

JOY

I must admit that the subject of this week's lesson came to me as a complete surprise. I was reflecting on the immanent Trinity, that is, the internal relationships and operations of the Persons of the Godhead, how God is *in Himself*, when suddenly this word, joy, entered my mind. We often, correctly, speak of love as what binds together the three Persons of the Trinity. But now I'm suggesting that there's something else, related to love, that's ineffable and shared between the Persons, and that's joy. The Persons of the Trinity have and experience infinitely great joy knowing each other, being with each other, loving each other, having *shalom* with each other. Their relationship is supremely and eternally joyous.

The great American theologian Jonathan Edwards wrote about this, except that instead of joy, he used the word "happiness." There is certainly overlap between the meanings of these two words. But perhaps now, three centuries later, a distinction exists being happy and being joyful. Happiness is almost always due to something external to the person, winning a lottery, for example, or getting a good grade on an exam, or receiving a terrific birthday gift. Most people feel happy when they're pleased or glad about something or other. And it's transient. Joy, however, can be experienced due to *or in spite of* circumstances. Richard Wurmbrand, for example, says he was filled with joy while in a filthy, brutal, hate-filled prison because he knew he was in God's will. Joy is the experience or state or condition of being delighted, and it's usually a choice we deliberately make.

There's also some overlap between experiencing love and joy and the experience of peace and joy. Joy, love and peace are gifts to us by the indwelling Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22), because they exist eternally to infinite degree in the Persons of the Godhead. They are God's attributes, features of His perfect Person. The experience of these gifts makes us god-like.

And then the further thought entered my mind that the grand purpose of salvation is to bring us, human creatures, into the joy of the Persons of the Trinity. In fact, the creation blessing that was initially intended but forfeited by the Fall (in Genesis 3) may be that God will share with us His ineffable joy. Thus, when we're glorified, we'll personally experience for an eternity the deep joy that pervades the Godhead. God doesn't merely call us into a relationship with Himself, He calls us into an intensely joy-filled relationship with Himself. We sing, "There is joy in serving Jesus," and that's really true; believers immersed in ministry experience it all the time. But immensely greater is this, There is joy being with Jesus, the risen, exalted Jesus. No greater blessing than this is conceivable.

The Scriptures may anticipate this blessing. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew noun *simḥa* ("joy," or "delight") or its related verb ("to be filled with joy," or "to rejoice") occur a total of 250 times. (The verb "to rejoice" includes both the feeling of joy and the outward expression of it.) Let's look at some of these uses in the Hebrew Scriptures:

"At your times of rejoicing – your appointed feasts and New Moon festivals – you are to sound the trumpets over your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings..." (Numbers 10:10. Joy is associated with Israel's festivals, which were given to anticipate Christ. In a proleptic sense, then, the joy was really either directed at or because of experiencing Christ.

"You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound" (Ps 4:7). David had joy in knowing the Lord, and that joy came from the Lord. And this: **"You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever"** (Ps 30:11-12). David had joy at being delivered by the Lord, at experiencing His mercy and healing. And it's associated with giving thanks.

"Surely you have granted him [in context, this is King David, but perhaps it's referring also to the future Messiah/King] eternal blessings and made him rejoice with the joy of your presence" (Ps 21:6). David was filled with joy simply because God was present in his life; *joy is being in God's presence*. If the referent is to Christ, then He has the grant to bestow to His followers.

"There is a river whose streams make joyful the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells" (Ps 46:4). In the midst of horrible turmoil, war and desolation, *because the Lord is present*, His people rejoice.

"I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord'" (Ps 122:1). David rejoiced at the thought of going to the Tabernacle to be in the presence of God.

"You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder" (Isaiah 9:3). There will be very great joy in Israel in the future at the coming of the Lord. **"And you will sing as on the night you celebrate a holy festival; your hearts will rejoice as when people go up with flutes to the mountain of the Lord, to the Rock of Israel"** (Is 30:29). Again, there will be great joy at the future Day of the Lord, at the appearance of the Lord to establish His kingdom and to save Israel. **"Rejoice with Jerusalem and be filled with joy for her, all you who love her; rejoice greatly**

with her, all you who mourn over her” (Is 66:10). Again, at the future coming of the Lord to save Israel, there will be great joy and rejoicing. The joy is for their deliverance, but inseparable is the joy at the presence of their God who saves them and is with them.

