

Joy In The Lord

Valley Center December 8, 2007

When I prayed for guidance as to what to present to you today, the Lord impressed on my mind, "talk about joy." The Christian life is made up of many parts; it's true that there is a "time for weeping," and a "time for sorrow," as the wise man noted. Life has a serious side to it. There will be cloudy moments on dark trails. But overall, the experience of the follower of Jesus Christ can and should be that of overriding joy. We have every reason to have joy predominate in our lives!

Let's consider **what** joy is and **why** joy is. Sometimes it's easier to define something by what it is not. Joy is not the same thing as giddiness. It's not the transitory feeling that some forbidden things cause, that passes all too quickly away. It's not the "high" that transgression brings that, like a narcotic, requires greater and greater dosages in order to thrill. Both Adam and Eve felt a momentary exhilaration when they disobeyed. But that was soon replaced by the deepening realization of what their sin brought; nakedness, guilt, sorrow, and eventually death.

Heaven's joy is not the same thing as superficial silliness or slapstick foolishness. The laughter produced by this type of humor has as much substance and durability as the cackling of burning tumbleweed. That's what the late-night television comics are all about. Heaven's joy is different than this. Here's what it is: heaven's joy is a buoyant, abiding optimism accompanied by a serene confidence in God's eternal purpose and capable leadership and His desire for our ultimate well being. Heaven's joy has nothing to do with what's happening around you; it survives and lives above adverse circumstances and hardships.

Let's take a quick look at some of the words in the Bible that are translated "joy" or "rejoice." There are quite a few of them:

"To leap" (*gil* "My soul shall be joyful in the LORD; it shall rejoice in His salvation." Psalm 35:9 *skirtao* Luke 6:23)

"To make a loud cry" (*rennah* "For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life; weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning." Psalm 30:5. "Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy." Psalm 126:5)

"To shout" (*rua* "Make a joyful shout to God, all the earth!" Psalm 66:1)

"To shine" (*sameach* "The king shall have joy in Your strength, LORD; and in Your salvation how greatly shall he rejoice!" Psalm 21:1)

"To sing" (*renanah* "My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips." Psalm 63:5)

To boast or exult" (*kauchaomai* "We rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation." Romans 5:11)

"To enjoy" (*sus* "The LORD your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you in His love, He will rejoice over you with singing." Zephaniah 3:17)

"To laugh" (*sachaq* "Then I was beside Him, as a master craftsman; and I was daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him, rejoicing in His inhabited world, and my delight was with the sons of men." Proverbs 8:30, 31)

Try to keep some of these words in mind: we'll refer to them later.

Joy has been a hallmark of divinity, even amidst this hellish rebellion. The Scriptures teach us that this joy permeates all that God does. There was joy at the creation of the earth, when "the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy". Job 38:7. There is joy in heaven at the return of a lost sinner. Joy is the common culmination of the parables Jesus told about the lost sheep (Luke 15:7), the lost coin (Luke 15:10) and the lost boy (Luke 15:23, 24). Joy is a main feature of heaven's environment, and it is into this life of joy that we are called.

The Bible presents at least **five reasons** why we as believers should have joy in Christian living. We should be joyful because

God is our Creator
He became a Man and entered this world
He took our sins upon Him at the cross
Through His Spirit He lives within us today
His promise is that He is returning soon

There is joy in knowing you were created by a loving and caring God. I was impressed by the usage of the present tense of the verbs in the 104th Psalm. Even as Christians we might be limiting God's creative power. We might actually be practicing a form of deism, thinking as if God created in that week as described in Genesis 1, but that things

today follow along without His intervention or interference. We might think that there's power in the seed itself to grow wheat, and that principle applies to all living things. He's not really involved in the growth of plants or living beings today, is He?

We fail to see that God's creative presence is just as active (though invisible) now as it was back then. Just because God uses molecules and genes, just because through scientific knowledge we can have some grasp of how things happen doesn't in the slightest detract from the presence of His power in all living organisms and their propagation. The Bible says, "In Him all things consist." Colossians 1:17. How did creation take place at the beginning? It was by His Word, wasn't it? The Scriptures tell us, "By the word of the LORD the were heavens made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth." Psalm 33:6. Peter tells us that same word is in operation in today's world. "By the word of God the heavens were of old...but the heavens and the earth which now exist are kept in store by the same word..." II Peter 3:

Notice how this is taught in the 104th psalm. After reviewing the great act of initial creation (vs. 1-9), the writer merges into the present, but includes God's creative power as the active impulse for all that happens in nature. Notice the usage of the present tense in these verbs: "He **sends** the springs into the valleys. He **waters** the hills from His upper chambers. He **causes** the grass to grow for the cattle." Don't think for a moment that creation stopped after the Genesis record! His creative power is still active and necessary today. For that, we have joy: remember the words the Bible uses: to "shout, sing, exult, leap, make a loud cry and boast."

You and may not have been there at creation week when "all the sons of God shouted for joy," but if we recognize that every aspect of the growth and maintenance of things in nature today is as miraculous as what Genesis 1 described, we can have joy as we see the hills turn green after our recent rains. Though we can't see Him, though we can't hear His voice, we can realize that He is present to bring forth the grasses that wrap the hillsides, just as He did on the third day of creation. And that applies to all living things.

