

# Serving the Lord with Joy and Gladness

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One of the devil's favorite lies in all the wide world is that sinners have more fun. If we think about this for a moment or two, we quickly realize how ridiculous it is. Does the alcoholic have fun when he wakes up in his own vomit? Does the adulterer have fun during his day in divorce court? How about the teenage fornicator when he realizes that he got his girlfriend pregnant? There's always a little bit of pleasure during the sin itself, but that's merely the worm on the hook. The more we sin, the unhappier we become.

Strangely enough, just as we are so quick to see joy in sin, where it actually isn't, we often struggle to find joy in serving God, where it actually is. I've found that the Christians who have served the Lord faithfully for decades are among the happiest people I know. And yet, many brethren don't seem to be developing that joy in their own lives. They are more prone to imitate the example of the Jews in Malachi, to disdainfully sniff at the service of the Lord and say, "My, how tiresome it is." Let's look today at getting back on track. Let's look at serving the Lord with joy and gladness.

## Joy in Jesus

The first place that we should look for joy in our walk with Jesus is to the Lord Himself. We should learn from the Scripture that, for instance, we should find joy **IN HIS BIRTH**. In fact, this began to happen even before Jesus was actually born. Look at what happens in Luke 1:43-44. Of all of the events of human history, the birth of Jesus is one of the most familiar. After all, people in the wider religious world have a special holiday during which they celebrate His birth every year, even if their methodology for choosing a date is a little sketchy.

It may be, though, that our familiarity with Jesus' birth causes us to overlook the wonder and astonishment of it. The Old Testament paints a fairly complete picture of God. He is a God of incomparable vastness, Creator of heaven and earth, too great to be contained by anything that He has made. His wisdom is perfect; His power is irresistible. And yet, somehow, the incomprehensible fullness of deity was crammed into a single cell that grew and became a human baby, outwardly no different than any of the babies we have ever seen. That, friends, is an awe-inspiring event. How can it be?

What's more, this wasn't something that God worked out for His own selfish ends. It was something He accomplished for us. Even though we were sinners, it was for our sakes that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. That's what God thinks of you. That's what God thinks of me. It's amazing!

Second, we should rejoice **IN THE WORKS** of Jesus. Consider the example of the crowds in Matthew 15:31. They saw what Jesus did, and they rejoiced because of it. When we consider the paradox of Jesus' birth, the cynical reaction is to say, "No; that couldn't be. Jesus wasn't God; He was just another man." However, like all of the other men who declared God's revelation, Jesus didn't expect others to accept His claim on its own merit. He backed it up with miracle after miracle.

What's particularly fascinating to me is the way that Jesus' miracles dovetailed with His purpose. After all, the Jews of 2000 years ago, just as we do today, suffered blindness and lameness and crippling deformities as indirect results of Adam's sin. When Jesus restored human bodies to wholeness, He showed everyone how things were supposed to be back in the Garden of Eden. He devoted His life to battling the symptoms of evil in the world, and in His death, He attacked the cause.

Even today, we can rejoice in the works of Jesus. They are not the primary proof of His divinity, but their appearance in the historical record of Scripture shows that our faith rests on solid foundations. Also, they illustrate the great compassion of Christ. How wonderful it is that this universe was not created by an evil God or even an indifferent one! Instead, Jesus to this day longs to extend spiritual healing to us as He extended physical healing to so many so long ago, and there is great joy and comfort in that thought.

Third, we have great reason to rejoice **IN JESUS' RESURRECTION**. Strangely enough, joy wasn't the initial reaction of His closest followers, but it was once they started figuring things out. Consider the record of Luke 24:40-41. There is certainly plenty of joy in the event of the resurrection itself. After all, Jesus was the best man to ever walk this planet, yet He suffered a cruel and undeserved death at the hands of wicked men. It just plain wasn't fair that Jesus died. God, though, reversed the unfairness by raising Him.

