

Rejoice in the Lord Always

5 of 6 in series *The Joy of the Lord is Our Strength*

Feb. 5, 2023

Phil. 4:1-8

I invite you to follow along as I read today's scripture passage— Philippians chapter 4 verses 1-8. I'll be reading from the New Living Translation. The apostle Paul, writing to the members of the church in Philippi, says:

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stay true to the Lord. I love you and long to see you, dear friends, for you are my joy and the crown I receive for my work.

Now I appeal to Euodia and Syntyche. Please, because you belong to the Lord, settle your disagreement. And I ask you, my true partner, to help these two women, for they worked hard with me in telling others the Good News. They worked along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are written in the Book of Life.

Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon.

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.¹

It feels like a lot of time has passed since then, but it wasn't very long ago that we were celebrating Christmas. During this past Christmas season, I heard a lesser-known Christmas carol, and the title of that carol has kept coming back to me throughout the month of January, and on into February. The title of this lesser-known carol is:

In the Bleak Midwinter.

How many of you have been feeling a vibe like *that* lately?

Weather-wise, this midwinter has seemed especially bleak, hasn't it?

¹ Philippians 4:1-8 (NLT)

A Global News article stated that while Toronto typically sees an average of 3.4 hours of sunshine per day in January, by mid-January of *this* year, there hadn't even been 3.4 hours of sunshine *in total*.²

And of course, the bleak midwinter is that time of year when many suffer from seasonal affective disorder, which forms a most fitting acronym— SAD. Seasonal affective disorder is often characterized by oversleeping, strong cravings for high-carb foods, weight gain (surprise-surprise), sluggishness, and a general feeling of melancholy.

I wonder how many of you hear that list of symptoms and are going *check... check... check...*

As we continue today in our series on biblical joy, I think it's very important to acknowledge that for many of us, joy does not come so easily during the bleak midwinter. And for some of us, finding joy feels like a struggle no matter the season, no matter the weather.

While biblical joy is not identical to what we often call happiness, the two concepts are related nonetheless. Joy and happiness are cousins.

Keeping that in mind, a famous research project by University of California professor Sonja Lyubomirsky concluded that about 50% of our happiness is genetic, 40% is what we think and do with our mind, and only about 10% of our happiness is based on our circumstances.³

One way of interpreting this data is that some of us, because of our genetics, are at a disadvantage in terms of becoming happier, more joyful people. "Thanks a lot, great grandpa!"

At the same time, there are some of you who won the genetics lottery, so that joy comes much more easily, much more naturally for you. You know who you are—and the rest of us are jealous.

While there has been debate in the scientific community about whether genetics should account for as much as 50% of our sense of happiness, what pretty much everyone does agree on is the 10%. In other words, only a very small percentage of our happiness (or to phrase it more biblically, joy) has to do with our circumstances. As Professor Lyubomirsky writes:

Although you may find it hard to believe, whether you drive to work in a Lexus hybrid or a battered truck, whether you're young or old, had wrinkle-removing plastic surgery, whether you live in the frigid Midwest or the balmy West coast, your chances of being happy and becoming happier are pretty much the same.

² See <https://globalnews.ca/news/9408615/toronto-lack-of-sunshine/>.

³ Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness: A New Approach to Getting the Life You Want*, Penguin Books, 2008.

That said, the main thrust of her research project focused on the 40%-- that part that has to do with how we use our minds—with the intentional strategies we can apply to become happier, more joyful people.

Did you know that your brain has a joy center that you can cultivate and exercise, regardless of your circumstances or your natural disposition? As Jonathan Grant writes:

Neurologists have shown that while most brain development stops sometime in childhood, the brain's "joy center" — located and observable in the right orbital prefrontal cortex — is the only part of the brain that never loses its capacity to grow.⁴

So we can cultivate the joy center in our brain, and it has tremendous potential for development.

But secular studies on happiness don't even have a category for the joy that comes not just from positive thinking or therapeutic methods, but from relational access through Jesus Christ to the joy-filled Trinitarian community that we call God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit— which Pastor Keegan spoke about last Sunday.

In fact, as followers of Jesus—no matter our circumstances or natural disposition— our potential to live in the joy of the Lord is such that the Bible actually *commands* us to rejoice, as we read earlier in our passage in Philippians:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!⁵

Joy is a biblical imperative for those of us who follow Jesus, precisely because, as the late great priest and author Henri Nouwen explains:

Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day.

