

BIBLICAL JOY

Danny Linden

Everyone wants to be happy. It is probably the number one goal of humanity - if I can just achieve my dreams, I will be blissfully happy for the rest of my days. What does joy look like in the Bible?

BIBLICAL JOY IS NOT DEPENDENT ON OUR CIRCUMSTANCES. Many people mistakenly believe that they can't be happy unless good things are happening to them. It seems easier to be happy when there is more pleasure, more money, more power, more fame, and more freedom. Yet, there are examples all around us of people with plenty of these things who nevertheless are miserable; and on the contrary, there are many who apparently lack the necessary ingredients for happiness but are full of joy anyway.

In John 15:1-11, Jesus uses the image of the vine and the branches to illustrate the connection between Jesus and His disciples. We must "abide" in Him to receive life-giving spiritual nourishment. At the end of the passage, He says, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11). True joy comes from Jesus, not from our circumstances. If I abide in Jesus, I will be happy, regardless of what is going on around me.

JOY REQUIRES GRATITUDE. As Paul concludes his first letter to the Thessalonians, he connects joy and gratitude together: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thess. 5:16-18). How can we be happy if we don't appreciate God's rich blessings? Or, even worse, what if we are complaining that God hasn't done enough for us and that we are owed more?

We do have much to be thankful for. We can go down the list of physical blessings that we have been given. Even if your life is approaching the loss of Job, you can still thank God for many things. I know this to be true because everything we have comes from His hand. We are owed nothing and create nothing by our power, yet we have much. Who else could be thanked but God?

Our spiritual blessings are even greater. Peter worded it this way: "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire" (2 Pet. 1:3-4). It is almost unfathomable that we can be transformed from a state of guilt and evil to a people who partake in the divine nature. We could never make such a thing happen on our own and we struggle to even understand the full extent of what we have been given! Every day we grow in the knowledge of God and so we experience life and godliness in deeper, richer ways than before.

GOD WANTS US TO SERVE HIM WITH JOY. Sometimes the Law of Moses is mischaracterized as a covenant of obedience but that does not engage the heart and mind. Nothing could be further from the truth. God did expect Israel to obey Him, but it was also considered an offense to not do so joyfully. "Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and lacking everything. And he will put a yoke of iron on your neck until he has destroyed you" (Deut. 28:47-48).

In truth, God has always commanded His people to obey Him in truth and in spirit. His covenants with man require submission of body, mind, heart, and soul. Our obedience should be eager and joyful, and when we understand what He has done for us and how His commandments benefit us, that should be easy to accomplish.

SORROW DOES NOT NEGATE JOY. Because we often relegate joy to a simple emotion, we sometimes believe that it is not good for us to experience sorrow or that our grief is a spiritual failure. Actually, God recognizes that sorrow is a part of life (Eccl. 3:4), but He also leads us to grieve differently than sinners do. We have a totally different understanding of grief! In regards to the death of loved ones, Paul said, "But we do not want you to be uninformed,

brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep" (1 Thess. 4:13-14). To a worldly person, death brings no comfort or joy; to the Christian, there is God-given hope in the midst of the darkness.

The rest of our sorrows function in a similar way. Because we have hope in the future, we are able to contextualize our grief and to focus on the hope we have in God. If nothing else, we are able to look forward to a day when our sorrows are taken away in the joy of heaven. Biblical joy is not rooted in pleasure or good experiences. It is part of serving God and a blessing that we are given through our fellowship with Him.