

REJOICE

by Elaine Swinehart

During this time of quarantine, I have returned to one of my favorite books in the Bible, Paul's letter to the Philippians. It was always a book of encouragement and hope that usually did not demand a lot from me. That is until now. Now, when I read Paul's words of being content in all things and rejoicing always, I am challenged. We already discussed the contentment part of the challenge and today, I want to tackle this: "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice." command.

We all perceive joy differently. In my attempt to make sense of Paul's command to "Rejoice in the Lord always" I originally was going to tell you that joy is always with us, but it is sometimes elusive. I was going to compare it to putting together a puzzle where many of the pieces seem similar and you have to look for that one little thing that makes it the right piece, be it that small dab of color on the edge, the turned up edge, or a tiny letter on the rim. When you hunt for it, you will eventually find it. This was my take on how to rejoice in the Lord Always. But then the Lord opened up His concept of Rejoicing which is not elusive at all!

Rejoice! Be joyful! The dictionary defines joy as "a feeling of great pleasure and happiness." It's the emotion we feel when life is good - when the sun is shining, when our team is winning, when we are healthy, happy and heartened. Most people do not typically speak of the happiness of heartbreak, the pleasure of migraines, the blessings of losses or the joy of being in quarantine. I know it's not my first response. But then I hear Paul say: "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say Rejoice." and I wonder how Paul practiced this concept. This was not some pie in the sky, removed from reality theologian saying this. This was the apostle Paul who had done extensive missionary work, had started several churches, had been, imprisoned, stoned, shipwrecked, escaped over a wall of a city in a basket to avoid persecution, and he had churches he had founded floundering with false prophets and heresies. This is the same Paul who had a thorn in the flesh that God promised him the grace to withstand it rather than giving him the healing he wanted. With all this going on, and while sitting in a Roman jail awaiting trial, Paul still commands, not suggests, commands us to "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say Rejoice!" Pretty incredible!

Within his letter Paul helps us redefine our understanding of joy, not the bubbly, giddy, happy feeling we associate with joy, but true joy - God's Joy. So, he helps us look at the reasons for joy, and the challenges of joy, by breaking it down in three segments:

1. Joy in - Philippians 3:1a, 4:4
2. Joy because - Philippians 1:28-30, 4:20-21
3. Joy even though - Philippians 1:12-14, 1:17, 3:2, 18-19 2:14-15, 4:2

First we look at the source of our joy. Too frequently we rely on circumstances, people, or feelings to make us joyful. We find joy in sunny weather, in getting outside, or in seeing our loved ones. Paul does not deny these sources of joy, he is talking about a different joy. The joy he is referring to is Joy in the Lord. When we focus on Jesus, our Lord, we remember that He is the Son of God, our Redeemer, Savior, King, and Friend. We remember that Jesus has died for our sins, was buried and rose again so we can live. We also remember what He will do, like walk with us and guide us through life, intercede for us with the Father, He will return from Heaven to take His children (that's us) back to Heaven to spend eternity with Him, He will destroy evil, Satan and all of his demons in Hell and He will bring about His new Heaven and new earth.

The Lord has put a new song in our hearts (Psalms 40:3) that the pains and distresses cannot drown out. Remember, if you want to have true joy, joy in all circumstances, make Jesus the object of your JOY.

Second, why can we rejoice in the Lord always? This is possible because of what Jesus has done for us. Think about it for a moment. Jesus gave up heaven and all His power and authority, to come to earth as an infant where He grew and showed us a glimpse of the Father. Then He suffered and died on the cross in our place. He paid the penalty we owe for our sins so that we may receive God's forgiveness and become a part of God's family. By His death Jesus broke our bondage to sin as He conquered evil, sin and the Satan. We can rejoice in the Lord always because Jesus has set us free. Free from sin, free from the control of the world (Satan) and free to rejoice in the Lord always.

Third, we can rejoice in the Lord always even though... Paul calls us to rejoice in the Lord always, even (or maybe especially) during painful trials, intense sadness, illnesses, fear, uncertainty, and even this pandemic we are now experiencing. Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before Him (Hebrews 12:2) and in order that believers' weeping will one day turn into joy (John 16:20). Jesus' pattern of suffering followed by glory is in some sense the script for our lives as well.

In his letter to the Church at Philippi Paul draws attention to various challenges to joy that he experienced - prison (1:13), opponents (1:17, 3:2, 18-19), grumbling (2:14), and disunity (4:2). But Paul rejoiced in the Lord always, even though he sat in prison, maligned by his enemies, and hearing reports of sin and strife among his friends. His joy was not anchored in circumstances but in his Savior, who will never disappoint him and who will surely deliver him. These promises are also ours when we rejoice in the Lord, because of all He has done, and even through the difficulties of life.

Brothers and sisters, Christian joy is the great pleasures and happiness that we feel - whether or not the sun is shining, whether or not we are healthy or hurting. It is the joy we know because our Redeemer lives, because we belong to Him, and because He is making all things new. Paul calls us to: "Rejoice in the Lord always" by reframing our present challenges in light of Jesus Christ our Savior, Lord, Guide and Friend. So, when joy seems elusive, turn to Jesus and remember it is in Him we rejoice, because of what He has done and even though life is filled with trials, sin, and temptations Jesus has already won the victory.

So, let's rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say Rejoice! To God be the glory, Amen.