Let's sing together the first verse of a hymn that gives expression to joy in God's creatorship, "Praise To The Lord."

There was joy at Creation, and there was joy at the birth of the Messiah. What did the angel tell the shepherds of Bethlehem? "Do not

be afraid, for behold, I bring you good **tidings of great joy** which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Luke 2:10-11. This is the time of the year when the eyes of many are drawn to the coming of the Christ Child into the world.

It's likely that He wasn't born in December, because the scene we just reviewed says that when the angels came the shepherds were "living out in the fields," something they probably wouldn't be doing in winter. Nevertheless, it is a good thing to be reminded of this wonderful and incomprehensible event. That the Creator God would leave heaven, risk all and come to this dark planet to become one with the human family, to teach us about God, to pay the ransom for our sins, to show us how to live, is a thought that brings great joy to our hearts. It is our hope that during this Christmas season our thoughts will be directed to the real purpose of our celebration.

It's not the tinsel or colored lights
It's Messiah's birth on that glorious night

Let's sing the first two verses of that carol, "Joy To The World."

Jesus came to die for the sins of mankind. His was not a life of pleasure seeking, ease or repose; He was here on a mission. He did not seek His own interests, but the will of His Father, and eventually that led up the path to where convicts and criminals bled out their existence on Golgotha. We can have joy because of what Jesus did that day. Because of that event, we are counted worthy. We are counted as righteous. He was there for us and our sins were on Him. We were in Him, and because of His death we are made free.

People get ecstatic over even little things. Something happened last Tuesday night when I went to Stater Brothers that I had never seen before. The customer ahead of me in line at the cashier was casually watching as the person ahead of him checked out and was handed her receipt. This was one of those receipts that has printed coupons on the back, and it just so happened that visible on the back of that receipt was a coupon for the very product he was going to purchase, some baby formula. By the way, the coupon was worth \$4.50! He recognized it right away and said, "Hey, that coupon is for what I'm buying!" The lady thrust it in his hand and said, "It's yours!" As the cashier rang it up, a smile stretched across his face like a suspension bridge, and I'm sure he couldn't wait to tell his wife about his good fortune when he got home, and probably will be telling people

about it at work all week. That was "joy" over a relatively small thing; that coupon didn't change his life, but it brought a measure of gladness.

Sometimes joy comes through great and momentous events. Consider the tragic and true story of Clarence Elkins, of Ohio, whose life was forever changed on June 6, 1998. His mother-in-law, Judy Johnson was at home babysitting her 6-year-old granddaughter Brooke, the niece of Clarence. Judy fell asleep on the couch, and Brook was in the bedroom. Sometime in the early morning hours, a man maliciously raped and bludgeoned Judy to death and brutally raped Brooke.

When Brooke recovered consciousness, about 7 a.m., she telephoned a neighbor to report "grandma is dead." Then she walked to the nearby house of her best friend and told Tonia Brasiel, the friend's mother, "Uncle Clarence killed Grandma." It seemed strange that this neighbor made Brooke wait 10 minutes on the porch, with her clothes covered in blood, before driving her home and didn't call an ambulance or the police.

Later, on the same day, Brooke admitted to a friend of her grandmother that she wasn't certain as to the identity of the killer and explained why she identified her uncle: "I think it sounded like him." But this woman's testimony as to Brooke's uncertainty carried no weight in court because Brooke repeated to the police, to psychologists and her parents what she believed they wanted to hear: "Uncle Clarence killed Grandma."

At the crime scene where the murder victim fought strenuously and two rapes occurred, the police could not find a hair, a fingerprint or a drop of blood to implicate Elkins who had no felony record. Beside this, his wife provided an alibi that was largely supported by witnesses. Despite all this on June 4, 1999, Elkins was convicted, with the earliest possible parole date being 2054.

Meanwhile, Clarence's wife Melinda and his two sons were absolutely convinced of his innocence, and so for the next seven years, she worked continuously to exonerate him and to find the real killer of her mother. In the process, she lost her home, was hospitalized for exhaustion and broke connections with her sister, Brooke's mother. There was a bloody print left on the doorjamb at Judy Johnson's house, but it was destroyed when police tried to lift it. Other items collected as evidence were never tested for latent prints. Judy Johnson

had fought for her life, but it doesn't look as if anybody bothered to test her fingernail scrapings.

Finally, as the sisters reconciled, Brooke was gently questioned once more. When Detective Yant asked if she still believed that Clarence was the one, she replied, "I've always had doubts." It turns out that someone named Earl Mann, living with that very neighbor who Brooke had first gone to, was the real culprit. Later in 2002, Mann was in the very same prison with Elkins, being convicted of an unrelated crime, when the spotlight of suspicion focused on him and at that time Clarence was able to get one of Earl's discarded cigarette butts which he mailed in a Ziploc bag to his attorney. This confirmed through DNA analysis with the rape kit and fingernail scrapings that Earl Mann was indeed the murderer.

