

NORMAL CHRISTIAN LIFE 6

The Joy Set Before Us

“Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking until Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and has set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” – Hebrews 12:1b-2 (NKJV)

“May you be filled with all joy, always thanking the Father. He has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to His people, who live in the light.” – Colossians 1:12 (NKJV)

“All joy, (as distinct from mere pleasure, still more, amusement), emphasizes our pilgrim status; always reminds, beckons, awakens desire. Our best havings are wanting.”¹

Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before Him, and, as His followers, we are called to do likewise. But if we mistake joy for a mere emotion we can conjure up in our own strength, we will quickly fall short. Instead of being filled with unspeakable joy, we will find ourselves smiling through gritted teeth, singing worship songs with our fists clenched by our sides.

Joy is a fruit of the indwelling Spirit – something that can be produced in our lives only by the power of Christ at work in us. However, while He is the one who works in us, the more we cooperate with Him, the more fruit He will produce. So how do we cooperate to experience the joy that the Lord promises can and should be ours? Through a thankful heart, an obedient life, and an eternal perspective.

Our profession of thanksgiving to God, in all circumstances and for all things, transforms our hearts. “The root of joy is gratefulness...It is not joy that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us joyful.”² As we thank Him – despite our emotions – our eyes are lifted off of ourselves and He becomes our focus. We stop examining our own troubles as we gaze upon God, who holds us in the palm of His hand. Our thanksgiving is a declaration that we put our hope in God and believe He is faithful to those who trust in Him. The more we express our trust through thanks to Him, the more we see as He sees and not as the world sees. By praising Him, our worry and fear falls to the wayside as we are lifted out of our circumstances and brought closer to Him. And it is there, in His presence that we experience, “the fullness of joy ...[and] pleasures forevermore,” (Ps. 16:11, NKJV).

But lest we fall into the trap of giving insincere platitudes to God and wearing a thin mask of shallow happiness before the world, we must understand that our thankfulness is not simply expressed through our words, but through our lives. Obedience to the Lord is necessary if we want to experience² the joy of the Lord in our lives. The reason is two-fold:

Pre-Article Questions:

1. Who is the most joyful person you know and why do you think they are so joyful? How has this person’s joy impacted you in a positive way?
2. What are one or two things in your life that bring you great joy and why?

1. Lewis, C.S. Excerpt from a personal letter.

2. Steindl-Rast, David. *Gratefulness: The Heart of Prayer*. New York: Paulist Press/Ramsey, 1984. 204.

First, Jesus, who was fully human, understands our weaknesses. Sometimes, in the throws of difficulty or heartache, we are unable to even think the words ‘thank you,’ much less speak them. To do so would not only be false, it would be to deny experiencing grief, pain, and even anger. We must let these responses and emotions run their course if we are going to experience full healing. Jesus knows this. Author Brennan Manning says, “To be grateful for an unanswered prayer, to give thanks in a state of interior desolation, to trust in the love of God in the face of the marvels, cruel circumstances, obscenities, and commonplaces of life is to whisper a doxology in darkness.”³ And when we are unable to utter the softest whisper of a thank you, our obedience to Him expresses these same, unspoken words.

Secondly, this same obedience expressed – not just in difficult times but in the mundane and often repetitive actions of our daily lives – continues to express our trust in Him, and thereby our thankfulness. Choosing to follow Him when we feel abandoned, choosing to do the right thing when nobody else is, choosing to live a life of integrity even when no one else sees our actions are all ways in which we display our trust. We are following Him with each of these decisions – no matter how small or great. And each step we take after Him is an expression of belief and thanks for that which He has given us.

While our literal, verbal thanksgiving and praise is commanded by God and integral to experiencing the tangible joy of the Lord, living lives of obedience is just as pivotal to being filled with the joy the Spirit offers. And the only way we will daily desire to obey the Lord is if we know the hope of our calling. It was for the joy set before Him that Jesus endured the cross. And so it must be with us.

What is the joy that was set before Him, and thereby us? What is the hope of our calling and inheritance? A Kingdom where God the Father dwells with men. The Eternal One who is both Beginning and End, the Creator who holds all things together in Himself, is going to make His home on Earth with us. Not Earth as we know it now, but a restored Earth – Earth as it was always meant to be. And we will rule and reign over it with Christ, co-heirs with Him in this, His eternal inheritance. This is our inheritance, our hope, and that which has the ability to fill us with all joy in all things. Hudson Taylor, renown Chinese missionary, said “...All throughout the New Testament the coming of the Lord was the great hope of His people, and was always appealed to as the strongest motive for consecration and service, and as the greatest comfort in trial and affliction.”⁴

It was not just for the internal peace that salvation provides for each of us as individuals that Christ endured the cross. He willingly suffered knowing He would inherit an eternal Kingdom. A literal Kingdom that will fill time and space forever, where He will be surrounded by brothers and sisters – His Father’s sons and daughters. Not just followers and disciples, but friends...and a family. And we, who seek to follow Him, are that family. It was for this joy that Jesus endured the cross. And it is the knowledge of such a hope that will fill us with thanksgiving and strengthen us to obey in every circumstance.

As we fill our minds and hearts with this hope, we will experience true joy. Not just a sense of happy feelings and warm fuzzies. But the very joy of God that is so deeply rooted in eternity that joy itself will be our strength.

3. Manning, Brennan. *Ruthless Trust: The Ragamuffin’s Path to God*. New York: Harper One/ HarperCollins Publishers, 2000. 37. 2

4. Taylor, Hudson. *Hudson Taylor; A Retrospect; To China with Love – 17th Edition*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers. 19.

Scripture Questions:

1. Before reading this study, how would you have defined joy? How have you experienced it in your life?
2. Read John 15:10-11 and Hebrews 12:1-2 and discuss.
3. How will 'fixing our eyes on Jesus' enable us to live joyfully, even when we do not sense His presence or feel happy? (Hebrews 12:2)
4. How has God 'enabled us to share in the inheritance that belongs to His people'? Colossians 1:12

Application Questions:

1. What are some areas in your own life that you currently consider trials, hardships, or frustrations that you have not considered or wanted to thank God for?
2. Do you believe it's in God's presence that we can experience true joy and eternal pleasures? Why or why not?
3. What can you do in your own life to more fully realize and understand the tangible and eternal hope we have, in order to experience joy? (John 15:10-11, Hebrews 12:2)
4. How can we walk in joy honestly and share it with others compassionately in the midst of trying and difficult circumstances?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father,

Thank you that Christ endured the cross for the joy set before Him. Thank you that the life you promise us in Christ is one filled with joy. We want to experience your joy in our lives, regardless of our circumstances. Please help us to thank you in all things and give us 'an abiding spirit of gratitude.' Strengthen us to obey you as a sign of our gratefulness and praise. Give us a perspective rooted in our eternal hope, that we might be filled with supernatural joy.

Prayer Partner Assignment:

Memory Verse:

Hebrews 12:1-2, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

In prayer this week, daily thank God for one or two specific difficulties in your life, asking Him to replace your worry, pain, and uncertainty with His joy.

Meet with your prayer partner from this week for a meal and discuss the additional reading together. Talk about the content, what they say about our future hope, and what joy this can give us. Specifically, when might having committed these passages to heart be the most beneficial?

Additional Scripture:

Psalms 30:11-12

Psalms 51:12

Hebrews 12:22-24, 28

Revelation 21:22:5