

Rejoice...

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[0 : 0 0] Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say rejoice. And that really is what I want us to think about this evening. We give thanks to God for his word, and I would like us to reflect on both how Paul starts chapter 3 and what he comes back to in verse 4 of chapter 4, this command, really. He's telling us what to do. He's telling us to rejoice. He is clear we are to be people who are rejoicing, who are filled with joy, whose life is one of joy. That is, in many ways, supposed to be the Christian life. And I suppose most of Philippians is getting at that point as well, this letter that Paul has written.

And yet, at the same time as I say that, if you're already a believer this evening, you're maybe thinking already, well, joy isn't really what defines my life. And I certainly know that feeling. And even preparing this message, I suppose, it's, you know, the challenge. Am I really rejoicing? And confession, I've preached this before somewhere, and yet, as I went back over it, things hadn't changed. It's something that I need to remind myself, that there is that need to listen to what Paul says here and to rejoice in the Lord. He is emphasizing it so clearly. This is what we need to be. And of course, sometimes I am joyful. But is my life one that is defined by joy in the Lord, joy in Christ and all that he has done, all the wonderful things that we've just read? And so, if you're a believer, you're maybe thinking that as well. And if you're not a believer yet this evening, then maybe you're thinking, that all sounds nice, to rejoice always. That's the kind of life that people want, isn't it? A life of joy. And yet, you may have questions like, well, why do Christians seem like such joyless people sometimes? Maybe you know someone who's not the most happy-seeming person. Maybe you know me. And maybe it sounds too good to be true. You know, maybe, you know, joy surely means that there's never anything wrong, that there's never any sorrow, that it's just a nice, easy life going on. And you know that the Christians in your life perhaps do have hard times, just like anyone else. And I think that tells us that joy isn't something that is based on our circumstances. That Paul is talking about something much deeper here, much deeper than simply just feeling happy because life is good and our circumstances are all right. That there is something actually that always remains true that we really can rejoice in. And more accurately,

I suppose there is someone that we can rejoice in always, who does not leave us, who does not abandon us, but who loves us and has done and will do, as we were reading, wonderful, wonderful things, giving us eternal life. And so that's what I want us to think about this evening. I need this message today. I suspect at least some of you will need this message today, that joy is what we should have.

And joy is what we are offered in the gospel, in the whole Bible. Even if it sometimes or often feels out of reach to us, it is what we are offered. Someone, I can't remember who, but they compared Christians to sitting on a gold mine without even knowing it. We have this untapped wealth of joy availability available to us. And yet it seems so elusive. Maybe you saw a news story from the Highlands towards the end of last year, I think it was. And I think it was a council building in Ruskeen. And there was this old sculpture, the bust of someone's head, you know, that kind of marble thing. And it was being used to prop open the door, as I suppose is the most useful thing for it.

And then, of course, someone discovered that this thing was worth millions, that it was hugely valuable and was just sitting, propping open some door in a council building, ignored by everyone.

[4 : 38] And I think that is a bit like what we're like with joy. It's right there for us. And it's there in Philippians 3. And perhaps we can be guilty of forgetting that value, forgetting what is offered to us, what is given to us already even. And so I think that's why Paul begins this passage with that command. Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. It is that command, rejoice. And so I just want to think about that idea of joy from this passage under two very broad headings. First of all, the thieves of joy. And then second of all, the source of joy. Thieves of joy, the source of joy. Because first of all, the thieves of joy, joy does seem to be an elusive thing, I suppose. As we've said, we have access to it, and yet it seems so far away. And, you know, even outside of the Christian life, we have access in our lives to, you know, possibly more entertainment than any other society before.

More fun, more food, more pleasure, more of everything. And yet, if we were to look at society, would we really say that people are happier today, that people are more joyful, that people are satisfied, that they're content, that life is really good. And yet, all these things are claiming to offer us that satisfaction, that happiness. Moments of happiness come, and they're good. And I'm not putting that down. And yet, it's something that we're kind of always chasing after. And we enjoy something for a while, you know, like a kid with a new toy. And it's good. And then it's not good.

It's boring. We're on to the next thing. And so much of our lives are really like that. So filled with discontent. Such a common thing, isn't it? Or we're envious when we see someone else with something that we want, and then we don't have joy until we get what that other person has. And, you know, we maybe see it more in children. But if we're honest, it's in our hearts, no matter how young or old we are. And so joy is far away from us in so many ways, and far away from our society.

