

TRUTHS THAT TRANSFORM Series
Rejoice In The Lord Always

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

Philippians 4:4

“Joy is the serious business of heaven.”

C.S. Lewis

HOW JOYFUL ARE YOU?

Being a grandparent has been a delightful experience. I’ve enjoyed it more than I ever imagined.

When Sue and I were raising our own 3 children, I think we saw the whole picture of our kids. What I mean is, I knew that they could be silly and joyful. But along with their happy moments, we also experienced the tears from skinned knees, and the fights with their brother or sister. We heard their singing, and at the same time we knew there was homework to be completed, chores to be done, and toys to be picked up. We let them play in the water at bath time, but at the same time knew that we needed to get them out of the tub, dried, in pajamas, teeth brushed and in bed on time for a good night’s sleep or else they’d be cranky the next day.

Now, as a grandparent, I find myself amazed at how much joy our grandkids have. Take Lily, our 2 ½ yr. old granddaughter. Whenever any music is on she cannot stop herself from dancing. Not a graceful, ballet type of dance. No! A hands and feet go everywhere, kind of crazy dance that is just for pure joy. Last week she was bent over at the waist with her arms dangling down moving from one side to the other to the beat of the music. Some time ago her dance move was being crouched down low with just her rear end moving up and down, up and down. It was kind of a toddler’s version of twerking. It’s hilarious to see!

Children delight in the moment. They live in the JOY of each moment. No cares about the future to suck the joy out of what they are experiencing right now.

LIVING JOYLESSLY

How different that is from adults. Somehow in the process of growing up, we focus on the future, instead of enjoying now. Most of our life is spent on what's next: trying to get somewhere, driving someplace, standing in line, waiting for a meeting to end, trying to get a task completed, worrying about something bad that might happen, or being angry about something that did happen. Those are all times when I am going to miss the JOY that is happening right now.

The Bible, however, puts joy in the non-optional category. Joy is a command. Joylessness is a serious sin. It's a sin that religious people in particular commit often.

How many churches emphasize the rules of what people can't do, more than they emphasize the joy of what people who know Jesus CAN do. You've heard the rules: don't dance, don't drink, don't go to movies, don't wear make-up, don't play cards, don't eat meat on Friday, on and on.

I remember as a boy growing up in a Lutheran congregation where worship was considered such serious business that no one was supposed to smile. People would go to communion and receive Jesus' forgiveness and a new life, and yet they'd return to their seats looking down with a pious, somber face. Our faces all looked like we were in pain from having our shoes 3 sizes too small. What a risk it was to look at others and actually smile after receiving communion! It seemed to me as a boy that we had kind of a boring, and gloomy way to worship. I couldn't help getting the impression that God must not like it when we are happy.

Garrison Keilor, the story-teller about Lutherans living in Minnesota, describes Lutherans as people who are stoic, not joyful. He says, "For Lutherans it's always Lent, and every Sunday is like Good Friday."

Why is it that Christianity is declining in America? Could part of it be that we don't represent Christ well by how we live? Non-Christians look at our lives and what they see is that we are often just as busy, just as worried, just as petty, our families and

marriages are as troubled as anyone else's. But on top of that we're guilt ridden, judgmental, and we don't enjoy life. So why should anyone who looks at our lives be compelled to want to become a follower of Jesus? When we live joyless lives, we are lousy witnesses, lousy advertisements for Jesus.

There is a being in the universe who wants you to live in sorrow. But it's not God. Francis de Sales wrote, *"The evil one is pleased with sadness and melancholy because he himself is sad and melancholy, and will be so for all eternity. Hence he desires that everyone should be like himself."*

Joy, you see, is at the heart of God's plan for human beings. The reason for this is worth thinking about for a while: Joy is at the heart of God Himself.

OUR JOYFUL GOD

The joy that we see in the very happiest of children, is just a fraction of the joy that is in the heart of God. God is more joyful than we are! WE are grumpier than God is. Imagine for a moment how the Bible account of God creating the world would read if God approached work and life as unhappy as we often do. It might go like this:

"In the beginning, it was nine o'clock, so God had to go to work. He filled out a requisition to separate light from darkness. He considered making stars to beautify the night, and planets to fill the skies, but thought it sounded like too much work. And besides, thought God, 'That's not my job.' So He decided to knock off early and call it a day. And He looked at what He had done and He said, 'It'll have to do.'

On the second day God separated the waters from the dry land. And He make all the dry land flat, plain, and functional, so that – behold – the whole earth looked like Indiana. He thought about making mountains and valleys and glaciers and jungles and forests, but he decided it wouldn't be worth the effort. And God looked at what He had done that day and said, 'It'll have to do.'

And God made a pigeon to fly in the air, and a carp to swim in the waters, and a cat to creep upon dry ground. And God thought about making millions of other species of all sizes and shapes and

colors, but He couldn't drum up the enthusiasm for any other animals – in fact, He wasn't too crazy about the cat. Besides, it was almost time for the game to start on TV. So God looked at all He had done, and God said, 'It'll have to do.'