“The Lord will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord. Joy and rejoicing will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing...The ransomed of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Rejoicing and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away” (Is 51:3, 11). The prophet is overwhelmed with how much joy there will be in the future (5x in these 2 verses), and notice that the joy of the redeemed people will be everlasting. In many prophetic verses, the joy that’s to be experienced is *in the future* (see Jeremiah 31:13 also).

“When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight, for I bear your name” (Jer 15:16), the prophet experienced joy at receiving God’s Word. An encounter with God’s Word is an encounter with God Himself. Thus there’s joy. Notice that the prophet identifies with God, saying, “I bear your name.” God identifies with His Word, and we identify with God.

In the New Testament, the Greek noun for “joy” occurs almost 60 times, and the verbs that are translated as “to rejoice” occur about 100 times. Here are some examples of the use of “joy” or “to rejoice” in the New Testament:

“...and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed” (Mttw 2:9-10). The N.T. begins its uses of joy in two ways: By showing how the Magi were overwhelmed with joy. That’s because Jesus is the source of great joy for those who find Him. And Mary saying, in Luke 1:46-47, **“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...”** because just thinking about God and what He does and will do for us in the person of Christ Jesus gives joy.

“Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy” (John 16:22). Jesus here promises His disciples that after the resurrection, they will be filled with joy because He will be with them again. Their relationship, being together, was one of great joy.

“We write this [the unity among believers and with God] to make our joy complete” (1 John 1:4). Joy is the essence of the relationships that salvation makes possible among all believers together with the Persons of the Trinity.

“Though you have not seen him, you love him...you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:8-9). Salvation by faith in Christ results in or is associated with both love and intense joy. Great joy is experienced by being in relationship to Christ.

“Jesus...who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2). Joy has a future element, it’s something God has promised we will experience, as it was even for Jesus. We’re to emulate Christ, ignoring whatever suffering, mocking, or hardship we experience here because of our Christian identity, because joy awaits us in heaven. Hebrews 10:34 argues similarly, except that confiscation of property is in view. 1 Peter 4:13 encourages us to be overjoyed at experiencing suffering because of Christ. Again, **“...in all our troubles, my joy knows no bounds”** (2 Corinth 7:4). Paul experienced great hardships serving Christ, yet in spite of dreadful circumstances, he had great joy. Biblical joy derives from a relationship; it’s not based on the circumstances of life. In 2 Corinth 8:2, Paul says essentially the same thing: in spite of severe hardship and poverty, the Macedonian church had deep joy. Although suffering in prison, Paul nevertheless experienced great joy, which is why he appealed to the Philippians to rejoice also (see 4:4).

“You became imitators of us [Paul and his team] and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message [the Gospel] with the joy given by the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess 1:6). Biblical joy is a gift of the Spirit, not something we generate in ourselves.

“How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?” (1 Thess 3:9). Paul rejoices at the faith of the Thessalonians, but he understands the reason for joy in the first place is *being in God’s presence*.

“...that you would all share my joy” (2 Corinth 2:3). Paul’s great desire was for others to experience the joy that he had by knowing, loving, and serving Christ Jesus. It should be ours as well.

From this brief survey, we see that exceedingly great joy is something that God desires for His beloved humanity. It comes from God Himself, who is the author or source of joy. The intense joy that fills heaven because of God’s presence and sovereignty (Rev 19:7) apparently will be imparted to us in the future, when we’re there with Him; but Scripture isn’t explicit about this. Scripture is tantalizing regarding the future, neither totally silent nor unambiguous. But the joy of the Godhead is imparted to us now by the indwelling Spirit, so that we can experience it as we yield to the Spirit and as we serve Christ. (Even Jesus’ joy came from the empowering Holy Spirit; see Luke 10:21.) We should be overflowing with joy, now, at the very thought of what awaits us when we’re with God. May this thought transform our thinking and how we spend our lives. I should hope, by the way, that we would want others to experience this joy too.