

JOY

REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS

Jared Mellinger

Senior Pastor, Covenant Fellowship Church (Glen Mills, PA)

Seminary professor and church historian Dr. Scott Manetsch wrote a book about pastoral ministry in Geneva in the 1500s. The pastors in Geneva during the time were faithful in many ways, and yet they were not perfect. One weakness Dr. Manetsch points out is that some of Geneva's ministers "drew criticism from time to time for sermons that were too severe or too pointed"¹⁶ and

several men were particularly notorious for stirring popular outrage by their vitriolic and abusive preaching. Angry words and incessant scolding too easily masqueraded as the reformed virtue of "holy vehemence."¹⁷

One woman complained that "the ministers become angry when they show zeal in the pulpit."¹⁸ Another young woman said of her pastor that "whenever he speaks it seems that he wants to bite people."¹⁹

Manetsch writes,

Of all the ministers, Raymond Chauvet was probably most hated. A ferocious preacher, Chauvet seems to have delighted in excoriating the sins and sinners that he encountered both in the church and marketplace. In 1546, for example, Chauvet pronounced from his pulpit a curse on members of his congregation who were leaving the sermon early: 'May evil, plague, war, and famine fall upon you!' he cried. Throughout Geneva, they gave him the nickname Torticol—literally, 'pain in the neck.' ...On a number of different occasions Geneva's magistrates and ministers were forced to reprimand their colleague, admonishing him 'not to be so angry and to use greater moderation' in his sermons and conversation.²⁰

¹⁶ Scott Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 175.

¹⁷ Ibid., 175.

¹⁸ Ibid., 175.

¹⁹ Ibid., 175.

²⁰ Ibid., 175-176.

The Joy of Jesus

In evident contrast to the angry scolding of Raymond Chauvet, Jesus says that the goal of his teaching is that his joy would be in his followers, and that our joy would be full (John 15:11). The joy of Jesus set him apart from the rabbis and other religious leaders of his day. The Pharisees with all their strictness and rules didn't have a category for him. Jesus is the one anointed with the oil of gladness, the one who came eating and drinking, the one whose glad heart made his face cheerful, the one with a radiant disposition, enjoying the company of children, the one who went through life and death with joy fixed in his eyes (though he was the man of sorrows), and the one who had the love of the Father etched on his heart.

Likewise, followers of Christ are to be known for their joy. Randy Alcorn says in his book on happiness,

In most unbelievers' perceptions, Christianity hasn't brought much joy to the world. As a religion, it's primarily known for its rules, self-righteousness, and intolerance—none of which convey gladness and merriment.²¹

And yet what we see in the book of Acts is that one of the most powerful factors in the spread of the gospel was the evident joy of the early church. Joy matters not only for the sake of our souls but for the sake of our witness.

If I had to put my finger on one quality that has marked my church experience in Sovereign Grace Churches in general and in Covenant Fellowship Church in particular, it would be the presence of joy. I have spent my life around Christians who sing with joy, serve with gladness, cultivate gratitude, talk about what it means to be happy pastors, and celebrate the grace that has rescued us from sin and death.

No One Will Take Your Joy

When Jesus spoke to his disciples the night before he died, they were troubled and afraid. Jesus told them that the world would hate them (John 15:19) and that in the world they will have tribulation (John 16:33). Jesus says in John 16:6 that in this moment sorrow has filled their hearts. Yet it is because he knows our frame and cares so greatly for us that he speaks truths to his people for the sake of their joy (John 15:11). Jesus does not call us to die to our joy, rather he is aiming for the fullness of our joy! In John 16:20 he says, "You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn to joy."

And in John 16:22 he says, "So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you." In John 17:13, he prays to the Father concerning us, "that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves."

²¹ Randy Alcorn, *Happiness* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015). 29.

When Jesus says that his joy will be in us and our joy will be full, he is not saying that he will give all of his followers a chipper personality or that he will plaster our faces with superficial smiles. True joy is not rooted in temperament. Nor is Jesus saying that we will have trouble-free lives. Someone once said that Jesus promised his disciples three things: that they would be completely fearless, absurdly happy, and in constant trouble.

How can trouble and happiness exist together? Because true joy is not rooted in life circumstances. Even as we are “grieved by various trials” (1 Pet. 1:6), we “rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory” (1 Pet. 1:8). When we are mistreated for Christ, we should join the early disciples and rejoice that we are counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name (Acts 5:41). “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds” (Jas. 1:2).

It is not that our circumstances are irrelevant, but that we have the deep satisfaction and joy of knowing that however deep our sorrows, the love of Christ is deeper still. He is with us, he will hold us fast, and he is working in those circumstances in ways we don’t understand, for our good and for his glory.

How can we experience the joy of Jesus in our lives, and cultivate gladness in our churches?

1. Know the God of all joy.

God is perfectly and eternally happy in himself—he has more gladness than we can comprehend, having the fellowship of the persons of the Godhead as the source of his eternal joy. 1 Timothy 1:11 describes the gospel as “the gospel of the glory of the blessed God.” Psalm 16:11 says, “In his presence there is fullness of joy, and at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

God delights in his glory. He delights in his creation. He delights in his beloved Son, with whom he is well pleased. And remarkably, he delights in us. “The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing” (Zeph. 3:17). Our God is the singing God, overflowing with joy and gladness. He is eternally happy in himself and has no need of us for his joy. And yet, he invites us to share in that joy for the sake of his glory. The way we honor God is not by somehow trying to make him happier than he would be without us. That is impossible. The way to honor him is to share in his joy by delighting in him.