For the remainder of this message, we're going look into Philippians 4 and consider three choices that lead to joy. The first is the choice to:

1. Pray about everything.

Flowing out of his exhortation in verse 4 to, "Always be full of joy in the Lord," Paul goes on to say these words in verses 6-7:

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which

⁴ Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015).

⁵ Philippians 4:4 (NIV)

exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. ⁶

Ours is an age of anxiety, and there can be no doubt that worry is a joy-killer. Worry betrays a lack of confidence in God's care for us as his people. ⁷

To combat this, Paul counsels us to pursue God's presence through prayer.

In the first message of this series, I spoke about how joy is profoundly relational—it flows out of loving connection with others. Of course, there is no relational connection more important for cultivating joy than our connection with God himself, and such a connection is made primarily through prayer.

When you come to God in prayer, his face lights up to see you. He finds joy in your presence, and his presence becomes your joy: "In your presence there is fullness of joy," says the psalmist to God. ⁸

How can we obey the command to rejoice in the Lord always, whatever our circumstances, whatever our natural disposition? Well, first and foremost, says Paul:

...pray about everything. Tell God what you need... ⁹

Talk to God about whatever's on your heart and mind. He will see you and hear you, no matter the season, no matter the time of day.

Another thing that's been said in this series is that gratitude leads to joy. So in our passage, Paul is very careful not only to counsel us to tell God what we need in prayer, but also to:

... thank him for all he has done. ¹⁰

When I learn to recognize and give thanks for God's good gifts in my life, from the little things to the big things, it reduces my anxieties, settles me in God's love, and if I persist in the practice, it fills me with his joy.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul offers a concise summary of the same themes, telling us:

Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus. ¹¹

Be thankful in *all* circumstances, says Paul. When he wrote the book of Philippians what were Paul's circumstances? He was in prison for proclaiming the lordship of Jesus. And yet

⁶ Philippians 4:6-7 (NLT)

⁷ Matthew 6:25-34

⁸ Psalm 16:11

⁹ Philippians 4:6b (NLT)

¹⁰ Philippians 4:6c (NLT)

¹¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NLT)

throughout the letter, Paul constantly *thanks God* for his relationship with the Philippian Christians— for their partnership, support and care. He *thanks God* for how the gospel was spreading in spite of and in some cases *because of* his imprisonment. Isn't it amazing to think that Philipians—often called the epistle of joy—was penned from a prison cell?

In his book *How God Changes Your Brain*, neuroscientist Andrew Newberg describes how he did brain scans on different people who pray. Here's what he discovered:

Intense, long-term contemplation of God and other spiritual values appears to permanently change the structure of those parts of the brain that control our moods, give rise to our conscious notions of self, and shape our sensory perception of the world... Contemplative [prayer] practices strengthen a specific neurological circuit that generates peacefulness, social awareness and compassion for others.¹²

No wonder Paul says that when you learn to pray about everything and give thanks for all God has done:

Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.¹³

The original Greek word for "guard" in this passage is a military term. In using this term, Paul is saying God's peace will keep our hearts and minds secure even in a spiritually hostile and dangerous environment. You wouldn't think you could experience peace in such an environment, but this is a peace which exceeds anything we can understand.

This is the peace we can experience when the joy of the Lord is our strength. And such peace and joy can only be found in God's presence as we pray about everything.

Let's move on to the second choice that leads to joy. It's the choice to:

2. Bring joy to each other, and when needed, get right with each other.

We've said that joy is profoundly relational. Its centre is our relationship with God, and it extends to our relationships with each other. Joy loves company! And as I alluded to already, Paul had an especially close and joy-filled relationship with the Philippian Christians.

Verse 1 of our passage contains some of the most affectionate and endearing language Paul used when writing to a church:

¹² Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain: Breakthrough Findings from a Neuroscientist* (as quoted in Rich Villodas, *Good, Beautiful and Kind: Becoming Whole in a Fractured World*, 86-87).

¹³ Philipians 4:7 (NLT)

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stay true to the Lord. I love you and long to see you, dear friends, for you are my joy and the crown I receive for my work.¹⁴

Earlier we said that when you come to God in prayer, God's face lights up to see you. If you could see God's face as it's revealed in Jesus, I'm convinced you'd see a big, joyful smile.¹⁵ Indeed, biblically speaking, joy is often connected with the face of God, and by extension it's connected with our faces as well.