We're discontented. And I think there's two things that can really, from this passage, I'm sure there's more than two things, but there's two things in this passage that I think really get at the heart of that. And the first is verses two through seven, and it's self-righteousness. Self-righteousness, being holier than thou, if you want to put it that way, that is a thief of joy. That takes away the joy that we can have in life. In other words, when we're focused on ourselves, on our performance, on our background, heritage maybe even, we're not going to be experiencing the joy that is available to us. Paul's describing these people, they mutilate the flesh, they're relying on circumcision, those ritualistic, perhaps, religious acts. That's what they're claiming as making them good, as making them acceptable to God. They are righteous in their own eyes. And Paul's talking about himself in a past life as well. They have all the religious boxes ticked. And of course, Paul can say the same.

And actually, he had total confidence in the flesh, he describes it, in his own works and the things that he's done. And, you know, he could, and probably, I don't think he's exaggerating too much, you're lying. You know, he could really say he'd excelled at it. He was great at being self-righteous.

[8 : 21] He was, you know, he'd done it all. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews. He kept the law as any Pharisee. He was good at it. He would describe himself as blameless, at least in other people's eyes.

And of course, we can look at Paul and we can see his example. We can look back on Jewish culture, back at the time of Jesus and Paul and these people and think, well, that's then. But of course, this confidence in the flesh, it's something that's hardwired into all of us. Because it is when perhaps some of us have been brought up going to church every week, have been brought up knowing the Bible stories, knowing all the right answers to give, knowing how to just, you know, go through life and appear to be the good Christian. Or maybe we don't know church very well, but even when we think that we're the ones in control, that we're good people, that we're very moral people, that everyone thinks very highly of us because we have the right opinions or whatever it might be.

And it can be the Christian or the non-Christian, can't it? It's that moralism, that self-reliance, where we think that the things that we do, where we've been born, the background that we've got, we act as if that is enough. We act as if we can just make ourselves good. And when we're doing that, we're not looking to Christ. We're not rejoicing in the Lord. We are looking into ourselves and we are justifying ourselves and we are putting that confidence in the flesh, as Paul puts it here.

And when we're doing that, we're on shaky ground, aren't we? Because I know when I've done that, that it's an anxious place to be. It's not a place of freedom or peace, is it? It's a place where whenever we do make a mistake, whenever it is actually revealed to us, oh, I'm not actually as good as I want to be. I'm not actually getting everything right. Then all our confidence goes and we have no contentment, no peace, and we keep going through that. And what is being offered here in the whole gospel is that the surpassing worth of knowing Christ, as we'll see, relying on him, trusting in him, resting in him is where that peace is to be found. And again, you know, we can be far away from the church and just holding the right opinions that society has, the things that we're supposed to believe, the virtues that we are supposed to have. And yet, in however many years, these things have moved on, progressed and changed, and we're left behind.

And so you see it's shaky ground. It's never enough. And so our self-righteousness does not give us joy. And in fact, we are slaves. We think we've got freedom, but we're slaves to the opinions of others. Think of Paul with all his Pharisees and all his fellow Jews and just, you know, they're all trying to outdo each other in their kind of righteousness. And what an insecure place to be.

[11 : 29] And yet, have we ever been in church even and kind of wanted to keep up with people, kind of wanted to show off a little bit, even look how many chairs I can carry, you know, that kind of just wanting to show that we are the good person. That's not joyful. It's toil, isn't it? It's toil and keeping up appearances. And of course, another way we can compare ourselves to others. And, you know, they say comparison is the thief of joy. Well, I think it's very true. Either we don't match up and we're discontent, or on the other hand, maybe we think we are better than others and we look down on other people. And that is not a joyful place to be. No joy in self-righteousness. And of course, not everyone tries self-righteousness, no one then. I think the other one is found in verses 18 and 19 towards the end of the chapter. Self-gratification is a thief of joy. Their end is destruction, verse 19.

Their God is their belly, and they glory in their shame with their minds set on earthly things. You know, think of the novels like Brave New World and that kind of society where it's just pleasure to the max. Self-gratification. And, you know, we kind of in some ways often feel like we're in that kind of society, don't we? It's just do what makes you happy. Do what's easy. Do what you think is good.

Live your truth, whatever you want to call it. And that's really what most people want. But verses 18 and 19, it speaks to these people who've abandoned their faith, actually, because their God is their belly. They've geared their life towards the here and now. That's what it's about. And you might think, well, maybe they're happy. How does that steal their joy? And of course, it steals it because it promises so much, so much fun, so much happiness, but it's never anything that lasts. It's also temporary.

It's also, you know, really meaningless at the end of the day. It doesn't give what people want. These things disappear, or they disappoint, or they end up hurting us as well. And at the very least, by the end of life, all these things are revealed, if not before. So it can be relationships, sex, alcohol, money, popularity, all these things, whatever it might be, they promise so much, they deliver so little, and we end up disappointed and miserable, and our lives in the exact same place.