Even if the event itself brings us joy, its implications are even more joyful. Jesus' resurrection from the dead is the final proof of His claim to be the Son of God. The record of the Scripture isn't some comforting fairy tale. It's true. Furthermore, it proves that He was telling the truth when He said that we can have eternal life if we believe in Him. If God can raise Jesus from the dead, He can raise us too. Finally, it establishes that we are a forgiven people. When we are baptized, we are united with Him both in His death and in His resurrection, and when we rise from the water, we rise to walk in newness of life like He did, freed from the death of sin forever. We know that we have risen and will rise because Jesus did.

Finally, we should rejoice **IN HIS PRESENCE**. Consider Matthew 28:20. It is true for even the humblest Christian that Jesus is always with us. If we aren't living the way we should, this may well be a source of embarrassment. We don't want to think about Jesus being with us when we were doing THAT.

However, if we've been doing our best to serve Him faithfully, then His presence in our lives should be a source of tremendous joy. Jesus is always with us. Always, always, always. Jesus is with us in the good times; He is with us in the bad times. He is with us when we are surrounded by family and friends; He is with us when we are alone. He is with us in the peak of our prosperity and health. He is with us in poverty and suffering. Even if we feel like our lives are a disaster, like everything is going wrong, like we can't possibly bear up under what is happening to us, Jesus is still with us. No life lived with Jesus can ever be a disaster. If our walk with Him is right, then everything that matters is right. We don't have to bear those burdens ourselves because He will gladly carry them for us. As long as we seek Him, He will never leave us.

Most people go through their lives without Jesus. Quite frankly, I don't see how they do it. I know I've been through things in my life that would have destroyed me if I didn't have Him to lean on. I've seen other people be destroyed by those things because their lives weren't founded on the Rock. But because we are Christians, we have Jesus and He has us. He is the source of rejoicing both now and eternally. Let's reflect on how great our joy should be as we partake of the Lord's Supper.

### **Rejoicing Through Life**

In addition to the rejoicing that we experience in Jesus, our walk with God gives us reasons to rejoice all through our lives. The first and most obvious of these reasons is **OUR SALVATION**. Rejoicing in their salvation has been an attribute of the Lord's people since the Ethiopian eunuch. Look at Acts 8:39. At this point of the story, the eunuch still had a long and dangerous wilderness journey ahead of him, but his heart was filled with joy anyway, because he knew that he had been saved from his sins.

Sometimes, I don't think we appreciate our salvation as much as we should because we don't appreciate the severity of our sin as much as we should. We live in a society that grows increasingly permissive about the things that the Bible forbids. Many preachers preach a God who is all love and no justice, and whether we like it or not, that attitude inevitably creeps into our thinking as well.

The reality, though, no less real today than 2000 years ago, is that sin means death. It means an everlasting death in hell, where the worm never dies and the fire is not quenched. That is the worst fate that can possibly befall a human soul. What Jesus did for us is He saved us from that, and that thought should fill our hearts with joy every time we think about it. We were stalled out on the railroad tracks with the freight train of God's wrath bearing down on us, but Jesus pushed us out of the way at the cost of His own life. That was a terrible price for Him to pay, but we should be glad and thankful daily that He paid it.

Second, we should rejoice in our association with **OUR BRETHREN**. Indeed, this kind of rejoicing has been evident from the very beginning. We see it in Acts 2:46. When we are saved from our sins at the moment of baptism, by the same process we are also added to the church. We have a new spiritual family of people who have also been rescued from death by Jesus. To describe them in modern terms, they are our support group. They are God's gift to us to help us stay faithful and get to heaven.

Among God's people, it's sometimes fashionable to bash the church and its members. If that's our mindset, we will always be able to find something or someone to criticize. The church is not a club for perfect people. Indeed, the opposite is true. The church is a gathering of imperfect people, of people who acknowledged that they couldn't make it through life without Jesus. If that's where we came from, is it any surprise that despite our best efforts, we remain imperfect? That's true of me too. I've been washed clean of my sins by the blood of Jesus, but I've got plenty of flaws for anybody who wants to pick on them.

