

PRACTICE JOY IN ALL TIMES
Philippians 4: 4-6

Leslie Weatherhead, the great London preacher and author of books like *The Will of God* and *The Christian Agnostic*, remembered a day in his childhood when, as he walked with a nurse along a country road, three children ran to greet him. He did not know them, but in their hands they held—as an offering to him—small branches of sycamore, crowned with beautiful bronze colored leaves. Smiling, they presented their gift. But young Leslie was shy and suddenly ran back to cling to his nurse. When he looked back, he saw their faces of disappointment written because he had rebuffed their simple gift. For days afterwards, he remembered that event and was chagrined by his action. He wrote: the children's offer "surprised in me some weakness of snobbery or fear, but in which I should have seen the Kingdom of Heaven and taken it with joy." Weatherhead's behavior is a parable for us all. How many times, perhaps when you were younger, did you find yourself doing a similar thing, shying away from a nice offer? Sometimes an offer than could have brought joy instead of chagrin? When do we discover joy in our lives? As some begin their day, they go for their breakfast on autopilot and perhaps drive to their destination with grim determination not to be cut off or be distracted by others. One Friday several weeks ago when Mary Ann and I drove over to the beachside to eat, my joy got trounced at one particular street corner where people with profanity laced political signs waved their flags and yelled at cars. Sometimes joy cannot flourish in my heart longer when I witness public displays of hostility. But the times when I DO find joy, with grandsons for example, are priceless.

On the other hand, people who are joyful about *everything* seem disconnected from reality. I wonder if the so-called "Joyful in the Lord" Christians have an occasional bad day! If they do, they seem to coat the day with joy! Then I have to stop and ask:

“What bothers me about this joyful Christian, or this joyful server, or this joyful store clerk? Is it envy, that they have joy and I don’t? Is it anger? No. I have come to realize something important: I’m not bothered by joyful people; joyful people bring me joy too! it’s *artificially* joyful people who I wonder about! Those who, in the face of death, violence, pain, or suffering show joy and not grief. I love the joyful Christians in this congregation, and I remember ones from years gone by. They seemed to have the Spirit of God in their heart and the fruit of the Spirit apparent in their life. In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he outlined the fruits of the Spirit. The first fruit was *love* as you might expect; but the second one was *joy*. Joy is one fruit of the Spirit that I, and perhaps you, need to nurture in my life. Throughout the centuries, some congregations have existed stoically, holding fast to the Commandments, while others practiced joy and invited others to share their fellowship. Perhaps the greatest Christian failing over the ages was to turn faith into something stoic, stern, and legal. The Jewish Pharisees—the holy legalists—would be in general agreement with what those churches represent—joyless adherence to the teachings of the Bible, especially the Commandments. But in the early church described in the book of Acts, the joy of the Lord was evident instead! Jesus said, I John 15:11: “These things I have spoken to you, *that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*” Or Paul’s words to the Philippians as translated in the Good News Bible “I thank my God every time I think of you; and every time I pray for you all, I pray with joy because of the way in which you have helped me” [1;3] May we always seek to have such joy in our union with our Lord! As Paul wrote it so clearly: Rejoice in the Lord always! And again I will say, rejoice!” [Philippians 4:4] Even before Paul and Jesus, a number of Psalms invited people to rejoice. Psalm 32:11-“Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you who are righteous!” [Psalm 33:20-21.]“We wait in hope for the Lord, he is our help and shield, in him our hearts rejoice.” [Psalm 105:3] “Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice!” And

perhaps the greatest verse on this subject was from Psalm 118: “This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!” It is certainly a part of God’s will that we rejoice in our daily lives. Sometimes I fall short; do you? *All that Jesus suffered for us on the cross, and all that he shared was not so that we needed to suffer with him daily. Only he could atone (that is, pay for) all the world’s sins and he doesn’t need our help to do it!* Instead he said to his disciples: “Your sorrow shall be turned into joyI will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice.” The joy that fills much of the world around the birth of Christ was enhanced with people offering “tidings of comfort and joy.” And the joy that Christ has risen from the dead is augmented by the grand hymn that we will sing: “This *joyful* Eastertide, away with sin and sorrow! My love, the Crucified, has sprung to life this morrow. Had Christ, who once was slain, not burst his three-day prison; our faith had been in vain. But now is Christ arisen, arisen, arisen, arisen.”

An ethics professor when I was at Princeton, Dr. Doris Donnelly, did some extensive research on the subject of joy. In her search, she discovered, among others, C.S. Lewis who I mentioned last week. Lewis said that “joy surprises,” hence the name of his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*. He learned as a child that joy was hard to attain but intensely desirable. Second, he said joy was different from pleasure, happiness, fun, and excitement, although it was frequently confused with those experiences. He also said “with joy, the desire itself to have it is experienced as a delight even when fulfilment seems remote or impossible.” Finally, Lewis said that joy coexists with pain. “In the midst of affliction, joy gives proof of its power.” (Joy: The Delight of Longing, The Living Pulpit, vol. 5, No. 4. p. 6) So you and I have the power to move from dark grey toward light with our moods rather than let life dictate how we will feel or respond! How freeing is that? Those who have done that have trusted and thanked God in all circumstances. It is

that simple, yet that difficult. Choosing joy can make your body, mind, and soul all healthier!

Finally, in Max Lucado' wonderful devotional book *Grace for the Moment*, he wrote: Each day I am free to choose; because of Calvary, I am free to choose. And so I choose ...love." That is the first point. Then he decided "I choose peace." Then "forgiveness." I knew I was with him on all those points, especially forgiveness. I once went months not forgiving another person. It sapped my energy every day; it drained my spirit, and it changed my mood. I certainly have decided for "forgiveness." But Max's last point: "*And I choose joy.*" I think that means I can't wait for joy to fall in my lap. *I have to choose activities that enhance my joy.* Political wrangling saps my joy. So does hearing about drug overdoses and affairs. So does hearing about harm coming to Ukraine's armed forces and civilians. Yet the words from the prophet Zephaniah are these: "The Lord your God ... will rejoice over you with gladness; he will renew by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival." [3:17] May you cherish words of joy you hear, and fill your life with activities that help you to choose joy.

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