

# A Brilliant Experience

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[ 0 : 00 ] So you already know the theme of the sermon this evening is the key verse in this chapter that is going to bring together everything I think in the chapter is verse 4, Rejoice in the Lord always again, I will say rejoice.

Now we did touch on this last Sunday night and one of the dangers of preaching twice as I have the last number of weeks and preaching through like this is you repeat yourself.

So because things are on your mind all the time. So I'll probably say some things from last week that I'll say again this week and maybe even some things I said this morning I might say tonight because that's the price of synility as well.

Okay. But it is the central theme of this letter as we mentioned and we are going to spend the whole sermon this evening being joyful.

That's going to be the theme and it's a joyful theme and it's a very important theme and I hope you'll not sort of switch off and think, you know, he's going to be all smiley and joyful and I don't really feel like that and it's kind of unrealistic anyway.

[ 1 : 06 ] I hope you don't because that's not the intention of the sermon. But it is tremendously significant that we recognize the significance of being joyful in our Christian life and that you will go out from this place joyful and that our goal will be to be a church that is joyful that we have a joyful church that it's a joyful place to be.

I'm going to say this word a lot so I'm sorry but that is just the way of it. We want the church to be a place that is a beautiful place to build relationships and to fight the good fight.

That's a really significant thing. A place you want to be part of because it's God's body, it's part of God's people. Christ is the head and because it reflects the joy of the Lord, okay, so that's where I'm coming around to that it reflects the joy of the Lord.

A community of joy and you're saying already you're saying unrealistic. This is not realistic.

However, stick with it because it's an important part of this, a really significant part of this letter that is written.

It's our greatest longing, isn't it, in many ways to be a community that is beautiful and encouraging, grace-filled and forgiving. All of these things will trigger a sense of joy in our experience.

[ 2 : 36 ] Because I think far too often our Christian life as individuals and maybe as churches particularly but certainly as individuals as well, our Christian lives are marked by joylessness, being joyless by a kind of disinterest or driven by duty or divided, miserable, miserable in our lives.

And that seems a strange thing. It marks an unhealthy theology that I'll go on to mention in a little while.

So by way of introduction we recognize and see that everything in our lives is ordinarily, naturally, is a shadow of what God intended it to be.

So our naturally disordered hearts take joy, for example, and they separate it from the spiritual core that we should have with the living God and Christ.

That's what Christ came to do. He came to fuse us back together and leash it with them and all that that means. And as we turn away from God, we see that joy also then becomes distorted.

[ 3 : 44 ] I'm not saying we don't have joy and I'm not saying that we don't experience happiness, but it is distorted because we take God out of the equation.

Therefore we equate joy sometimes with pleasure, simply pleasure without reference or thanks to God. Just pleasure or with sensuality, with no spiritual dimension.

What I mean by that is that we connect joy and happiness with the physical sensations of living, like sexual pleasure or emotional pleasure or visual stimulus that gives us joy or sometimes a depressing of our senses, which of course is what alcohol does as a way of experiencing joy

because our reality is so miserable.

We need to suppress that reality to somehow bring out a different kind of joy, which is why so many people will drink to excess because it does that or any mind-altering experiences.

Or we link, we take God out of the equation and we allow our circumstances to become the gods of our lives so that our spontaneous reaction to good circumstances is happiness and joy.

[ 5 : 11 ] And we kind of make that, our God's, again, it's a purely natural response to good things that happen. So happiness and joy is about things going well, circumstances being good.

And therefore we respond to that with happiness and joy. Now none of these things are bad. Well drinking to excesses, but drinking in and of itself, I'm not going to go into that.

But anyway, none of these things, in and of themselves, are, you know, lots of people find happiness and joy in that stuff. But it's shadowy and it's distorted and it's not really the joy that's experienced.

The tendency is for us to equate, when we read a passage like this about joy, we tend to equate it with these natural experiences that we have.

And we forget, we forget and underestimate and misunderstand the significance of being spiritually alive and in relationship with God and how that should affect our understanding of joy and of life and of happiness.

[ 6 : 18 ] As we take the Redeemer, as we take Jesus into our soul more and more into our lives, we find that that there's a transformation going on and even our understanding of joy changes.

Now I think this is a battle and I think it's ongoing and I think we struggle. Well I certainly do. But it's good to remind ourselves of why the joy that's spoken of here is not slapstick, it's not painting on a stupid smile on their faces and saying, hey, to the world, when everything is miserable, it's not that kind of thing at all.

