

Joy

“...These things I speak in the world so that they may have My joy made full in themselves,”
John 17:13.

We've missed it! We've missed so very much. How will we ever return to a right mind now? We are too far gone and there is nothing so dogmatic as experience. It is often said in debate and philosophy that whoever frames the argument, wins. Perhaps I can frame this argument now and communicate a world shaping truth to you. I tell you, something criminal has taken place among us. There is such joy in Christ. A despicable vandal has surely bewitched us, and most especially in the churches. He has switched all the price tags on the shelves of life. The things that should be valued most he has now labeled cheap, and the junk foods are now the most valuable. Many in our day now agree with the new prices by experience.

Learning what Christ meant about His joy comes with learning of Him in sound theology from the Bible. Like a marriage, the love and fidelity created in this lifetime process becomes only more profound with time. Christians do not have faith *in faith*. Christ is *not* an ethic, a system or an ideal. You can't have dialogue with any of those things. God is relational. Why He would ever want to be relational with us is a mystery I cannot yet fathom, but nonetheless He does. He loves it. God loves prayer, praise, and adoration. He just loves it. He delights in righteousness and beautifies His children who strive and love to live holy. To know Christ and fellowship with Him is the source of priceless joy. I wonder how many of us would experientially attest to the priceless price tag.

The other day I was reading a magazine to kill some time. It was a hot rod magazine. I saw a new Lamborghini model recently produced worth just a shade under \$400,000.00. Really it was an ugly car, but hey, it was a Lamborghini. I remembered in that moment how much I used to want to become a billionaire. I wanted it all *and* a bag of potato chips (some of you will get that reference). I esteemed the prestige of wealth so much that I developed sleep apnea for a season in the fantasies of all that I would do with the money. Truly, I was the most selfish man alive. That was many years ago. Later that same day I was alone in my square wooden box here in Afghanistan in prayer and preparation for a sermon message, and I was momentarily engulfed in praise. I lifted my hands with slight tears and sang to my God with an absolutely inexpressible joy singing just about who He was...and marveling that I knew Him. I know God! There was a song playing and I was singing. These moments don't come all that often, but oh how precious they are when they do. I cannot express that joy in words so I won't try except to say that I feel that the whole of creation could have stopped what it was doing, looked to me in that moment and said, "Ahh, that's why He made them." Nothing in creation praises God like a new creation. As I write this letter, I can't help but put the Lamborghini next to my life in Christ. The car represents to me all that the world has to offer. I used to want the Lamborghini Countach. The

world would put barely a 10 cent price tag on the worship (if it makes me happy and doesn't offend anyone) and a 400K tag on the car. I feel that I'd be close to suicide today if I had all that I once wanted and none of Christ! Jeremiah spoke for the Lord one time and said: "Thus says the LORD: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glorifies glory in this, that he understands and knows Me..." Jeremiah 9:23-24a. Amen to that, Jerry. Amen to that.

How can any MTV laden, instant pudding, Hollywood adoring, "I'm gonna get mine," lustful, selfish American ever esteem the gospel's riches over materialism? Must we forsake our culture, put on sackcloth and ashes and pursue Anthony in the deserts? Some would say yes. I don't believe so. So what's the remedy for a culture blinded by Satan's riches? I suppose it's the same as it always was really— we must only see the Lord. One moment in faith and the following parable is our story: "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it," Matthew 13:45-46. I'm reminded of Christian at the start of *The Pilgrim's Progress* who left everything, even his family, upon hearing the warning to flee the city. Christians follow Jesus joyously when found by Him. This happens and we see, confess and forsake our sins to turn to Him. When a man sees Him through the words and preaching of the Bible, the rest will take care of itself. Now don't get me wrong, I'm still a product of my time. I have an I-telephone, a laptop, and I feel that a microwave is a bare necessity of life. Sometimes I find myself impatiently whining because a file hasn't yet opened on my computer this whole minute. But I know something some don't. I've seen where the vandal has attempted to defraud me, and am no longer ignorant to his devices. Colossians 2:8. I see that it is a miserable reality when one's life consists in the things he owns or in the vain pursuit of stuff. In the vain pursuit of the things that only expire with the using. Understanding this shows me to be a product of grace. I pursue Christ violently. I esteem Christ above all things. Pursuing Him right is the key to the joy He wants His people to have.

A friend of mine recently preached a big truth. He said, "Satan has never invented a single pleasure. All he does is distort and twist what God has made." That's exactly right. Folks, real joy, real happiness and real fulfillment only come from an obedient life in Christ. These things are not legitimate draw cards for salvation, but they are some of the unmistakable fruits of it. I wish you all had it. It is also helpful to remember that while fruit may appear overnight, it only ripens with time. Perhaps you struggle with assurance. Maybe joy is not a residual characteristic of your life as you reflect on God's promises. Let Him prove you some more. He's heard your prayer if you're seeking Him. Just the wanting of assurance is often a first step or evidence of grace moving us towards it.

I believe that Jesus is the only joy there is in a very real sense. This is not to say that the unrepentant sinner cannot be happy. Not at all. They have family; they love their spouses, manage their money well, have good jobs, take summer vacations to exotic places and eat terrific foods. God is very merciful. But it's all an illusion. It's not real. It will give way and their joy will soon turn to horror. "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits

his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" Matthew 16:26. This is why I say that Jesus is the only joy...because He is the only joy really worth having. His joy is not an illusion. Imagine sitting in a mansion surrounded by toys. Boats, cars, square footage, expensive art, a lush garden, jet skis on your own lake, horses, go-carts and a private helipad and feeling lost. Suddenly all that you thought the world had to offer to satisfy you comes up desperately short. There's just not enough stuff! That is death before death. Yes, I suppose much of this letter is to address that "American dream" so many of us are chasing that leaves us empty and having wasted the better part of our lives. What are we doing for Christ now is all I want to ask? I'm not saying that all pursuits are inherently evil.

