

"Joy of the Lord"

By Chris Ulrich

Sunday, June 22nd, 2014

If you could bow your heads with me. Lord, we thank You, God, for the blessings You've poured out already this morning in worship time, the music, God, and we thank You, God, for blessing our lives as abundantly as You have, God. We pray, Lord, that You would bless our future as well, God. We look forward to what You have in store for us, God. I pray that I would get out of the way of Your message, God. We pray that You'd rain down and give us the words that we need, God; that You would pour out Your blessings, God. We pray that You would give to us richly, God. We thank You for being there for us, God. We thank You, God, for giving us the breath of life. We just want to ask these things in Your name, Jesus. Amen.

So, how many remember this past winter? I'm glad that everybody who didn't raise their hand, doesn't remember it. Today is the first day of summer, so thank God for that. Now, I've got to say, I've got to say, I know Parrish Lee had stated last fall that he had prayed for an extremely cold winter, so that it would kill off any of the insects or whatever other things—mosquitoes... So, if there's anybody you want to question about how it was this past winter, Parrish is sitting right here in the front row. That was a shout-out.

So, this month has been Sound Doctrine. You don't have to turn to it, but I'm going to read:

Titus 2:1 But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine:

I know it has been mentioned, but it bears repeating that the theme of Sound Doctrine has been by direction from our general pastor, Pastor Paine, in Norfolk, VA. We're actually going to have sound doctrine as our theme a couple times this year; it's an important topic because it keeps us on our spiritual toes. It also is important because we have to understand that in 1 Corinthians 1 it talks about how we all speak the same thing doctrinally and that there be no divisions among us. We're all individuals, that's true, but as far as that applies to doctrine, it is important that people get the same responses. I'm not talking about on gray areas, and I'm not talking about opinions. I am talking about if somebody asks us about a different topic: If they ask us about holiness; if they ask us about the Old Testament; if they ask us about salvation. It's something that we have to be in one mind and one accord.

I know that the first message this month, Parrish, you had given, on "Prayer," and it's definitely a topic that will never get old unless we allow it. I know you shared something about a cousin that you had, shortly after you got baptized, that had been shot and he had been in intensive care, and I remember you just sharing about that people banded together, the Christians banded together, and prayed diligently, and there was a healing taking place that even the doctors couldn't deny. It was one of those things where it was like, once that acknowledgement was known, Parrish, I remember you sharing that it just seemed like people just kind of sat back and said, "Well, I've gone as far as I'm going to go." It just seemed like at that moment that the healing stalled. It was one of those things where it just made me understand that we need to pray it through. I mean, it may seem, at times, like, "Okay, I've gone as far as I can possibly go." It's like, you look at the example in the Old Testament of the Children of Israel; they were standing there at the edge of the Red Sea, with the Egyptians in pursuit, if they had just given up, then forgot it, they would have been slaughtered. But, God, He told Moses to put forth his staff, and God parted the waters. That's one of those miracles that, it's worth remembering; it's worth rehearsing; it's worth knowing that it's applicable to us, today. This isn't

something where it's like, we serve an Old Testament God, or a God of yesteryear. It is something that God is alive and well, and, even though the media likes to take and to show prayer as a weakness. Or, it likes to depict it as something that weak-minded people use, or it's something that they try to make mockery of. Well, I'm here to say that God is not mocked, but whatsoever a man soweth, that he will also reap (Galatians 6:7).

Bob Heirtzler, you preached the message two weeks ago about, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God" and I think that helped us to understand that, if we put God first, all these things will be added unto us. I remember that, at the Bible study a couple of days before that, he just asked around, of everybody that was in attendance, "What are those things that you seek God first on?" You got a lot of answers, and you actually used people's names, and their answers. It was something that was personal, and, because of that, it is powerful, because it is something that is brought into remembrance.

Last week we celebrated Father's Day and I've got to say that I appreciate Malcolm and Kirk and Pete sharing their hearts. I know that not everybody came out, but I would like to say thank you to those who supportive, those who were in attendance. Malcolm, I've got to say that I appreciate what you said about people that are honorary fathers, because not everybody is. It's one of those things where it's like, you know that there are people that teach the children. It's one of those things where it's like, you'd better be able to teach them right. I mean, we can't just—and that's what Sound Doctrine is all about.

Nehemiah 8:10 *Then he said unto them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our LORD: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the LORD is your strength.*

I know that many of us here have heard this verse many times before but I suppose that some might be hearing it for the first time. But I want to backtrack a little and, not try to explain the entire history of the book of Nehemiah, but just understand that is you look at the first chapter, at that time, the Israelites were in distress. I mean, they were under siege; the wall of Jerusalem had been broken down, and, you know what? these things were the result of their own transgressions. That was one of Nehemiah's confessions to God and asking for forgiveness. But, when they did, and when they banded together, their circumstances improved. The wall was rebuilt, and restored, even though there was great opposition. So, it wasn't as though everything was a walk in the park for them. But, this verse that says that the joy of the Lord is your strength resonates just as much today as it did back then, if we'll allow it. We have to look at it like, "Okay, is this something that I want?"