But it comes from the very core of our being, if we can use a physical analogy to speak spiritually, that from the very core of our being there's something that changes our experience.

So I'm just going to say two things. The first is it's a spiritual experience. And the second thing I'm going to say is it's a command. The first of all is a spiritual experience.

Rejoice in the Lord. Rejoice in the Lord. I see to you again, rejoice. So immediately it's linked in with being in the Lord, the essential response of being in the Lord, being a Christian, giving your life to Jesus and being in relationship is what He's saying, with the Lord.

[ 7 : 44 ] And we see that very often as a response in the Psalms. We sung some of them today. There's 182 references to praise and 43 references to rejoicing according to Bible Gateway.

And these reflect the psalmist relationship, sometimes in very difficult circumstances, to being in the Lord. And it's not, therefore it's not just a byproduct of faith, it's of the essence of faith, not just because of what we experience by being in the Lord, which is things like, you know, you could list them, forgiveness, freedom, peace, hope, belying darkness, future security in the resurrection, all of these things.

That gives us joy, knowing what we have in Jesus, knowing what He's gifted us, knowing what we believe and knowing what we have our security in. But it's interesting, you know, prepare sermons sometimes and type it all out and it's already and half an hour before the service, I was downstairs and I was thinking, I've missed out a hugely significant thing here.

That joy isn't just, isn't, and it was, I'll tell you, it was triggered by a quote that I remembered. I'll come to that in a minute.

So that joy isn't just the response that we have because of what God has given us, which is worthy of joy because of all these things that we've quoted, this amazing foundation.

[ 9 : 15 ] But we often see it as spiritual a circumstance, so that's maybe not the best word, but a spiritual response to what He's given us. But actually, Eric Liddle, the great Scottish runner who made the film of *Chariot of Fire*, some of the younger ones, wouldn't remember that.

If you haven't read the book about Eric Liddle, read it or watch the film. It's a bit dated now, probably, the film. Great film, Christian, Scottish Christian who run the 1924 Olympics.

But when he was on Arthur's seat in the film, and you know, it's a very famous bit, when he's on Arthur's seat and his sister is kind of arguing with him about why he's running and why he's in the Olympics and why he isn't being a missionary and serving God in that way.

It's Jenny, I think, isn't it? Jenny has her name. Jenny, you see, Jenny, God made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure.

I feel His pleasure. And that just triggered in me this whole thought, of course. It's not simply what we receive that makes us joyful. It's being in the Lord in and of itself.

[ 10 : 23 ] We sense His joy and His pleasure because Jesus is, and God is the one who is the God of joy. And we're told in Zephaniah that so much of God's joy actually in the Bible is related to what He's done in salvation.

Saved us, and it brings Him great joy. And it says that He rejoices over His people with singing. Zephaniah, isn't that one of the greatest words in the Bible? There's joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.

That God's justice and mercy at the fruit of the cross reflects the trinitarian joy of offering the prodigality of God to us and His love and His grace.

Jesus promises my joy. He says, my joy I will give to you. It's the gift of the Holy Spirit. Repeated through the New Testament that so in the Lord, in and of itself, essentially is knowing this joy of the God who is in trinitarian joy and who is a God of joy and who, whose greatest happiness is your voice.

Greatest happiness is you coming into His presence, loving to hear you, loving to receive your complaints and moans, loving this unity that is affected because His justice and His mercy were met when His own Son was crucified on the cross.

[ 11 : 53 ] And so we have this great reality of joy because we are in the presence of the joy giver and the joy, the joy person of the universe.

Therefore joyless Christianity is a monster. It's divorced from the Lord who is the God of joy.

It's not an added extra. It's not superficial, something this guy has no idea what he's talking about and he doesn't know what my life's like. This is of the essence of Christianity.

And if we don't know that, then we're suffering from bad theologism. We have bad theology, iteth, if we don't recognize that, because somewhere along the line you've learned to believe that solemnity somehow is holier, or that God is only to be feared or not rejoiced in, or that all that matters is that we mourn because blessed are those who mourn.

Did Paul not know these truths? Was God wrong when he said what he said here as he inspired Paul to write these words? Of course not.

