

JOY

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Joy is a constantly recurring theme of the New Testament writers. It is also a paradox in a wretched world where anything beyond basic survival is for the very few. More vital than that—if one cares about the people of the world, one cannot help but be constantly moved by the hundreds of millions of lost souls, under despotic and godless rulers. And it seems callous for the Christian to pull the shade, as it were, on the cries of the discomfited, and engage in exultation as though the time of triumph had already come.

How then, do we square the biblical insistence on the inevitability of joyfulness as a consequence of salvation? The answer lies, as always, in definitions. What is joy? What did Jesus mean by it, when He spoke the words on the way to the cross? And what did Paul mean by it, writing from prison? Could Christ have been joyful when He wept over Jerusalem? Could Paul have been joyful as he addressed the churches with breaking heart? To urge joy in the midst of sorrow—is that not the essence of hypocrisy? Does it not rob one of the right to tears? Must one put on a callous veneer in the midst of suffering, and go unmoved in the wretched realities of the weeping world? To all of these questions—no, indeed, if we understand the true meaning of joy.

The ancient world was not a place of bliss. It was constantly wracked with wars and want. The people, except for the very few, struggled for survival. Our English word, “happiness,” which usually implies, “blissfulness,” was not a part of their vocabulary. In the Beatitudes, some have erroneously translated the word, “blessed,” (*makarios*) as, “happy.” This completely misses the meaning of the word, which is rather, “touched by God.”

The common word for joy, used both by Jesus and Paul, was *chara*. This word meant, not so much feelings of euphoria or bliss, as exhilaration, such as one might feel in the contest. Its versatility is shown in its usage in connection with the Greek games, or athletic contests. In such a usage, one could feel both the agony of the endeavor, and the inner exhilaration of the challenge, at the same time. As Jesus went to the cross, He felt the exhilaration of the triumph over sin, even as His heart was breaking for the world that was crucifying Him. Paul could feel the exhilaration of his mission, even as he languished in the prison, and despaired over the people.

Such joyfulness is never hypocritical, because it belongs to the inner recesses of the heart. It is the irrepressible flow of divine energy within the spirit, as Christ comes to dwell there. That is what is meant by joy as the fruit of the Spirit. It is not something to be cultivated because we are Christians, but something that is the natural expression of the abiding Christ.

To understand this, we must distinguish between the flesh and the spirit. The flesh is the natural mind and its processes. Human thoughts and feelings are all produced in the brain, which in turn is controlled by behavior patterns that have developed over a lifetime, and are subject to deception and error. The spirit is a sort of overriding consciousness, which, in the Christian, is occupied by Christ. When Christ enters the spirit, He brings with Him His own qualities of joy and

love and peace—qualities not dependent upon the deceptive concepts of the human brain. When the Bible speaks of the renewing of the mind, it is this spirit-consciousness, to which it is referring—a consciousness previously the prisoner of the natural brain-function. The brain is not itself renewed, as Paul indicates “*In my flesh, there dwells* (not, ‘used to dwell’) *no good thing.*” This natural brain-function is what Paul refers to by “the flesh.” That its effects are not eradicated by conversion, is evident in the constant emerging of the human element in believers. Paul is constantly addressing this problem in all of his letters.

And so it is, that one may be struggling with all kinds of human wretchedness in the natural mind, and still possess a river of joy and peace in the inner spirit.

(See author’s pamphlet, *The Struggle*)

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