And at the end of the week, God was seriously burned out. So He breathed a big sigh of relief and said, 'Thank Me, it's Friday.'"

Of course, Genesis reads nothing like that! Instead, it throbs with JOY. At the end of each day, God looks at what He created and said, "It was good! – Very good!"

On the first day, "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw the light was good." The first day was a JOY day. And God did a crazy joyful dance.

The problem is not that God is an old sour-puss. The problem is not that God is angry and punishing and demanding. He's not! God's a joy-filled God! It is we who have sinned, turned away from being with our fun-loving, joyful God. We've filled our lives with sadness and worry. God is happier than we are! Joy is at the heart of God Himself. And joy is at the heart of God's plan for you!

Jesus came as the Joy-Bringer! The angels announced to the shepherds on the night of Christ's birth, "***Behold I bring you Good News of Great Joy which shall be for all people ... A Savior is born, ... Christ the Lord!***"

Yes, Jesus is known as "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." Yes, Jesus went to the cross, He suffered horribly. He was hated by some people in His lifetime. He is still hated now.

But the suffering and sorrow of Jesus – the anger of God that was heaped on Jesus to pay for of our constant sinning – that sorrow was God's temporary response to our sin and our sinful world. Because of what Jesus has done, that sorrow will be gone forever. Jesus is in the business of restoring joy. Because of what He's done by living and dying for us, He's setting the world right. Everyone who trusts in Him can join Him forever in heaven – be WITH HIM, in His JOY!

See joy is not optional for people who trust in Jesus. But God doesn't want us to have just any kind of joy. Jesus said, "***I have said***

*these things to you so that **MY** joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”* John 15:11

Can you get joy or happiness from our world? Yes, you can. If you buy a new house, earn a big paycheck, or eat a big ice cream sundae, will you have joy. Yes you will. But the problem is: tomorrow that joy or happiness won't be enough. You'll need more. You'll never be satisfied. The joys and pleasures of this world are empty, hollow, they have no meaning, they don't last.

But the kind of joy that only Jesus gives is fulfilling. He offers forgiveness, complete, sweet forgiveness for all the wrong you've done, and for all the good you haven't done. It doesn't matter who you are or where you've been. He knows it all. He died to pay for it all. He forgives it all. Will you just accept Him – and TRUST in Jesus as your forgiver, and the leader of your life?! Let Him GIVE you heaven. He paid your way to heaven (you can't!). Heaven is a place of everlasting joy – being with God Himself!

Knowing that Joy that Jesus gives, satisfies. Knowing that God loves you with a great big love, knowing that He forgives you, knowing that He is with you today to guide and guard you, knowing that He's working for your good to take you to heaven – that's a joy that's deep, and satisfying, and lasting! And no matter what happens in this world, nothing can take that away!

“To miss out on joy is to miss out on the reason for your existence.” Lewis Smedes.

“Joy is the serious business of heaven.” C.S. Lewis

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” *Philippians 4:4*

HOW TO LIVE IN JOY AND GRATITUDE

I believe that when God guided Paul to write the words, **“Rejoice in the Lord always,”** in the Bible, He meant that we are invited to rejoice in every moment of life. You see, every moment of life is a gift from God. Usually it is only people who have been through a serious illness, or come real close to death, or people who have lived long and well, who have this perspective. Life is a gift. Every morning that we can wake up is a good morning to wake up. Every tick of the clock is a gift from God.

So how can people like you and I, LIVE in this kind of joy – not just once in a while, but everyday? Well, strange as it sounds, you will have to work for it. This doesn't sound like it makes sense, but it's true nevertheless: The time has come for us to take joy seriously. You can be a joyful person. With God's help it's really possible. But joyfulness is a learned skill. Your friend can't do it for you; not your parent, not your spouse, not your kids, not your boss – your joy is up to YOU.

People who want to live in joy can do some ...

- **Strategic Celebration.** In the Old Testament there were feast days. They were times of celebration. Holidays when people would gather with those they love, eat, drink, sing, and dance. But these were times of **spiritual** celebration – times for reflecting on the wonderful God who has given us such wonderful gifts. The Amish people are very good at this. At barn-raising, and square dances, they gather together with those they know and love, to eat, and laugh, and dance, and celebrate the simple gifts of life, and the God -- who in love -- gives us all good gifts. Why not plan a holiday, a dinner party, a barbeque to strategically celebrate?
- **Set Aside a Day a Week:** If holidays or social gatherings are too far in between – set aside a specific day of the week. One day a week eat foods you love to eat, listen to music that moves your soul, play a sport that stretches and challenges you, read books that refresh your spirit, wear clothes that make you happy, surround yourself with beauty – and as you do these things, give thanks to God for His wonderful goodness. Think about what a gracious God He is to have thought of all these gifts. Turn your heart toward Him, and praise Him for all of His goodness.
- **Celebrate Today ...** Regardless of Circumstances. The psalm writer said, ***“This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”*** He doesn't say, “YESTERDAY was God's day – how happy I was then.” HE doesn't say, “TOMORROW will be a great day – I'll just endure until then.” NO! “THIS day, with all of it's problems and shortcomings is the day of JOY!”