[ 13 : 09 ] We're not pitting these two things against each other, but we're recognizing that there's a depth and a reality to joy that subsumes and that takes in all of these other experiences also.

But don't use theology to close your hearts, to keep your hearts closed to the joy of the Lord and that relationship. And don't let your theology stop you challenging the prejudices that you may have grown up with about being miserable as a Christian, that being miserable is the only way to be, because that's much more holy, because it shows how much you hate your sin, and because the world is lost and we need to be solemn about that.

Well, we're not actually told that, but there's a reality about our joy that can take in the tears and the weeping and the reality of what this world is doing.

But bad practice, sorry, bad theology always leads to bad practice. And if we don't know, if we don't understand who God is in himself, if we have a misunderstanding of him and of his joy, then what we, bad theology will lead us to practice our Christianity wrongly.

So if we have a joyless Christianity, the tendency is to return to the outward, to walk by sight rather than by faith. What's another word for that?

[ 14 : 35 ] It's legalism. That's the tendency for us. So it's all about rules and regulations and doing things better than other people outwardly.

And that's what somehow, it's an ugly, shallow pleasure that we get from being legalistic, that as we compare ourselves to others, we're better than other people. And that gives us some kind of sense of joy.

But it's a shallow, poor reflection of what God intends with it. It's godless. It's short-lived and it's hollow.

So it could be legalistic. It can also return us to thinking that our happiness, our joy, is only paralleled by good outward circumstances, by, again, sensual pleasure.

And therefore, we get annoyed with God if that isn't the case. Now, you can say, what's He talking about? Well, how often have we said, I don't know if God really loves me because things are going so badly in my life?

[ 15 : 40 ] How can He possibly love me? What are you talking about the joy of the Lord when my circumstances are so joyless and miserable? But can't you see that? It's a returning to outward circumstantial living and losing sight of what it means to rejoice in the Lord.

I think it also leads to dull worship. That is soulless, not in the Lord.

Routine. I know we meet every week. That's a good thing. It's good routine as well. But the challenge of keeping the worship living when we meet regularly like this, dull worship can be judgmental and outward and merely sensual, performance-related.

It can easily happen for the preacher as well as everyone else, the way we listen, the way we act in church. But it can be utterly forgettable worship, can't it?

When we have lost the joy of the Lord and we are not connected with Him, the praise is heartless, it's miserable, it's kind of joyless, we're not great in the free church that's singing joyfully.

[ 16 : 50 ] I don't care what you say. We have a tradition of singing miserably like at a funeral. We do it well. We do misery really well.

And we have that tradition. I don't know what it is, maybe it's the weather. But we really could. And again, you've got what just, you know, just being kind of crazy outwardly, that can just be performance as well.

But if praise is, if God sings over us with pleasure, then singing is what the angels in heaven do. It's kind of significant. We call it the preliminaries to the sermon.

That's not right. Our corporate praise together should be a reflection of heaven. That's what it should be, because that's what it is.

We're joining with the heavenly angels in praising the King of the universe for who He is. It's our worship. It should be expressive and it should be emotional in the sense of being from our hearts.

[ 17 : 59 ] Now, at the same time, it can be brilliant, professional, enjoyable, stimulating, but worldly. It's not really about the outness, necessarily the outward experience of what it sounds like.

It's to be from the heart. It's to be from being in connection with the Lord. So if you're spending your life, and if I'm spending my life separated from the Lord, we can't possibly come in worship and know His joy.

At best it will be something that's kind of wound up outwardly and emotionalism at best. It leads to bad practice. So in the first place, I think we see it's a spiritual experience.

It's rooted in the Bible. It's rooted in a relationship with the Lord, and therefore it transcends how you've come tonight and what you've experienced.

I'm not belittling anything you have experienced, but it is something beyond that as we look for His presence. Because the second thing I'm going to say is it's a command.

[ 19 : 04 ] Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say rejoice. So linguistically, grammatically, this is an imperative. Rejoice. It doesn't say think about it.

It doesn't say now and again. It doesn't say every so often. He says rejoice in the Lord always. I say again rejoice.

Always. Sometimes He says rejoice in the Lord, rejoice in the Lord always. Why? It's perpetual. It's a perpetual state. We might not feel that that's the case, but it's a perpetual state that we're commanded to recognize.

And how can He say that? Real? Really? Can we possibly say that? Well, I think for all of us it's deepening our understanding of God and of theology, because that's everything.