The title of today message is "The Joy of the Lord," and my first point is about having joy in the midst of tribulation. That's really one of the paradoxes of Christianity: that such a thing is even possible. Think about it for a moment: When you're having distress, or turmoil, or hardship, how is it possible? You know what? I know that different people have suffered tragedies—Tennessee, our heart goes out to you, I've got to say that right now. Malcolm, you had mentioned that last week, and I appreciate that. It's something that, it's heart-wrenching. I don't think there's any words that can express it, and we can't get into other people and live their life for them. But, I believe that to be supportive of people does make a difference. I know those words of compassion—Parrish, you shared how that Cedric had lost his sister, and Jim Bailey had lost his mom. It's one of those things that, we realize that this life isn't designed to last forever, but sometimes there's misfortunes, and there's tragedies that happen unexpectedly, and the Bible talks about weep with them that weep(Romans 12:15), rejoice with them that rejoice. These are the kind of things that form the backbone of Christianity. Now, I'm going to say that having this joy in tribulation, that doesn't mean we don't have any emotion at all. In fact, I suggest that, as Christians, we're going to feel the full spectrum of emotions as much as anyone else. The difference is we don't let our emotions dictate our decisions and derail us from continuing in the faith.

That is a big difference, because we're going to get into the differences between joy and happiness, and I get that some people might confuse the two, and think, "Well, they're the same, right? It's just a word, right?" We're going to discuss that, too, but...

1 Peter 1:1-8 *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ: Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory:*

We're going to have some trials of our faith whether we like it or not. Peter talked about the trial of our faith and the heaviness of manifold temptations, and they that live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecutions (2 Timothy 3:12). There's enough endurance that we understand that it's not going to be all, like I said, a walk in the park. And you know what? I really don't like it. And I'm pretty sure that none of us here really likes it very much either. But when we look at what's stake we realize that a lot of the joy we have derives from just the hope that eventually it will get better. I know a couple of us have talked about that this past week. It might not get better today, might not get better tomorrow, and it might not get better next week, but it's bound to get better. That doesn't even necessarily mean that it's going to get better in this life. I'd like to think that it will, but I think we all hold out hope that, "You know what? I'd like to see things improve." I'd like to see us a group, us as a church, us as a state, us as a country, that the general well-being would improve, but it might not. That's the challenge right there, because we have to look at it more long term. We've got to look at the things that are unseen. The Bible talks about lay not your treasures upon the earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, but lay up treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19). It's one of those things where it's like, as you go through life, you accumulate some stuff, I get it, we all have some personal mementoes, or some things that have sentimental value to us, but the goal is not to try to accumulate massive amounts of possessions. I've shared this before, there was a movie, years and years ago—actually, it was from the forties, but, I saw it, not in the forties—it was called, "Citizen Kane." I suppose some people—how many have ever seen Citizen Kane? It's a classic—Orson Welles, for anybody who knows who he was—but, what it was, it was about this person who had gone through life, and they had accumulated huge, huge amounts of wealth, and possessions, and houses and real estate, and whatever else was at the time... I think the timeframe was the early nineteen hundreds. But, at the very end—they started out at the very beginning, with what he aid, which was, "Rosebud." I'm not going to tell exactly what that was, for anybody who's never seen it, who wants to see it, but I am going to say this: It had nothing to do with his possessions, it had to do with , when he was a child, something that meant a lot to him. But we've got to look at our faith the same way—how much does it really mean to us? How much does holding on to the faith really mean to me, personally? Having the joy in the midst of tribulations—and, believe me, I'm not trying to make light of anyone's sufferings or tragedies, including my own. It will keep us on the straight and narrow path. It's the kind of thing where it's like, it may seem pretty hopeless, like you mentioned, Rebecca, in your testimony, about some of the struggles, and some of the hardships—I think sometimes, as Christians, we almost get calloused, just thinking, "It's going to be just that? It's just going to be

burdens?" That's not the case. Christ said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart, For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:29-30) To me—and I have to share this—I remember just driving—me and a friend were visiting (I think it was my grandmother in Delaware)—this was shortly after I got baptized. We were just driving up the road, and we've all seen religious billboards, but I remember seeing one in lower Delaware (they call it slower Delaware, anybody that knows that area) but I remember seeing off to the side, it just said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Sometimes you need a visual to get something to really stick in our mind. It's one of those things where I look back, and it's like, I knew that was the path where I wanted to go. I knew that was the life that I wanted. I mean, I had tried a lot of other things. I mean, I get that we all try something. Some cases, you know, there are kids that are raised in the faith—and I know those that are young that are here today, you're seeing, you're at a point where you're at a crossroads a lot of times of, "What do I want to do with my life? What do I want to choose to do?" That segues into my next point, which is:

The second point is that joy is an option. That might seem strange because I think that we would all think that joy is something that everybody wants. But we really can't get into everybody else's mind to know for sure. I know there's a lot of depression, sadness, even suicidal tendencies. I know that in the early '90's, there was a scene like a Goth scene or a Grunge scene, and I'm just thinking, whether we can understand it or not, I'm looking at it like, my goal is not to try to be as unhappy as possible or—and you know what I think? I don't even want to get this to where it's just my opinion, but, Biblically-based, we have to look at it like, "Do I want joy, or do I want to be unhappy? Do I want to be depressed? Do I want—?" and, again, there's going to be enough things that are going to happen to us in this life, there are going to be challenges. So, it's not a matter of looking at it like—there are going to be obstacles. Where are people going to find joy? I think a lot of us know that there's a lot of different places out there where we could seek for it. We could think, "Well, I'm going to get it from this, or I'm going to get it from that, or I'm going to get it from this career, or this movie, or this relationship... I'm not going to try to spend half the day trying to figure out, "Okay, what is it that everybody chooses or esteems..." We see so many who are unwilling to submit themselves under the mighty hand of God. When that happens, we have to look at it like, okay, my question right now (and I'm not asking anyone to raise their hand), "How many want to have joy?" It's a pretty easy question with a pretty easy answer, but are we willing to do what it takes to get there? I'm sure we're all pretty convinced, here, that it all comes from God. But I'm suggesting that we can't really have it unless we know God in the fullness of His plan of salvation. I'm talking about the plan of salvation. Now that is one of those things where it's like, again, I believe that there are a lot of happy people out there. I'm not trying to make it sound like it's too morbid, like it's noting but problems. I believe that there are a lot of happy people outside of God. That's the difference, though, having the joy or having just happiness. It comes down to, when you peel back the layers, and you start asking, and seeing that there's a lot of uncertainty about where they're eventually going. That has to be the big difference. Looking at it like, okay, I could be happy that it's been a nice Spring; I could be happy that Winter is over, or that my team won the championship, or whatever the case may be—that I got a good meal. But, that's only going to last a short while. But then we have to look at it like, okay, something that's more long-term, and it's something that—it's not a matter of looking at it like, we're trying to shame anybody into, "Okay, if you don't have Christ, if you don't know Christ, then you're not going to have joy. If somebody firmly believes that they do—and we're not even trying to say, "Oh, you've got to prove it; you've got to prove it to me." Nobody's going to answer to us; everybody's got too answer to God. It's a matter of looking at it like, I know that we believe that, ultimately, that joy does come from God. And it does come from being born again, and it does come from enduring in the faith. Yes, again, we're going to go through some hard times, but we're going to be happy, too, and there's nothing wrong with that, but do we still have the joy of God to keep us going?

I'd like to say one last thing on this point of the joy of God being an option. Personally, I'm thankful that God gives us a life to enjoy and there's a lot of things that I feel like I do have that, and I feel that a lot of us here do. Again, it's not a matter of—I know God's good to us, but, to make it more personal, I know God's been good to me. But I want to ask a question, and I've asked this before, because it's a matter of coming to grips with this thing called Christianity: "Do you like being a Christian?" I suppose that there's times where we don't always like it, but I'm thankful for it. It gets me through those times where it's like, on the outside, before I knew God, there's those times where there are lulls in the action, or they call them, "down time." It was just searching, and it was like that uncertainty that was just deep down within, and it was like, you don't know where you're eventually going to end up, or, if I don't know whether I'm right with God. I would say, to answer that question, I like being a Christian. I like the fellowship; I like the friendship. I like knowing that I don't have to look behind me and think, "Oh, that guy's coming after me because I did something to him, or I did him wrong." We're going to offend people at times; we're going to say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing, and it's a matter of apologizing and getting on with that. I'm not talking about such a grievous matter that—I mean, even if something like that does happen... We'll look at the example of King David. I mean, could it have gotten any worse than that? For those of you who don't know, he committed adultery, then he had the man whose wife he had committed adultery with murdered, then he lied about it, but, you know what? because of his repentance, God forgave him. It's not a matter of looking at it like, "Oh, well, if he can do it, so can I," or, "Well, I can get away with it..." The goal is not—he suffered for the rest of his life. He was still in God's grace, but there was wars within his own household, there were wars that he had to fight, and there were things that he had to go through that he wouldn't have had to go through, just looking at it Biblically speaking. I believe that God puts people on our path, on this journey of our life that will encourage us and strengthen us; many of those people are right here in this room. I think that's part of what—just having joy as an option—when we choose that, then it does allow us to keep going.

