

Joy Is a Decision

by Dr. Steven C. Riser

Texts: Psalm 16:11; Philippians 4:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; John 15: 9-13

Introduction: A Great Need in Our Country Today

In his book *To Laugh Again*, Chuck Swindoll says, “I know of no greater need today than the need for joy. Unexplainable, contagious joy. Our country seems to have lost its spirit of fun and laughter....” God wills for us to be Spirit-controlled and joy-filled people. As a friend once said, “Most of us need to lighten up.” In this harsh economic down turn, a grimness has taken over many faces. We have a realistic reason to rejoice!

Three questions for consideration: What is joy? Where is it to be found? How can we recover it, if we lost it? Because I believe a lack of joy is a spiritual issue, let me share with you a good word from the Lord. First Thessalonians 5:16-18 says, “*Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.*” Let’s look to God’s Word to help stoke the fires of joy within our souls.

I. Joy Is an Indirect Choice – It is a Byproduct of Something Else – 1 Thessalonians 5:16

What is Joy?

1. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) and a byproduct of remaining in God’s love (John 15:9-11).
2. “Joy is the flag we fly from the castle tower of our hearts when the King is in residence there” (Eph. 5:18).
3. Joy is the exultation of my inward being that comes from genuine harmony with God, myself and others.

First, Christian joy is not so much a feeling as it is **a choice!** Verse 16 says: “*Be joyful always!*” Not sometimes. But some will immediately respond, “How can I possibly be always joyful with the hurts, the pains and the difficulties that God has allowed to enter my life?” That’s a fair question but God has a good answer.

We can make a distinction between joy and happiness: happiness being dependent on external circumstances, while joy is internal, a result of being controlled by the Spirit. Some people consider happiness to be a feeling dependent on circumstances and usually restricted to moments when life is going well. Joy is an inner serenity of the soul, rooted not in circumstances but in a choice to trust God’s faithfulness, regardless of what is happening externally.

There is an interesting story about Nathaniel Hawthorne. One day he came home heartbroken, feeling like a failure because he had been fired from his job. His wife made this response: “Now you can write your book!” “What are we going to live on in the meantime?” asked her husband. Then she pulled out a substantial amount of money, and said, “I have always known you were a man of genius. I knew that someday you would write a masterpiece. So every week, out of the

money you gave me for housekeeping, I saved a little bit. Here is enough to last us for a whole year.” Greeting her husband’s apparent defeat with joy, optimism and expectancy, the door was opened for him to write one of the greatest novels of American literature, *The Scarlet Letter*.

Jesus serves this function in the lives of believers. He greets us with surprising resources to cope when our own reservoirs are empty – when we face problems for which there seem to be no solutions. We can do anything God wants us to do through Christ who strengthens us (Phil. 4:13).

If it was in my power to give you the gift of being able to trust God’s love and goodness, no matter how violent a storm might be raging right now in your life, I would give it to you. The truth is that no one can do for you what God expects you to do. Joy is a **choice**! Trusting that, with God, there are no impossible circumstances, enables us to live as victors rather than victims. It’s when our future looks the bleakest that our Lord provides the biggest surprises. Tim Hansel reminds us from his own life of pain: “Pain is inevitable, but misery is optional.”

There are several reasons why joy is a decision:

1) John 15:11: “***These things*** I have spoken to you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.” What do “these things” mean? “These things” refer to what Jesus said prior to John 15:11. For example, John 15:9-10: “*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love.*” Do you see the sequence? Verse 9 – to have joy you have to abide in God’s love; verse 10 – to abide in God’s love you have to obey God’s commands.

2) Joy is the result (fruit) of being controlled by the Holy Spirit and that is a decision to obey God’s command: a) The Condition – submit to the Spirit’s control (Eph. 5:18); b) The Result – first love, and then comes joy (Gal. 5:22ff)! Joy is a choice but it is an indirect choice and a byproduct of something else – our experience of God’s love.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Paul offers a second step toward the discovery of joy:

II. Pray Continually! – 1 Thessalonians 5:17

“Always keep on praying.”