Matthew 13 gives a parable of the kingdom of God and says it's like a man who was in a field and found treasure. And he sold everything that he had in order to gain this.

[ 20 : 07 ] He experienced this reality of what it was to have found the incomparable riches of Jesus Christ and he sold everything.

It became his great priority and he joyfully did so, we're told, because it was treasure. Because he understood who God was and what it was, the incomparably rich reality of knowing Jesus.

And it doesn't say explicitly, but there's a kind of encouragement there, the importance of digging deep, isn't it? Because he found treasure in a field that we presume it wasn't just on the surface.

Presume somehow that nobody else knew about and he had to dig deep. And then there's other places that speak about treasure and depth of the ground and I think Job speaks about digging for the great treasures of wisdom.

And it's the inexhaustible riches of God's character that we dig for in our lives and recognize who he is and what he provides for us as we soak our lives in him.

[ 21 : 17 ] See the context of the passage here as he speaks about rejoicing in the Lord and he says, I know you're anxious. Anxiety is a big thing in life and he says, but please don't be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and petition and thanksgiving, let your request be known to God.

He's speaking about this relational reality of going, digging deep into relationship with God through your anxieties and through your troubles. And that enables us to see joy because we're digging. So often we fail to be joy because we've stopped digging. We've stopped reaching out into the treasures of God's character and we think we know it will. Yeah, yeah, I know that.

I've made my commitment and there's nothing more to learn. But then we can settle for that cheap imitation which comes when we are naturally and relationally crippled and estranged and separated from Jesus in our lives.

We encourage one another to continually be in God's presence and Paul's able to do that, isn't he? He always thanks God, he says, Father, Lord, we pray for you since we've heard of your faith in Jesus Christ, the love and you have for all the saints and he encourages them to keep being in God's presence.

[ 22 : 40 ] So it's perpetual. It's also realistic, this joy that he speaks of here because if you see that, you've seen the verse before it, sorry, I read another bit there, sorry, I read from Colossians there.

It's the next book but I was Colossians chapter one but it's a similar kind of thing, you see. Okay, but it's realistic. See this chapter, before he says rejoice in the Lord, what does he say?

He says, Yodiah and Sintiqi, stop arguing. That's what he says. In other words, it's realistic. You see the verse before, in the midst of church argument between two prominent women and members of the church, which is obviously a threat to their joy as a church.

It's obviously something fairly serious. He names them, it's public, it's known, maybe it's causing great division within the church. How does he deal with that?

Going on to speak about joy, yes he does speak about joy but he commends their gospel labor. This is really interesting, division between two people in the church. How does he deal with it?

[ 23 : 48 ] He commends them for their gospel labor. He reminds all of them in the church that they belong to Christ, that their names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

And he sends one of his workers, we don't know, he doesn't name them, but he sends one of his workers to go and help them. He says, you know, help these women who have labored side by side in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers.

Philippians 1, the book's one of the few churches in New Testament, we know lots of people's names, I've mentioned that before and here's some more of them. But he deals with this in a way that reflects who they are and who he is and is able then to go on and encourage them to rejoice in the Lord.

Your joy will have gone, he says, because you're divided. Remember who you are, I thank you for what you've done, I'm sending someone to help you so that we might joy again in the Lord.

Isn't that a great way of doing church discipline? Marvellous. Maybe they were majoring on minor things, I don't know, maybe it was something quite significant, but he commands them not only to rejoice in the Lord, but he also commands them to agree in the Lord.

[ 25 : 06 ] Not interesting. Both agreement and rejoicing, the two go together. It's not to say we're to be mindless and we're all to just think the same things, but we're to work through differences and agree to differ in the Lord, denying ourselves.

You see what he's saying is joy, this joy is realistic, it's outworked, it's not fluffy emotion, it's dealing with the dynamics of imperfect church relationships and people in Christian environments together and reminding us that as we deal with one another, we receive the joy again.

So it's perpetual and it's realistic, it's also thoughtful, we don't have time to look at this but he goes on to speak about finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, whatever is in the exons, in the excellent of worthy of praise, think on these things.

So we rejoice in the Lord, in the Lord when we're thinking about these things that belong to the Lord. It's the response of pressing on, isn't it?

He wants us to be thoughtful. The chapter begins with, therefore, that links it to the pressing on that we looked at last week. The chapter is finally, and we will be joyful as we think on and as we spend time on the true noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy things that Christ

reflects.