However, before we get too self-righteous about the shortcomings of our brethren, there are a couple of things that we need to remember. First, if we are merciless in our evaluation of one another, God will surely be merciless to us. If we want to receive God's grace, we need to extend grace to others too. Second, it's easy for us to allow a few flaws in our brother to blind us to the very great good that he does. None of us are of a piece. None of us fit neatly into the "All Good" box or the "All Bad" box. So it is that a man who drives us crazy in one area can shine like a bonfire with the light of Christ in another. There's no use in focusing on the flaws of others. Let's focus on the good in them instead, and rejoice in this gift.

As part of this, let's rejoice in **THE OBEDIENCE** of our brethren. This is apparent in the words of John in 2 John 4. John was likely an old man when he wrote this, and his long years on the earth had taught him that there was nothing better under the sun than the joy of seeing someone else serve the Lord.

John's words also imply that this is particularly true of younger Christians, especially the ones we see grow up and make the decision to dedicate their lives to the Lord. I myself took a lot of encouragement and joy from an opportunity I had to teach the young-adult class about a month ago. It was on a miserable Wednesday night, and yet I believe there were ten students in that class. Some of them drove themselves; all of them could have stayed home if they had wanted to pitch a fit about it. And yet, there they all were, interested in talking about spiritual things, and indeed all participating in the conversations.

There is good in that, friends. There is good in our older members who come limping up the stairs when they don't even feel like getting out of bed. There is good in Christians who decide to come to services twice a month instead of once a month, good in the brethren who gear up to face some spiritual challenge that seems insignificant to us but dreadful to them, good in people who stretch themselves to try something they've never tried before. All of these things are happening here, friends. Let's rejoice in them.

Similarly, let's rejoice in **THE BLESSINGS** our brethren enjoy. Consider how Paul portrays the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12:26. This is certainly true of our experience with our own bodies. A stubbed toe makes us hurt all over, but a nice scalp massage relaxes us from head to foot. In the same way, the good enjoyed by our brethren should make us feel good too.

Sadly, it doesn't necessarily work that way. About six months ago, I read a study that said that Facebook had a significant mental effect on those who used it, but the kind of effect depended on how it was used. People who posted a lot, highlighting the best parts of their lives, got a boost to their mood, but people who spent their time passively reading the happy updates of others became depressed.

The same thing can happen to us in the church, both in the virtual and the real world. Dressing up doesn't only happen on Facebook, does it? The expression "Sunday best" is an expression for a reason. When we compare Brother So-and-So's church life to our real life, it's easy for us to become depressed about how they're so with-it and we aren't, or even to become envious. Once we become envious, especially once we start looking for a reason to take Brother So-and-So down a peg, all kinds of trouble can result.

There are two problems with this way of thinking. The first is that "Sunday best" is a façade. We all know that our own lives aren't as put-together as we try to make them look, so we can safely assume that everybody else's real life is messy and complicated too. Second, even if that's not true, even if Brother So-and-So really is living the dream with his lovely wife and 2.4 kids and white picket fence, good for him! If we love him as we should, we will rejoice in his good instead of struggling to come to terms with it.

## Rejoicing in Heaven

Ultimately, though, the fountainhead of our rejoicing in this life must be our rejoicing in heaven. **THE HOPE** that we have should be enough to fill our hearts with rejoicing every day. Look at how Peter presents this in 1 Peter 1:8-9. One of the fascinating things to me about this passage is the way that it links our rejoicing in heaven with our rejoicing in Jesus. I've already spent a lot of time talking about the joys of our walk with God, but even despite all of those joys, there is still an essential frustration at the heart of Christianity. As Christians, we have dedicated our lives to a man we have never met. Sure, we read all kinds of things about Jesus in the word, and we certainly learn more than enough there to learn to love Him, but it's not the same thing as spending even half an hour with the real Jesus. In this life, there's no cure for that.

The only way that our longing for Jesus can ever be satisfied is in heaven, but when that longing is fulfilled, every other longing we experience will be fulfilled as well. As the book of Ecclesiastes says, God has set eternity in our hearts. We spend our days in this imperfect world seeking perfection, but the only possible

end to that search is in heaven, where we will spend eternity basking in the perfect love of a perfect God. I think that the measure of completion, of rest that that will bring to our souls is beyond our power to conceive of here, but the Bible describes it well enough that we can understand what's on offer.