Christ gives His own joy because He's joyous. Like any truth or Biblical concept, we grow in appreciation of this the more we meditate on it and obey His commands. We ripen like fruit and will one day be harvested. For those who have been born again, they suffer and they die, yes. They're often in poverty and in sickness *but they have the most valuable commodity*. Revelation 3:18. They have life. All others are dead. What's more valuable than that? They're persecuted and cast down at times...yet at other times they sing songs the world has never sung. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted," Matthew 5:4. Blessed am I. The world has changed the price tags, but my question to you, reader, is have you rightly appraised Christ? It's simple. Are you growing in your appreciation of Him? We do not have faith *in faith*. We have faith in Jesus. We know His name. God has chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith. James 2:5. In Christ and because of Christ, you have been given something that cannot be priced. Oh, what joy comes in believing God's promises!

You need not flaunt it. You dare not parade it, but you also *dare not* boast in it. 1 Corinthians 1:31. Just imagine for a moment that you had been given an invitation to a king's manor because he'd promised to meet your every need if you surrendered to Him. He's a great king and is esteemed by all his people as perfectly righteous and always at work for their good. He treats all with equity. You'd never lack again. You'd never suffer again. Your family would be well taken care of. Imagine how you might feel if you actually believed his promise! Now imagine that that king is the King of kings and the Creator of all material existence who could explode the stars like bang snaps. (Remember those?) God has promised you all these things and more into eternity. It is the reward of your labor for Him. You ripen on the vine through it all while dbasking in the warm trust of His providence. That's heaven! There are many perfect reasons for this life, dear reader, but I believe wholeheartedly that they'll *mostly* be discovered beyond it. Heaven is not on earth...yet. This place stinks like a sewer. Believe me, I know. This place is subject to death, disease and sin. One day, however, there will be no such stain! Every cigarette butt will be removed from the soil. God has given you the promise that if you repent of your sin and trust in Him you can know Him. Can this give you joy? You bet, but only those who know from what they've been saved and for what they've been redeemed. Christ, who is God, came to save sinners from the justice and wrath of God. He could have done it any way He wanted, but He chose this one. Repent and believe the good news or die. If you know how

dreadfully sinful you are, then that's good. Forgiveness brings great joy and freedom. God is in the happiness business. Now this will fluctuate and in life God will test you, sure, but after it's all said and done there's a finish line. I hope you're sweating as you cross it. I'm 33 years old and exactly half way to 34 as I write this. I feel like I've been moving around on this planet for about five years now. I joined the military over 13 years ago. I can't believe it. This life is a vapor! It's truly like the dew. It will be no different should I live to be 90. I'll look back, and it'll be gone in an instant. There is so much more ahead. What are you doing in your life *for eternity*? It is impossible to be so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good. As I take this phrase, it would be those most heavenly minded doing the most earthly good. I hope this letter is a blessing to you. It's a part of my heavenly-minded labor for the Lord.

Paul asked: "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it," 1 Corinthians 9:24. Runners weary during the race, but they compete for a prize. They run knowing there's a finish line. If they win there's great honor. This is a joyous prospect. It's not too late. Run your race with honor and joy set before you like a finish line. It is not for you...it's for the reward of Christ's suffering. One of the most fascinating verses in the New Testament to me is Romans 2:7-8. Here the Apostle contrasts godly works with selfish works. "To those who by perseverance in doing good *seek* for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; *but to those who are selfishly ambitious* and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation." (Emphasis mine). There is a holy expectation and seeking for glory which is *not* selfish or self seeking because it's by the power of the Holy Ghost. Seek that seeking. The faithful can know that it will result in reward. Hebrews 11:6. Run with this joy in mind. There is an end to this race and you're supposed to be running to win. Every prayer, every death, every fast, every play date with your kids, every persecution, every sermon, every gift, every romantic night with your spouse, every letter, every rebuke, every Bible study, everything...it's all marked. Do it all seeking Christ's prize and you'll find a participation reward beyond your imagination. And that reward will not fade away. There is nothing wrong with this. This is simply doing all for the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10:31.

Christian joy is a present reality based on historical events with eternal scope. There is joy because of what Christ has already done and given, and a joy that stretches to the right into what Christ has promised He will one day do. It's both. You can't have one without the others actually. So think on what Christ has done and think also on what Christ has said He will do. His word is His bond and, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame," Romans 10:11. Believe and have joy. It's *not* "blind faith." I don't even like that term. It's faith based on right seeing, John 9:39, or it's baseless. See Jesus!

Think on Christ. Meditate on His riches. It's not about money; it's almost not about anything the world generally esteems. There's something else. It has well been said that the richest man on earth is not him who has the most, but him who needs the least. It is awesome to think that this is most true when a man has Christ. I envy those who need less than me. No matter

what, in Christ we have eternal riches. Faith in Jesus is not just confessing His works. It is not just confessing His death and Resurrection. It is having faith *in the promises accomplished* by those professed works. Christ bought you, and bought you something. Seek Him and be happy.

Thank you for your attention to this letter.