2. Remember the good news of great joy.

When Christ was born, the gospel was announced as “good news of great joy” (Luke 2:10). The good news is the message of salvation, the love of Christ in his death and resurrection. And it is a message that is calculated to thrill and satisfy our souls. “Be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things!” (Joel 2:21). “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (Isa. 12:3). Psalm 34:5 says, “Those who look to him are radiant.” And in Psalm 90:14, Moses prays, “Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.”

The gospel is a message of indescribable joy, declaring that sinners are loved, forgiven, and accepted by a holy God.

3. Abide in Christ every day.

George Müller, whose life did so much good for others and especially for so many orphans, learned the priority of joy.

According to my judgment the most important point to be attended to is this: above all things see to it that your souls are happy in the Lord. Other things may press upon you, the Lord's work may even have urgent claims upon your attention, but I deliberately repeat, it is of supreme and paramount importance that you should seek above all things to have your souls truly happy in God Himself! Day by day seek to make this the most important business of your life. This has been my firm and settled condition for the last five and thirty years. For the first four years after my conversion I knew not its vast importance, but now after much experience I specially commend this point to the notice of my younger brethren and sisters in Christ: the secret of all true effectual service is joy in God, having experimental acquaintance and fellowship with God Himself.²²

Every day, the greatest danger in the Christian life is losing our joy in Christ. Every day, our greatest need is for our own soul to be happy in God, which is just another way of saying that we must learn to abide in Christ through the Word of God and prayer.

4. Delight in the people of God.

In Psalm 16:3 the psalmist says, "As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones in whom is all my delight." John says in 3 John 4 that the Christian's great joy is seeing God's grace at work in fellow believers: "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth." Study the letters of Paul, and you see him constantly thanking God for people and experiencing joy as a result. "For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God?" (1 Thess. 3:9).

Even when sin and weakness abound, we should be more aware of grace, searching out things to celebrate and affirm in others. We cultivate joy by being able to enjoy and delight in a wide range of people in the church, not just those who are like us.

5. Gather with gladness.

I once heard a pastor tell his church that Easter Sunday was approaching, and that people should "come rowdy." There is a sense in which the greatest contribution we can make to a church is to come rowdy—that is, to bring our own passion for Christ to the gathering of the saints. The psalmist says, "I was glad when

²² George Müller, *A Narrative of Some of the Lord's Dealings with George Müller, Written by Himself* (Muskegon, MI: Dust and Ashes Publications, 2003), 731.

they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’” (Ps. 122:1). Nehemiah 12:43 describes the corporate joy of God’s redeemed people: “And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.”

In Sovereign Grace Churches, we value the Sunday gathering and we value musical worship. Our gathering cultivates and expresses our joy in the Lord.

6. Serve and lead with joy.

In Deuteronomy 28:4–48, God threatened judgment if his people would not serve him “with joyfulness and gladness of heart.” Psalm 100:2 gives the command, “Serve the Lord with gladness.” Charles Spurgeon once said, “The best work is done by the happy, joyful workman.”²³

One of the verses that has had the greatest influence on my service in pastoral ministry is Hebrews 13:17. Speaking of the pastoral work of keeping watch over souls, it says “Let [pastors] do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be no advantage to you.” The greater a pastor’s joy in serving, the more those we serve will benefit from that ministry. Effective preaching and pastoral leadership will convey and reflect the gracious, happy heart of the Father.

A lot of preachers and those who lead in public would do well to smile more in public. Having a joy-filled, radiant countenance as pastors, especially in our preaching, is important because unbelievers often see Christianity as a dreary faith, and believers often assume the heart of their Father toward them is stern. A glad ministry of grace counters the enemy’s lies by embodying the truth. Preaching is the primary means for cultivating a culture of joy in the church.

7. Encourage a joy-filled ministry diet.

The ministry we take in and the ministry we extend to others should contribute to a culture of joy. So much of social media works against the cultivation of joy due to the prevalence of criticism, complaining, slander, and outrage. But Christians can promote joy in their own soul and in others by talking more about grace than sin, focusing more on truth than countering falsehood, expressing honor more than criticism, emphasizing what we are for more than what we are against, and living a life marked more by celebration than lamentation.

8. Hope in the return of Christ.

The day is coming when our blessed hope will be realized and Christ will appear to make all things new. God will dwell with his people forever.

²³ Charles Spurgeon. March 25, 1888. “Our Great Shepherd Finding the Sheep.” Sermon preached at Metropolitan Tabernacle.

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away (Rev. 21:4).

Christians know the end of the story! The bright tomorrow will soon be here!

Therefore, “set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:13). And until that day, resolve to work for your own joy and the joy of others, contributing to a culture of gladness in the church.

Deep and Lasting Joy

Octavius Winslow says,

The religion of Christ is the religion of joy. Christ came to take away our sins, to roll off our curse, to unbind our chains, to open our prison house, to cancel our debt; in a word, to give us the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. Is not this joy? Where can we find a joy so real, so deep, so pure, so lasting? There is every element of joy—deep, ecstatic, satisfying, sanctifying joy—in the gospel of Christ. The believer in Jesus is essentially a happy man. The child of God is, from necessity, a joyful man. His sins are forgiven, his soul is justified, his person is adopted, his trials are blessings, his conflicts are victories, his death is immortality, his future is a heaven of inconceivable, unthought-of, untold, and endless blessedness—with such a God, such a Saviour, and such a hope, is he not, ought he not, to be a joyful man?²⁴

Someone has come into our lives who is greater and far more joyful than Raymond Chauvet, the stern and vitriolic preacher. Jesus has declared that his joy will be in us and that our joy will be full. With “such a Savior, and such a hope, are we not, ought we not, to be a joyful people? May the joy of heaven fill our hearts and flood our churches, for the glory of Christ alone.

²⁴ From *The Sympathy of Christ with Man*, quoted in Randy Alcorn, *Happiness* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015), 23.