Do our faces light up to see each other?

Back in my university days, I had a friend named Eric. Eric was a bringer of joy. He was long and lanky, taller than I am, and an expert guitarist who's gone on to play jazz guitar at a professional level. While his music was delightful, what really made Eric a bringer of joy was the fact that he was always glad to see you. When Eric and I would cross paths, his face would light up with a huge open-mouthed smile, he'd extend his long fingers out for a high five, do a little knee-bend, and say, "Hey, hey!" And it was genuine. Even in such a simple encounter, you'd walk away from it feeling valued, seen, loved. You'd feel *joy*.

You know who's a bringer of joy for me and many others? Pastor Keegan. I mean, it doesn't hurt that he always laughs at my jokes. Like, ear-splittingly loud laughter, with foot stomps and everything. And I love it! It's very good for my comedic ego!

Maybe Keegan and my old friend Eric are people who won the genetic lottery and are just naturally more joyful than many of us.

Regardless, their faces light up to see people, and people's faces light up in return. They bring joy.

How is God calling you to be a bringer of joy to others at home, at work, at school and let's not forget, in this church family? Last week, one of our small groups that wanted to practice bringing joy to others treated our entire church staff to pizza and wings. Is there some act of kindness or service you could perform, a thoughtful gift you could give, or a word of encouragement you could share to bring someone joy this week? Or maybe you could just practice letting your face light up when you see others, and seeing if their faces light up in return.

What if we could set off a crescendo of joy in this church family by finding creative ways to bring joy to each other and to the community around us? Consider yourself so challenged.

But while Paul found great joy in his fellowship with the Philippian believers, our passage shows that not all was harmony and joy inside that church. Check out verses 2-3:

¹⁴ Philippians 4:1 (NLT)

¹⁵ See 2 Corinthians 4:6

Now I appeal to Euodia and Syntyche. Please, because you belong to the Lord, settle your disagreement. And I ask you, my true partner, to help these two women, for they worked hard with me in telling others the Good News. They worked along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are written in the Book of Life.¹⁶

The very next thing Paul says after this is, “Always be filled with the joy of the Lord.”

Because relational tension can be a joy-killer.

Euodia and Syntyche were women in the church of Philippi. Each of them had worked diligently and faithfully alongside Paul in sharing the Good News of Jesus with others. No details are given, but somewhere along the line these two sisters in Christ had a falling out. They had beef with each other. And here Paul is saying that for their own sake, and for sake of the church and its witness to the world, they needed to settle their disagreement.

I love that the New Testament is so up front about how messy and complicated church relationships can often be—just like in any family. No filters or photo-shopping here.

The fact that Paul lists so many people in these verses— including an unnamed partner that he’s asking to be a mediator in the dispute— shows that God’s call to joy comes amidst real relationships with real people who experience real relational challenges.

But at the end of the day we all belong to the Lord, as Paul says in verse 2. Therefore, in the life of the church, we need to keep our relationships more important than any problems that may arise between us. The relationship is more important than the problem.

With this in mind, immediately after his double call to rejoice in the Lord, Paul says in verse 5:

Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do.¹⁷

The original Greek word for “considerate” here means to count the interests of others ahead of your own interests, and to bear with one another’s faults. Paul then adds:

Remember, the Lord is coming soon.¹⁸

Because when the Lord who died for us all comes back and you’re standing face to face with him, the beef you had been so emotionally wrapped up in will probably be looking pretty small, and maybe even pretty silly. We need to get right with each other—especially in this semi-post-COVID era when we’re all emotionally and physically weary—and let’s face it, a little bit *testy*— from nearly three years of constant pivoting, unpredictability and

¹⁶ Philippians 4:2-3 (NLT)

¹⁷ Philippians 4:5a (NLT)

¹⁸ Philippians 4:5b

change, not to mention a news cycle filled with political acrimony, social upheaval and violence. An article I read the other day suggested that about 20 years' worth of change has been crammed into the last three years. No wonder we're testy!

So here's a challenge for you: Ask God what one thing he would have you do to build a bridge towards someone with whom you've been experiencing relational tension.