Just as we’re to rejoice always, we’re to pray continually. Prayer gives us the privilege of leveraging God’s resources with our own. Prayer is putting our hand into God’s hand, so that when we confront what appears to be overwhelming waves (challenges), we won’t sink. In prayer we are practicing the presence of God. Psalm 16:11: “*You will show me the path of life; **In Your presence is fullness of joy**; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*” When things get tough, pray like a child firmly hanging on to the hand of a loving parent. “*O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.*” We can’t abide in Christ’s love without having a strong, vital personal relationship with Him, can we? (Jn. 15:1-8)

Praying for others can also lead us to joy because it takes our focus off our own needs and personal preferences. Have you ever been in a worship service when something happened that was not to your liking? Instead of complaining, why not pray that the worship experience would be meaningful to the others who are present?

Paul said, while in prison, “*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*” (Phil. 4:4)

Our source of joy is God, not our circumstances. Where are we to rejoice? *“In the Lord.”* (Phil. 4:4) There is always cause for rejoicing in who God is!

1 Thessalonians 5:18 gives us a third step to help rediscover joy:

III. Give Thanks in All Circumstances – 1 Thessalonians 5:18

“No matter what happens, always be thankful, for this is God’s will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.” Or ... *“Give thanks in all circumstances. [Why?] Because this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”*

There’s an extremely high correlation between joy-filled people and thankful people. To put it another way, the joy-filled people I know are thankful. How many ungrateful people do you know that are happy? Zero!

Maybe we don’t understand what God is doing in our lives, but we trust Him anyway and we thank Him in advance. “When we don’t understand his plan, when we can’t trace his hand, we can always trust his heart.”

People who please God by obeying God are joyful (John 15:9).

People who please God by loving God/others are joyful (John 15:10, 14).

People who please God by being grateful are joyful (1 Thess. 5:16-18).

One of the great barriers to gratitude ... and thus to joy ... is comparison. Do you know the favorite expression of those addicted to comparison is? *“It isn’t fair!”* Have you ever met person who always compared himself unfavorably with others? That’s the recipe for misery, isn’t it?

Some time ago, Jack Hayford was invited to the White House along with some other Pastors and he was feeling pretty good about the honor until he discovered that Bill Hybels had been invited to come and spend the day before and stay all night in the White House! When he compared himself with Bill Hybels he said he lost his joy in visiting the President. With whom are you comparing your life? Of course, life isn’t fair! Life is difficult and often unfair. But, comparison and complaining will squeeze joy right out of your heart and right out of your life!

It is so easy to compare ourselves with those who: 1) Have families when we feel alone. 2) Have money when our bank account is empty. 3) Are in good health when we suffer from poor health, etc. It’s hard to envy someone you don’t compare yourself with, isn’t it? Comparison is an invitation to envy!

Giving thanks in all circumstances means we understand that God has a different plan for each of His children. Every person has his or her own sorrows and disappointments. In 1 Thessalonians 5:18, Paul says, *“Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”* For who? For **YOU!** Accepting this truth, can be a step to rediscovering joy, without a change in your circumstances. Today, if you lose your joy, it’s possible to laugh again. The word “rejoice” means to find or rediscover joy again.

Ten Biblical Resources for Choosing Joy

1. **Make a list of God’s blessings.** This gives you scheduled time to focus on the blessings God has given you – they are a source of joy. This is so incredibly simple that most of you will think it’s too easy to do. But it is one of those life-changing things that *is* incredibly effective. We need to daily count our blessings!

2. Develop the attitude of gratitude. The thread of gratitude will become a lifeline to joy. When you decide you've had enough of an undesirable feeling, you can begin to shift immediately by changing your focus to recognizing God as the source of every good and perfect gift and appreciating anything that God permits to come your way. Appreciate one thing, then another, then another, until all you feel is the vibration of appreciation. Thankfulness is an attitude, but it is also a godly habit that can and should be regularly cultivated.