C.S. Lewis sums it up well. Maybe a quote you've heard before, but always worth sharing. It would seem, he says, that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us.

[14 : 37] Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea, we are far too easily pleased. You see what he's saying?

All these things, they're nothing compared to what Christ offers, to what Paul calls the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus. My Lord, infinite joy is offered to each and every one of us. And that is what's offered to you and to me, something that lasts, something that is more meaningful, something that is not based on what we do, our own self-righteousness, or what we can get from this world, something that is good. And that brings us on to our second point, to the source of joy. And it is closer than we think. It really is within our grasp.

So often in life, the answers are right in front of us, aren't they? You know, so often we're searching for things and we find them. And maybe it's daft, but a common experience for me is I'll be looking for something, you know, looking in the fridge, looking in a cupboard, can't find it, can't find it.

I'll shout to my wife, where is it? She tells me, it's not there. I've looked, she'll come, and it's there. And it's mysterious, but it's what happens. And you see what I'm saying, though, that we can't see what's right in front of us, totally blind to what is right there. It's right there for us. The source of joy is there, waiting to be found, waiting to be used, if we would just open our eyes and listen to that exhortation that Paul is giving, to rejoice in the Lord. Because that's what he's saying, isn't it? To rejoice in the Lord. In verse 7, again, whatever gain I had, I count as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. He's saying that Jesus is the source of his joy, that Jesus is everything to him, that anything else that this world could offer, anything else that he could have done, anything else, absolutely anything, was nothing, rubbish compared to knowing Jesus, to being found in him. Absolutely everything that this world has to offer. Jesus is the source of joy, worth far more than anything else. Faith in

Christ, knowing him, being near to him. Now, I suppose we could end it there, but maybe we have to ask why. And I think Paul tells us why Jesus is worth more than anything else. And this is not exhaustive, I'm sure we could find more, but just here's a few for us. The first thing is that he makes us righteous. Verse 9 tells us that, be found in him not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. We've already seen we can try so hard to make ourselves good in God's eyes, to make ourselves acceptable to God. Well, what can restore that joy to us? What can rescue us from that way of life?

[18 : 01] What can make our hearts sing with praise? Knowing that Jesus has loved us so much that he has died not only to forgive us all our sins, wonderfully, yes, but that we are loved and accepted by God, that we are, we have Christ's righteousness, that we are not seen as the sinners that we are, but that we are seen as God's children, that we are accepted, that he has great affection for us.

And so that frees us to stop performing, doesn't it? What a freeing message. He sees us as his children. He's already rescued us. He's already done it. And he's not getting us to just do all these things, jump through all these hoops so that he might accept us at the end of our lives.

It's already happened. We have his righteousness. We're not climbing a ladder. We're not struggling for God's acceptance. We may struggle in many things in life, but one thing we will never struggle with is having God's acceptance. He has done it. We have his righteousness, as Paul puts it here. We have Christ's righteousness. We are looked on as his children. All is forgiven. And more than that, we're not just seen as neutral. We're seen as his children. And certainly for me, that brings me back to joy, knowing that. Knowing that no matter what, that he has done it, that it's not dependent on me. If it was, I would be utterly miserable because it would have messed up pretty much every hour of every day. That we are not slaves, but that we are children. We are not slaves to sin. We are children of God. And we don't have to live for the things like our belly, as Paul puts it here.

That we know that there is greater joy offered in Christ making us righteous. And it's done by faith. Again, it simply depends on faith and trust in Jesus. Again, not on anything that we do. It's the opposite of that self-righteousness. It's always worth saying. It's not blind belief. It's reliance.

It's knowing who Jesus is and trusting in all that he has done. Trusting that he has died for us. That's what is here as well, that he's died and risen. That I may know him, verse 10, and the power of his resurrection may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. He died on the cross. He suffered for us. He went through death for us. And that is how we become for him, because Jesus has done it.

[20 : 45] That is who we place our faith in. And it seems a strange thing to rejoice in, doesn't it? His death. And yet, the point is, it's been done so that we can live. That is why. Anyone would rejoice at their life being saved. They may feel sorrow over the cost that had to be given. And yet, at the same time, there is joy knowing that this has been done for us. That that sacrifice has been made. And actually, just to remind us that joy doesn't mean everything is just great all the time.