We can sometimes live with the illusion that joy will come someday when things change. Friends of Mother Teresa said that instead of being overwhelmed by the suffering around her, she would glow with joy as she went about her ministry of mercy. If we don't rejoice today – if we wait until conditions are perfect – we'll never rejoice. **THIS** is the day the Lord has made. **THIS** is a day that you have Jesus' forgiveness. **THIS** is a day that you have the joy of knowing heaven awaits you. **THIS** is the day of joy.

- **Find a Joy Mentor.** Each one of us knows a few people who are joyful. When we are around them, they breathe life into us. There are other people who are not joyful. They are like black holes that suck the joy right out of us. So, find those people who make you joyful. Prize them. Thank them. Most importantly, spend time with them. Spend a lot of time with them. Do it often. And begin to pray that the Holy Spirit will work this gift of joy in you in greater degrees.

- **Unplug to Enjoy Others.** Many people watch TV because they are tired and want to rest their mind and body. But how often have you ever heard someone say to you: "I watched TV last night from the evening new until the late-night talk shows, and I am feeling rejuvenated, renewed, revitalized and refreshed today! What a memorable evening that was! I'm so grateful for the gift of television in my life." Ever heard anyone say that? I haven't.

Or you can change TV for surfing the internet on your phone. Does anybody find social media is invigorating? I doubt it! I see people all the time giving their full attention to their phone screen, but ignoring their children. Friends sit beside each other, not saying a word, but busy texting someone who is not present. Why not set the phone down and actually enjoy the people with you?

How about trying this challenge: Commit to a 1 week, cold-turkey television and texting fast. Unplug for 1 week. Instead, spend the time to get more sleep. Read something. Have a really good conversation. Spend the time enjoying others!

- **View Life From God's Perspective.**

When I was a pastor in Rochester, Minnesota, I remember one particular wedding on a hot and humid August day. There was no air conditioning. It was stifling hot. The bride and groom were standing in front of me. Behind them were about 6 bridesmaids and grooms men standing up in front. In the heat the bridesmaids started to faint. First one; then another; then I think 4 of them altogether. As each one started to wobble, a groomsman or the parents would step up and quietly lead the fainting bridesmaid off somewhere to sit down. The bride and groom weren't aware of what was going on behind them, while most of their wedding party and most of their family members had to leave to recover.

Finally came the time for the bride and groom to light the unity candle. As they turned around to face the congregation, they were shocked. Most of their family wasn't there. Shaken a little bit, they walked over to the candle-stand, lighted the unity, and turned to walk back to the center. But in her shock, the bride didn't notice that the long train of her dress got tangled on the base of this candle-stand. As she walked away, the congregation let out a collective gasp as three lighted candles, sitting on top of this tall candle-stand, was sliding along, following the bride, as the train on her wedding dress pulled the whole thing behind her. Then the bride turned, and the lighted candles on the stand were like a water skier behind a speed boat, when a boat turns and the skier picks up speed. Only they weren't headed for smooth calm water, the lighted candles and the stand were headed toward the top of three steps down towards the people, kind of like a water skier going over a ramp jump about to fly through the air. Quickly, the best man finally grabbed the sliding candle stand and stopped the disaster about to take place.

In the end, in spite of all the fainting and near disaster in that wedding, the service ended with a loud applause. The bride got her husband, and the groom got his wife, they kissed passionately, and God blessed their marriage. It ended joyfully.

In your own life, how is it possible to be a joy-filled person when things don't often go as planned, there is disaster that comes your way, and we live in a pain-filled world? View life from God's perspective. Remember how this story ends. Look at the promise that comes right near the very end of the Bible:

Let us rejoice and exult

And give Him glory,

For the marriage of the Lamb has come,

And His bride has made herself ready. Revelation 19:7

Heaven's groom (Jesus), gets His bride (which is us, His people, those who love and trust in Him, the Church).

The joy that is in store for God's people is so great that the only image that fits is the joy between a bride and a groom on their wedding day. Then, on that last day, God will dance with His people. Then the joy will be undiminished and never interrupted.

Then, at that wedding feast, ...

"[God] will dwell with them as their God;

they will be His peoples,

and God Himself will be with them;

He will wipe every tear from their eyes.

There will be no more death,

Or mourning, or crying, or pain...." Revelation 21:3-4

How can you live in joy today, even with pain and sorrow in your life? Just remember God's perspective. There is coming a day, a great day of rejoicing, wedding feast, a dancing day that will never end.

Amen.