Here on earth, we keep going through the workday because we know that the workday will be over. We keep going in a race because we know the race will end. So too, we can rejoice through our lives, even when the going is hard, because we know that Jesus will be waiting for us in heaven at the end.

This is true even **THROUGH PERSECUTION**. Jesus pointed out to His early disciples that they would have to become experts in rejoicing in their persecution in Luke 6:22-23. Indeed, we see first-century Christians doing precisely this. The apostles rejoiced after they were beaten in Acts 5. When Paul and Silas were imprisoned in Acts 16, they responded by singing hymns of praise to God. These men weren't crazy. They were men of faith. When Jesus said their reward in heaven would be great, they believed Him.

Today, we also need to be faithful enough to stand for Jesus no matter what and to rejoice when we are persecuted for it. This doesn't mean that we should be self-righteous jerks. If people shun us because we are obnoxious, we shouldn't expect any kind of heavenly reward for that! However, we must be willing to speak truth in love, even when those around us don't want to hear it, because that's what first-century Christians did. If we get a reputation for that at school or in the workplace, and people start avoiding us because we stand for Jesus, it's sad that they won't listen, but we should rejoice because we are pleasing God.

This is something that we need to prepare for more and more, because the word of God is becoming less and less acceptable in our society. Take, for instance, the recent public debate about homosexuality. More and more, I'm starting to see the opinion expressed that repeating what the Bible says about homosexuality is hateful and evil and should not be allowed. This opinion is not merely directed at the Westboro Baptist Church and similar extremists. Even I find the way they express their beliefs to be offensive. Instead, more and more people argue that anybody who speaks out against the practice of homosexuality, no matter how thoughtful and principled and loving they may be, needs to be silenced.

Before the end of my life, I may well see that become the majority view in this country. That's certainly not a welcoming environment for the gospel. We need to have the courage to repeat the gospel anyway, even if the consequences for so doing are severe, and then rejoice in our hope in heaven.

On the other hand, if persecution isn't what the future holds for us, nearly all of us will have to learn to rejoice in heaven **THROUGH SUFFERING**. Look at 1 Peter 4:13. I think there are two senses in which we can share in the sufferings of Christ. The first is the way that we have talked about already—when we are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. The second, though, is more broad. It occurs any time we suffer unjustly. Persecution gives rise to unjust suffering, but so too do other tragedies we haven't invited.

In this regard, I can't help but think of our brother James Hensley. Just about every Friday, I give him a call to see if he wants me to drop by and talk with him for an hour or so. Sometimes, he's able to receive visitors; sometimes, he's not. I can just about always, tell, though, whether he's going to want to see me as soon as he answers the phone. If he's able to say "Hello" without groaning in pain, it's a good day. If I hear the pain in his voice as soon as he speaks, it's not.

James hasn't done anything to deserve such intense suffering. If you talk to Goldia and the other people who have known him for 60-plus years, they'll all testify that he's always been a good man. And yet, he suffers, as many of us already do or will when we reach old age. I don't know how an atheist in James' predicament could bear it. What could possibly keep a man like that going if all he has to look forward to is final extinction? I think that what stands between James and utter despair is his faith. He knows that it's going to get better eventually, and so he presses on, even if there are days when he wishes that the Lord would call him right then and there. I wouldn't call James happy, exactly, but I would call him hopeful.

If we are able to stick it out, though, to find joy in our hope even in the worst situations, we will surely rejoice **THROUGH ETERNITY**. Look at how John presents it in Revelation 21:3-4. I can't imagine a world in which no pain and sorrow exist. Amazingly enough, this world is wicked enough that for the time being, it is able to diminish even the perfection of heaven. There are many passages that discuss God's anger and sorrow at our sin. However, the time will come when all of those things will be done away with. Those who spent their lives resolutely turning their faces away from God will get what they sought all along. Those of us who spent our lives seeking Him, though, will get what we wanted too, and in Him, we will find everything we were looking for and more. That mere promise is enough to make us rejoice.