[ 26 : 41 ] That's who he is. That leads to action. Put them, he says, into practice. So it's not, it's not emotionalism and it's not slapstick.

It is, when did you last, when did I last stop and think about our relationship with Jesus and what, he says, think on these things, all of these things, think on them, spend time in them, because that will begin to enable you to and me to see joy in a way that we haven't before.

It's perpetual, it's realistic, it's thoughtful, it's also inspirational. Verse 10, Paul is responding to their love for them. He says, I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that length you have revived your concern for me.

And then verse 14 to 20, he speaks about the way that as a effect that has been inspirational, the generosity of the church that they've come to his aid, that they've come to help him, that stems from their joy expressed in love.

You see, it becomes a virtuous circle as he preaches and teaches joy and as they live that joy, he receives their joy in his circumstances and that causes him to praise and be joyful.

[ 28 : 02 ] It's a virtuous circle. The older I become, there's two dangers. One you become more cynical. There's one danger, become more cynical.

The other is you become more godly. But and I don't know where I am in that particular line, but what I do know is the older I become, the more precious joy becomes and the more precious joy among God's people becomes.

Our joy, just as Paul's was, was greatly influenced by the community of believers. He responded to their generosity because they were joyfully obedient to Christ.

And isn't it true more and more and more that we are influenced by the gospel community we're part of, negatively or positively?

And we look for that virtuous circle among us, that we encourage one another by our joyful obedience and by all that we're thinking on and the care for one another that joy brings.

[ 29 : 12 ] And therefore, it becomes inspirational. We don't want church to be depressive and dull, a place where we come and we dread coming.

Isn't that, wouldn't that be just terrible that the Christian company you have is a company you hate? Are you dread? Are you dread? It's going to be more gossip or it's going to be more judgment or it's going to be miserable and the worship will be dull and the sermons will be terrible and the singing will be awful.

Isn't that, isn't that exactly what it shouldn't be? And I'm not saying that church is just this gathering on a Sunday, but everything about we should look and be excited because it's a community of joy because we are in the Lord.

And lastly and briefly, very briefly, this joy in the Lord is accompanied by two friends, two lovely friends, the trilogy, it's a triune pleasure, the joy in the Lord.

It's accompanied by peace and by contentment. Twice Paul mentions peace. In verse 7 he says, as you go to the Lord, the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds.

[ 30 : 19 ] And then in verse 9 he says, what you've learned and received from me, practice these things and the God of peace will be with you.

This peace of God is a friend of joy and it's incompatible, you know, and it transcends words that it can't be proven or explained really.

I can't, but it's experienced. It envelops our hearts and minds. It's the sense of Emmanuel, God with us.

It doesn't induce pride but staggering humility because he is with us. We're never, you know, we sung this morning, Sam Twethee, even in the valley of the shadow, we can know we are not alone in the darkness.

There's no other way to experience that peace when everything is experiential or temporary unless we are in the Lord. So peace and contentment and that, you know, you could preach 10 sermons on verses 11 to 13 where Paul says, I've learned to be content.

[ 31 : 32 ] I know what it is to be brought low and to abound and in any circumstance I've learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger. I can do all things and it sustains me. So joy has two great friends, peace and contentment.

What a trilogy that is and it's learned. Paul's not just dropped into our lap, it's a process. He had learned, Paul had learned it. It was tough, you know, tough for Paul.

Paul's not speaking glibly or cheaply here. He said, I've learned these things. I'm a disciple. It's a process and we are the same, you know, we have to be teachable through our trials so that we are learning contentment and peace and joy.

And you know, he speaks about the things that affect us, poverty and hunger and lacking the basics in life. These are real horrible things and we're not insensitive to them.

But he could say he could know contentment and peace and joy. What a great Savior we have, you know.

[ 32 : 35 ] I often feel like a wee boy at the beginning of the Christian road. I've been a Christian for about 40 years. And sometimes I feel I don't know anything.

When you think of just who Jesus Christ is, you know, it's so important to dig deep. And I pray for a spiritual awakening in my own heart.

And I do plead for it for this congregation because it will transform us increasingly as it will transform us today and for all our tomorrows as we experience and know this joy as we dig deep into the one who has gifted us salvation.

And I hope that is your experience increasingly in life. Amen.