For example, is there a conversation God is inviting you to have? Is there an apology God would have you make? Is there forgiveness God would have you extend? Is there something you've been holding onto that God is calling you to let go of? Is there a need for you to accept that there may be more to a story than the side you've been hearing? Is there a need for you ask God to help you take a deeper look at what's going on in your own heart, rather than assuming that the problem lies entirely with someone else? Is there a practical peacemaking gesture God would have you make?

It's a tough challenge, to be sure, but if we respond to it as the Lord leads, it can lead to greater levels of joy for all involved.

I'll be briefer with this next one, but here's the third choice that leads to joy:

3. Fix your thoughts on the very best things.

At the beginning of the message, we heard about the happiness study which suggests that 40% of our experience of happiness has to do with where we set our minds.

Isn't it interesting, then, that in calling us to rejoice in the Lord always, Paul gives the following instruction in verse 8 of our passage?

And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.¹⁹

What's been filling your mind lately?

According to Paul, you need to think about how you think, and choose to set your mind on the very best things— the aspects of life in this world which God approves of and delights in. To know the joy of the Lord, we must give ourselves to patterns of thought that celebrate God's goodness throughout creation. But as New Testament scholar N.T. Wright says:

To think about all the wonderful and lovely things listed here, runs directly opposite to the habits of mind instilled by modern media... How are you going to celebrate

¹⁹ Philippians 4:8 (NLT)

the goodness of the creator if you feed your mind only on the places in the world which humans have made ugly.²⁰

I once heard a pastor challenge his congregation to post a printed copy of this verse near every screen that they use. Would you accept that challenge, and find a way to make that happen with your TVs, phones, tablets, and the like? How might reviewing this verse before you turn on Netflix, or the nightly news, or scroll through your social media feed make a difference in the choices you make when it comes to what you set your mind on?

Your joy is at stake.

One thing that's encouraging is that today, you've made a choice to gather with God's people—whether in-person or online—for this worship service. You see, when Paul calls us to rejoice in the Lord always, a vital part of that call is to make a commitment to the corporate worship celebrations of the church. Because worship is the place where, week in and week out, we fix our thoughts and set our hearts on Jesus— and there is no one more true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and worthy of praise than Jesus. Amen?

In a moment, we're going to fix our eyes on Jesus by joyfully celebrating the Lord's Supper.

But first, I'd like to quickly note a couple of resources and an opportunity to help you put certain aspects of today's message into practice.

If biblical joy is found first and foremost in the presence of the Lord through prayer, our **Practicing the Presence of Jesus worksheet** provides you with some practical ideas, exercises and resources to help you remain awake and alert to Jesus' presence with you throughout the moments of your days.

Next, in light of today's focus on the importance of giving thanks when we pray, I'd like to remind you of the **Joy and Gratitude exercise sheet** that Pastor Jeremy highlighted in his message a few weeks ago. Check it out if you haven't done so already.

Finally, I'd like to open up an opportunity for some of you to **Experience Spiritual Direction**. Spiritual direction is an ancient Christian practice in which someone called a spiritual director meets with you one-on-one and partners with you to help you discern God's presence, voice and movement in your prayer life. It's basically the gift of a safe space to talk with someone about your relationship with God, and to experience God's presence in the process.

I'm a trained as a spiritual director, and soon I'll be opening up a limited number of new slots for one-on-one spiritual direction with Cornerstone congregants.

²⁰ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Epistles – Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon*, 131.

If you're interested in that opportunity, or in the other two resources I just mentioned, handouts for each of those things will be available after service in the lobby, and you can also find those, along with other some joy-related resources, on our website at www.cornerstonechurch.ca/joy.

COMMUNION

And now, let's prepare our hearts to celebrate the Lord's Supper in the joy of the Lord:

As we get ready to meet Jesus at his Table today, we're reminded that joy is profoundly relational. The word communion literally means "union together." It is a celebration of our union with Jesus—our relationship with him—and also of the relationship we share with each other through him.

Whatever our circumstances of life, nothing can separate us from the love God has for us in Jesus, and the proof of that love is embodied in the bread and in the cup.

The Lord's Supper points ahead to the banquet we will share with Jesus and with each other in the new heavens and the new earth when he comes again to set the whole world right once and for all. This is a meal that looks forward, anticipating that day when our joy in the Lord will be forever be made complete.

For the joy set before him, Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (see Hebrews 12:2).

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus took bread...

- Instructions on screen
- If needed, raise your hand and a mobile server will serve you in your seat
- Serve one section at a time (T.B.D.)