Paul is saying as he commands us to rejoice, that he's willing to share in these sufferings. That Jesus himself is worth so much more than anything else, that suffering with him, suffering for him, is greater joy than anything else that Paul himself could dream up or that this world could offer. That is how good Jesus is. That is how good what Jesus offers is. We can rejoice in that. And as well, of course, that as he died, he has been resurrected from the dead. I may know him and the power of his resurrection. And he goes on that by any means possible, I may attain the resurrection from the dead. And that he'll press on to get it. And that is joy, isn't it? The hope that we have if we have placed our faith in Christ. The joy knowing that just as Jesus has died and risen from the dead, that we have that same hope that we too will rise from the dead. Paul wants to know that, to keep knowing it, to attain that resurrection. It's not that he doubts that he will get it. But he knows that he must keep going in this life and in suffering and pain, that he will keep going because he has joy in Christ and he has hope of greater joy in the future, that he will be resurrected, that he will live forever.

That this life is not all that there is. And again, it shows this is something far outside our circumstances, whatever we're going through, that there is something even in our darkest times that is light for us. It feels so far away sometimes, and I'm not wanting to be flippant about the times we don't feel joy. And yet there is something, there is someone there. There is someone who loves us. There is someone who has done all these things and promises that resurrection, promises that eternal life.

And for me, that is joyful, knowing that and being able to know that he will transform, as verse 21 says, he will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. We won't be bound by decay, by pain, by sorrow, but we will be in the place that Revelation describes of no more tears or pain or suffering. That is joy. See who Jesus is, see what he has done and find joy in him. He is where it is to be found. So let's just conclude with a few applications. First of all, we need to keep Jesus central every single day. A guy, I think it's Nigel Bynon, said, joy in God means our spiritual taste buds have changed. And what he's saying is Jesus must be absolutely everything. He must be at the center. If it wasn't obvious already, take that application. I can speak for myself and others that I've spoken to, but often joy is not there because

I've gone cold or I've just forgotten some great truths. And as we read God's word, as we pray to him, we experience that joy. We keep him central. Deeper roots. It's not that we memorize loads of scripture and know lots of good answers to give to people. It's simply that we're growing knowing Jesus more and more. Deeper roots into the gospel, into being one of his people. That's the Christian life. Knowing that we are his children. Knowing that we are in Christ. That we are united to him.

[25 : 09] Keeping him central. And of course, another thing is actually choosing joy. And it sounds strange, but that is what Paul is saying in the beginning and the end. Rejoice in the Lord. And sometimes we do have to tell ourselves things like that, don't we? You know, we're so often, especially in our society, it's feelings that we go on. And yet, you know, Paul's saying here, we can choose to rejoice. And as he says, he's pressing on to the goal. He's choosing to rejoice. That's the command. And as well, that brings us on to the next thing, I suppose. Joy doesn't mean no suffering. And we've hinted at it a couple of times. And Paul's saying he wants to share in sufferings to become like Jesus in his death. Joy is not the absence of suffering. Joy isn't avoidance of pain. Paul will say in chapter four as well, he can be content in all circumstances. And again, it's looking beyond our present circumstances.

It is looking forward. It is pressing on, forgetting what is behind it. It's seeing Jesus' example, as Hebrews tells us, that he suffered for the joy set before him. Looking ahead, straining forward.

And again, it's not minimizing or ignoring the things we face, but it's having that perspective, looking ahead, pressing forward for the joy set before us. Of course, it doesn't mean we seek suffering either, but we're not surprised by it. It isn't what defines us. What defines us is that we are Christ people, that we are in him. And it doesn't hold us back from knowing Jesus. And again, I know it feels like that sometimes, but Jesus does not let go of us in these times. And that is something to rejoice and he will draw us closer and closer. And so keep going. That's why Paul's message is to rejoice, keep pressing forward. He's a sufferer himself. He knows he's writing to people who will suffer and he's encouraging, keep going, keep going. There's so much more for you. There's so much more available. He's saying, just keep, keep going. Christ has got you. Christ is with you. Rejoice in the Lord. He is there. Heaven is waiting. New creation is waiting. Resurrection is waiting. Keep going.

That is the message. Keep going. He has promised it. He is faithful. And of course, pray for joy. You know, Paul prays that the Romans in chapter 15 of that book, may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing. Let's pray that for ourselves and let's follow Paul's example and pray that for each other, that we would have joy. We would have joy in Christ. And when it seems far away, let's follow the example of David in Psalm 51. Restore to me the joy of your salvation. Again, when we don't feel that joy, we're not alone. David has felt it and he prays, restore to me the joy of your salvation. Let's be people who pray for that joy. And finally, as we come to our last song, let's be people who praise God in song with joy. Sing joyfully for all to hear. We are rescued.

We are loved by him. We have hope. We have a future. God gave us mouths to sing. He gave people the ability, the great gifts to lead worship. So let's be people who express that joy in our worship together.