulterated joy and sometimes joy is more complicated.

Centuries before Jesus, hundreds of people from Judah had been taken off as forced migrants to Babylon. Then, years later, a prophet told their children or grandchildren that they could go back to the ‘home’ that they had never seen:

You will go out with joy

 and be brought in with things being well.

The mountains and the hills

 will break out before you with chanting.

All the trees in the countryside

 will clap the palms of their hands. (Isaiah 55:12)

Joy means enthusiastic celebration, a celebration that envelops body and spirit. And at a time when God acts in fulfilment of his promises, it replaces gloom. The dynamics had been the same another half-millennium before. David had tried to bring the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, but there had been a disaster and he had abandoned the idea. Then things got sorted out and he was able to pick up the project ‘with joy’ and jump for joy before the Lord with all his might (2 Samuel 6:12 – 13).

 There’s a testimony in Psalm 30 along these lines. Sometimes things can have been grim in your life and it’s as if you’ve been wearing mourning clothes, but then God takes them away and clothes you in joy. It’s possible then to look back and see how God has brought you out of the grim experience. Previously, the psalm says, everything had been going well and the idea that things could go wrong was far from anybody’s mind. Then there was a catastrophe they had no reason to expect. It was as if life had come to an end. They couldn’t see why God would let it happen. People they had told how good God was had muttered that the tragedy proved they had been deluding themselves. All they could do now was turn back to God and ask God to reach out to them and rescue them and put things right. And he did. He turned their mourning into dancing. It was as if he had brought them back from the dead. It was as if they had cried all night but then in the morning they were chanting like a football crowd. Yes, it was as if they’d been wearing mourning clothes and God had taken them off and clothed them in joy.

Joy When You Know You Went Wrong

When a disaster happens, it usually doesn’t mean that we had done something wrong. But occasionally it may. Psalm 51 speaks for someone who knows that they had failed God. They don’t say how, but it was evidently something serious. Maybe they’d given up serving God and turned to a different God. Then things had gone terribly wrong in their life, and this had brought them to their senses. They have turned back to God, and pleaded with God to have them back. And they talk several times about joy. ‘Let me hear of joy and happiness’, they say. In other words, they need to hear a word from God that assures them that they are forgiven and accepted by God: it would be the message that would bring such happiness and joy to them. It would transform their life. They go on, ‘May the bones you crushed be glad’. By ‘the bones’ they mean the whole person, body as well as spirit, because our bodies are essential to who we are. And joy is something that finds expression in our whole person—body and spirit (remember David jumping for joy, and the mountains and trees chanting and clapping). ‘There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents’, Jesus says, ‘joy in the presence of God’s angels’ (Luke 15:4 – 7). It’s more or less the only place in the Scriptures that explicitly speaks of heaven’s joy or God’s joy, and the reason for joy is the fact that someone turns back to God.

‘Give me back the joy of being saved by you, of being delivered by you’, Psalm 51 pleads. The person who prays this prayer had known in the past what it was like to have the joy of being rescued from trouble—whether it was trouble that was their fault, or trouble caused by other people, or just life’s troubles. Now they’ve been in real trouble and there’s no doubt that it was their fault because they had turned away from God, and they need God to put their life back together as well as have them back. That will mean joy for them. And they will be able to serve God again—with joy.

There’s a Christmas prayer that begins: ‘Almighty God, at the birth of your Son, you have shown us the fulness of your love: help us to walk in his light and dwell in his love, that we may know the fullness of his joy’. And there’s another Christmas prayer that begins: ‘Almighty God, you make us glad with the yearly remembrance of the birth of your Son Jesus Christ’. After that it does go rather solemn: ‘Grant that, as we joyfully receive him as our redeemer, so we may with sure confidence behold him when he comes to be our judge’. Nevertheless, ‘Rejoice in hope’, Paul said. And ‘Always rejoice in the Lord. Again I will say it, Rejoice’.