

A Faith Big Enough for Joy

When we say we are Christians, what image do you think is in the mind of unchurched or unbelieving people? Serious...all about rules... condemning... judgmental...self-righteous...hypocritical...angry. Not very positive, is it?

Though the English language often uses the words happiness and joy interchangeably, there is a difference between the two, especially as used in a Biblical context. Happiness depends upon what is happening outside, while joy is dependent upon what is happening “inside.” Other people, our circumstances, the news in the media, that’s what is happening on the outside. It can make us happy, or sad, or frustrated. We can control it to some extent – what we listen to, what we say, the message we send, but our control is limited. We live and are meant to be a part of this world. But joy, what is on the inside of us, with God’s help, his Spirit, we can control.

There are 3 aspects of spiritual joy:

- Joy as a spiritual fruit
- Joy as a spiritual force
- Joy as a spiritual weapon

Galatians 5:22 defines joy as a “fruit of the Spirit.” What does that mean? Other fruits of the Spirit are love, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. In verse 25 Paul tells us that if we live by the Spirit, we will be guided by the Spirit. The word “Spirit” refers to God’s Spirit – so God is the One who creates the fruit of joy in the heart of a person whose life has been surrendered to God. So, it is possible for us to have “joy” in our hearts even if we have negative circumstances in our lives. We may not be happy in our circumstances, but we can have joy in our spirit. Or we can let our spirit defeat us. The thing about the fruit of joy is that when we live it, we display it for others, it takes seed and the seed produces fruit in others.

Joy is secondly a spiritual force. Nehemiah 8:10 demonstrates the power of joy when it says, “...do not be grieved, the joy of the Lord is your strength!” God wants you to use joy as a spiritual force to deal with difficulties you may be facing in life. This isn’t a form of self-denial – this is us saying we have a right to feel sad, or hurt, or depressed because of life events but, because God has given me the

spirit of joy I can chose to use it as a spiritual force to not let those feelings control me.

We see this message play out in the New Testament. Paul the Apostle knew a lot about adversity. He had been beaten, persecuted, betrayed, gone without food, shipwrecked and thrown into prison. His daily circumstances were not the kind that would make a person “happy.” Yet Paul counselled New Testament believers in Philippians 4:4 to: “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice!” Paul practiced what he preached and used joy as a force in his own life instead of letting circumstances dictate his approach to life.

We can see joy as a spiritual weapon at work in 2 Chronicles 20:14-25. King Jehoshaphat was faced with an invading enemy army that vastly outnumbered his troops. The situation looked like certain disaster was imminent. But God gave him some strange counsel – the king was to place the singers out in front of the army and they were to sing praise to God and rejoice! Praise to God is a way of giving expression to inward joy. This spiritual strategy of using joy as a weapon was the key that turned the situation around. Suddenly, the enemy army turned on each other and they destroyed themselves! How does this apply to us? After all, we are not likely to face an invading army. Or are we?

Jesus told His disciples that they would face difficulties in this life. His words are recorded for us in John 16:33 – “These things I have spoken to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world, you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” The word “tribulation” in that verse means “pressures, trials, distress and frustration.” Do you have any pressures in your life? Are you experiencing distress or frustration? These are the enemy armies we face. Jesus was giving us a secret to victory over our tribulations. The key is to have joy, not because you are having a problem, but because you serve a God who is bigger than any problem. And as you do that – the enemy will be defeated.

I want to remind you that our faith is big enough for joy. Why should we have joy about our faith?

1. We know that God is bigger than we can imagine – that we limit Him by our perception of Him, but He is limitless and has a master plan for our lives and our world.

2. We remember that our faith is built on a firm foundation and that we can be assured in our faith.
3. We remember that God loves enough to understand our doubts and fears, and that He still accepts and loves us.
4. And finally, we know how the book turns out. We may not know the details, but we know this world is not the end.

Listen to the words of the psalmist in Psalm 47:

Clap your hands, all you peoples;
shout to God with loud songs of joy.
For the LORD, the Most High, is awesome,
a great king over all the earth.
Sing praises to God, sing praises;
sing praises to our King, sing praises.
For God is the king of all the earth;
sing praises with a psalm.
God is king over the nations;
God sits on his holy throne.

John 16:22 says, "So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you." And John 10:10: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I come that you might have life, and have it abundantly."

What does God want us to do with our joy? Hear the words of Jesus from Matthew 5:14-16:

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works, and given glory to your Father in heaven."

We have a God big enough for us in this place and for all the world. And we have a faith big enough for us, for our families, for our friends, for our communities, and for our world. Our God and our faith have no limits except those we impose. What will you do with your light? Will you pass it on to a world that so desperately needs it?