3. Learn to love what God loves. When you are hurting and finally decide you've had enough you can learn to love what God loves. The Bible calls us to rejoice – that means finding joy again or rediscovering the joy we have lost. In Philippians 4:4 Paul said, *“Always be full of joy in the Lord; I say it again, rejoice!”* Did you know that Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians from prison? The only way to be full of joy is to look for it in God and not in our circumstances. Learning how to please God can become a great sense of joy!

4. Give away what you need. When you're feeling blue, hunt up a few that are bluer than you and try cheering them up for a while. When we give away what we need, emotionally, we have recognized at a deep internal level that we already have it within ourselves the joy that we need, or we wouldn't be able to give it away. You can't impart what you do not first possess. Giving takes our eyes off ourselves (2 Cor. 1:3-4).

5. Shift your focus. The law of attraction says whatever you focus on you get more of. Your heart secretly attracts what it loves or fears. Hebrews 12:1-3 says that we need to keep our eyes on Christ. As we learn to focus our faith on Christ we learn to find our joy in knowing, loving and serving Him.

6. Create a comprehensive growth plan. Seek to live a biblically balanced life just like Jesus. Luke 2:52 says that, *“Jesus grew both tall and wise, and was loved by God and man.”* Let's face it: If you do not have a plan and an intention to grow spiritually, you will be floundering your way through life!

7. Focus on knowing, believing, meditating and obeying God's word. Remember what Jesus said? In John 15:11: *“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”* Obeying the truth is a powerful source of joy as well as the means by which we express love for God (John 14:21).

8. Realize joy is a fruit (result) of being controlled by the Spirit. In order to be controlled by the Spirit, we need to submit to the Spirit's control which involves making God's Word the final authority for faith and practice. Galatians 5:22-23 says: *“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”* The injunction of being controlled by the Holy Spirit is not a mere suggestion but a divine imperative – a command! (Eph. 5:18)

9. Learn how to experience the greatest joy on earth. In 3 John 4, the apostle John says, *“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.”* In other words, disciple making! We need to pass the baton of godliness on to the next generation to experience the greatest joy on earth.

10. Choose joy. It is always an option available to a Christian. If you have lost joy, you can rediscover it. We choose it by: 1) learning, loving and living God's Word, and by 2) submitting ourselves moment by moment to the Spirit's control. We choose joy by 3) cultivating an attitude of gratitude and learning the practice the presence of God in prayer. “The favor God shows and

the joy He bestows are for those who will trust and obey.”

Concluding Challenge

Here is my challenge to you:

- Stop believing the myth that joy can be experienced only by the absence of pain and the fulfillment of your desires.
- Stop thinking that God is picking on you when things don't happen to go your way (Rom. 8:28).
- Stop making inappropriate and unwise comparisons which stir up envy and discontent (2 Cor. 10:12).
- Start praying, believing God hears your prayers and will answer them according to His will (1 John 5:14-15).
- Give thanks for how God is going to weave your circumstances to ultimately work out for your good.

You may have previously heard this portion of God's Word but if you are like me you need to be reminded from time to time. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 is a passage you would do well to commit to memory!

In closing I would like to say a word to those of you who don't feel joyful and this article has not fixed your pain. I can make you this promise: If you know Jesus, there will come a time, maybe not now, when the Lord will surprise you with His joy. As you meditate on His holy presence and His living Word you will break out with a smile on your lips that comes from a deep sense of joy in your heart.

The Bible says, “*Tears may tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning.*” (Psa. 30:5) “*Do not grow weary in well doing, for in due season we will reap if we do not lose heart*” (Gal. 6:9). I don't know how, and I don't know when, but Jesus has promised you will know His joy (John 15:11). Frederick Buechner makes this beautiful statement about joy in the life of the Christian:

I believe that all of us have not only the right to be happy, in the sense of being able to bless even the sad times of our lives...It's all good. There is nothing to worry about. That is the gladdest and most final of all secrets which I suspect the whole human family, since the world began, has glimpsed always in its holiest dreams.

Hear again the Word of God:

1 “*Rejoice always,*”

2 “*Pray continually,*”

3 “*Give thanks in every circumstance!*”

“*This is God's will for you!*” Amen.