So, after 7 ½ years in prison, on December 15, 2005, Clarence Elkins was released. He was exonerated. All charges were dropped. What a relief! To have the weight of those charges and accusations off his back!



(Clarence Elkins, center, spent 7 ½ years in prison for a crime he didn't commit. Can you see the "joy" and peace in his face when the charges were dropped? Study carefully the expression on his face: it is the expression of a person who has been "justified.")

Talk about "joy"! Review once again all those words that the Bible uses to describe our joy in Christ: leap, shout, laugh, sing, and exult." I have a feeling that over the next few weeks Clarence experienced all of those and a few others! Here's the point I'm trying to make: the joy that we experience in Christ should be all of those as well! But there are some differences that make it even more emphatic:

Clarence Elkins was exonerated from a crime **he didn't commit**. That's not the way it is for us. In our situation, we have all sinned. We are guilty. We deserve the penalty that sin brings.

Clarence Elkins would have spent about 56 years in prison, which is long time, but the penalty we've been saved from is **everlasting death!**

Should we not have supreme joy in Christ because of the salvation He has given us? Take another look at Clarence's face in the above picture. You and I should be walking around with that look on our face!

What could it be that would prevent our experiencing that kind of joy? Well, maybe we don't think we've done anything wrong. We're as "good as the next person. I'm not really that bad, am I?" Could it be that we don't recognize that we have sinned-- we've broken God's holy law, and that without Christ we stand guilty as charged? Could we be like Simon the father of Judas, to whom Jesus said "To whom little is forgiven, the same loves little"? Luke 7:47.

Or could it be that we don't fully grasp the reality that when we are in Christ, and wear His robe of righteousness, we stand before God as though we have never sinned? The Bible uses the term "justification," which means "to be declared **not guilty.**" It means "the charges are dropped." The gifts of peace, tranquility and joy are there for the taking, if we will believe that His death accomplished our salvation. We can be like Clarence Elkins walking out of that prison, free! We can feel the joy, the "leaping, shouting, singing, exulting" joy in embracing salvation through Christ our Savior. Let's sing the first and last stanza of that beautiful Christian hymn, "Jesus Paid It All," and sing it as if you believe that you are justified in Christ by His blood. Sing it with the same passion as you think Clarence felt when he was released.

There is joy in experiencing Christ's presence in our life today. After all, the first fruit of Spirit that follows love is joy. There is joy in knowing that God hears and answers our prayers. Last Thursday evening, yesterday, my sister was in her Toyota, on her way to participate in a bell choir Christmas concert. Driving along the wet roads of northern California, suddenly there was a brilliant flash of light as a falling tree downed a power line. Instinctively she slammed on her brakes, but a ten-inch diameter branch of the tree crashed into her windshield, shattering it. She skidded off the road. What could have been a fatality seems to be limited to a broken windshield and perhaps some body damage to her car. Thankfully, she was spared injury from both the tree and from leaving the roadway. Within minutes there were helpful hands getting her free of the damaged

vehicle, and she even made it to the musical program. Today she made numerous calls to express her joy in knowing the angels protected her from danger last night.

This morning my wife had another set of x-rays completed, which were reviewed by her doctor, who passed on the good news that despite a partially collapsed lung from a fall the evening before Thanksgiving, her lung has healed and she won't have to have the chest tube procedure which many times is necessary for pneumothorax problems. She expresses her joy in knowing God has answered her prayer for healing.

There is joy in experiencing victory in Christian living. There is joy when Jesus is in your heart. One little girl was asked to explain what joy was to her. She looked at the word, and said, "J" is for Jesus, and "Y" is for you. The "O" is nothing. So joy is when there is nothing between Jesus and you." That's not a bad answer, is it!

There is joy in knowing Christ's leadership in your life. The happiest place on earth is not Disneyland! It's being where God wants you to be! I have to insert a word of personal testimony here, as I review the events of the last year. If someone had told me last December that I would be serving here in Valley Center as pastor, I would have struggled to believe it. And yet, miraculously, after nearly 20 years of being out of the ministry, God has called me back into the work, and placed me here in this wonderful church. I know this is God's doing, and not mine.

I have to also say a praise to God in the way He has enlarged my ministry through modern technology. Some time ago, He put into my mind that because the sermons are written on the computer, it would be easy to email them to church members who live out of town, to friends and family members. So I began to compile an email list to send out. I give God glory today for the opportunity He has given me to share His word through this medium. I pray that someone will be blessed by what He has placed in my heart to share.

Do you have joy in your life? Is it the predominate attitude that pervades your being? If not, pray that God will open your eyes to these great reasons to have joy.

He is our Creator, and the power of His creative activity is present with us today just as it was in Genesis 1.

God became man and was born into the human race.

When He died on the cross, our sins were there, and God forgives us and has declared us not guilty.
Through His Spirit He is present with us today, to guide, protect and enable us.
He is coming soon!

Sometimes as Christians we are like children traveling in the car asking, "Are we there yet?" We long for the time when Jesus will come and take us home! That day will come soon! As we live in the expectancy of His advent, joy will be in our hearts. We'll sing as our closing song "'Tis Almost Time For The Lord To Come."