Isaiah 61 *The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified. And they shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the waste cities, the desolations of many generations. And strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, and the sons of the alien shall be your plowmen and your vinedressers. But ye shall be named the Priests of the LORD: Men shall call you the Ministers of our God: ye shall eat the riches of the Gentiles, and in their glory shall ye boast yourselves. For your shame ye shall have double; and for confusion they shall rejoice in their portion: therefore in their land they shall possess the double: everlasting joy shall be unto them. For I the LORD love judgment, I hate robbery for burnt offering; and I will direct their work in truth, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. And their seed shall be known among the Gentiles, and their offspring among the people: all that see them shall acknowledge them, that they are the seed which the LORD hath blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels. For as the earth bringeth forth her bud, and as the garden causeth the things that are sown in it to spring forth; so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations.*

My last point today, and I believe it's the most important one, as far as joy, is that we have to understand that the joy of God isn't about an extreme form of behavior. I want to expound on that a little, because what I mean by that is there's going to be those that are boisterous, a little bit louder, a little bit more rambunctious. There's going to be those that are going to be quiet, more subdued, more withdrawn... We need to be respectful of each other—we weren't all raised the same way, we don't all have the same influences, and we don't have all the same likes and dislikes. If there is a common ground, it's that we love God, and we do have a common goal. We have to look at it like, you know what? I'm not talking about sitting around, sulking, and ignoring people, that's not way that people are going to see the joy of God. But on the other end of the scale, we have to have enough balance that people can understand when they're asking us questions and we can answer them sensibly, logically, and Biblically so that they can understand. That was one of the big differences when I first came here and we got into Bible studies, and it was just a matter of connecting the different points and understanding, okay, so that's what it takes. That's what pastorship is about. That's what humility is about. That's what salvation is about. I mean, we've got to look at it like—I know that the prayer meeting that we had, and Mike and Greg, you guys definitely described it well, I would say that it was like a rushing mighty wind. And I've got to say, I'm on that end that's a little bit more subdued, and a little more laid back, I guess you could say, but I was enjoying myself. I'm not talking about, like, it's the kind of thing where it's like, the Bible says let everything be done decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40), so it has to be a matter of respect, both ways, so that it's like, if somebody wants to be a little louder, that's fine. Our founding pastor's wife, Sister Hazel Davis, she's—I believe she just turned eighty—but she's always been pretty quiet, pretty subdued. I would say that still water flows deep. It's one of those things where I would never question, "Oh, yeah, she's not—she's not..." You know what I mean? Think about this, too, and it's not a matter of trying to talk anybody into being one way or the other, like, "Okay, if you're loud, you need to tone it down, but, if you're quiet, you need to amp it up." That's not, like I said, there has to be appreciation, too. There has to be respect, like, you know what? that's what makes it beautiful. You see the different backgrounds in different people, and, like I said before, it's an education. I mean, you see how people were raised, and you see how God drew them, or God called them, and it's great! I mean, it's really something where it's like you can see how God has used this ministry in so many different ways that I would say I've never seen elsewhere. I'm not looking at it like—again, it's not a matter of like, I'm trying to convince you to stay, or I'm trying to convince you to do anything. It's simply a matter of looking at it like, today's message is about the joy of the Lord. It is sound doctrine. It is something that we have to look at it like, you know, knowing whether we've got it is a good barometer of where we're at spiritually. If we don't have it, we can still get it, and if we do have it, we can still keep it. So, it's not a matter of looking at it like, "Well, I need to act like this person, or act like that person..." How about, just appreciate that person for who they are, what they do, how they conduct themselves? Again, I realize that there's boundaries. Again, the Bible says, "Let all things be done decently and in order." I'm closing with this thought, and then I'm going to read from Psalm 30. It doesn't matter what kind of background you have or whether you had a pleasant upbringing or not. It doesn't matter if your family agrees with your decision to live for the Lord or not. Whether you're young or old, rich or poor, married or single, widow or widower; the joy of the Lord is truly for everyone. Joy really only comes from God.

Psalm 30:1-5 *I will extol thee, O LORD; for thou hast lifted me up, and hast not made my foes to rejoice over me. O LORD my God, I cried unto thee, and thou hast healed me. O LORD, thou hast brought up my soul from the grave: thou hast kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit. Sing unto the LORD, O ye saints of his, and give thanks at the remembrance of his holiness. For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.*

That's a lot like life. There are times when we go through things, and hardships, and tragedies, and it just seems sometimes like it's never going to end, or it seems like we just don't see that light at the end of the tunnel. But we have to see that light at the end of the tunnel. God has it there for us. I know Motel 6 has their slogan, "We'll keep the light on for you." God keeps the light on for us. He's always there. It's one of those things that we can always rely on. I thank you for your time this morning, and God bless.

