

© Protected by Common Law Copyright.
This may be copied for personal use only.

Joy

by William P. Wilson, M.D.

-- *Commentaries from past newsletters* --

**Therefore the Redeemed of the Lord
Shall return and come with singing unto Zion
And everlasting joy shall be upon their head.
They shall obtain gladness and joy,
And sorrow and mourning shall flee away.
Therefore the redeemed of the Lord
Shall come singing unto Zion
And everlasting joy shall be upon their head.**

We are the redeemed of the Lord. We have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. So everlasting joy should be upon our heads, but is it? Certainly we know that Jesus promised us joy when he said, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete (John 15:10,11). He promised gladness and joy, but it is not obvious in the Christian community today. It is almost a universal phenomenon that Christians have to be told jokes to get them to show any joy at all.

It is a truism that when the Holy Spirit dwells in us, the fruits should be manifest. The third fruit of the spirit is joy, but most believers rarely manifest any evidence of joy. I have seen a glaring lack of it all across the kingdom particularly in mainline churches. One event was quite illustrative of the point I am making. It occurred when I went to conduct a healing conference in an Episcopal church in a distant state. After I spoke on Friday night, Saturday morning, afternoon and evening I was told that they had three services on Sunday at 8:30, 9:45 and 11:00. The rector told me they were totally different congregations. The reason for the three services was that the sanctuary was quite small for the congregation of about 800 people. Although his statement was made with great emphasis, it did not sink in. When I spoke, though, I really found out how different they were. The first service began with traditional Episcopal music and was about as funereal as you could find. It was accompanied by a squeaky old organ. There was a sea of blue, white and bald heads in front of me. As I perused the congregation I could see they all had vinegar for blood. They held their heads down, their mouths were drawn in a thin line, their eyes were slits, and the lines on their faces revealed hostile expectation. Their posture and facial expressions did not change as I spoke of the necessity for a real and right relationship with the Lord. At the end of the service they occasionally muttered a few words as some of them limply shook my hand and went out the door.

The second service was totally different. It began with a processional. There were flags, banners, a crucifix, guitars, and when the processional was ended they added drums and a keyboard. The music was contemporary, mixed with two more traditional hymns by more popular song writers. There was great joy in their singing and they lifted up their hands and clapped. As I began my sermon I could see that they were teen, young or middle aged. There were few bald, white or blue heads among this group. Their facial expressions were relaxed and accepting. They paid close attention to what I said and there were many nods of approval. I preached the same sermon as the first service. At the end of the service they openly expressed their approval and vigorously shook my hand as they went out the door.

The third service was again different. The music was again Episcopal. It was not designed to produce any spiritual movement at all. The same squeaky organ accompanied the singing and the congregation's response was to say the least desultory. They were not as hostile appearing as those in the first service, but had rather neutral facial expressions. I felt they were there to go through the motions of worship and partake of the Eucharist. As I bid them good bye I got an occasional comment of approval and a few firm handshakes. The rest of them went through the motions of being polite.

Why was the bulk of this congregation so joyless? Why did they look so grim in the first service, so full of joy in the second and so uninvolved in the third? The answer lies in a statement by the Apostle when he was addressing the subject of eating food sacrificed to idols. "If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit* (Rom. 14:15-17). The congregation in the second service was worshiping in the Spirit. Those in the first and third were not.

As I wrote in my last newsletter, joy is the other of the three pleasant emotions. It is defined as the emotion evoked by well being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires. Certainly Christian joy arises out of well being. It is not necessarily physical well being, but a well being of attitude. Because we know who holds the future and what that future is, we can have a right attitude about our lives. We certainly have been successful in dealing with our existential problems. Our sins are forgiven and we do not expect to be punished for them. Fortune is derived from a hypothetical force or personified power that unpredictably determines events and issues favorably or unfavorably. Since we know who the hypothetical force is and that His promises are sure, we can expect the good things that God has promised. God said he knows what is in store for us. It is good and not evil (Jer. 29:11). Finally, as I have said before, all of us are future oriented. We do not want to believe that our lives end with the death of our bodies. This knowledge is important because if there is no future,

the present is without meaning. Believing in Jesus provides the promise of eternal life (John 3:16), and provides the assurance that we will achieve that which we earnestly desire. Jesus' resurrection assures us this promise is true.

Our Lord promised that he would give us his joy now. "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:10,11). With such a statement is there anything in the Old Testament that promises joy? There is. 1 Chronicles 11:26,27 tells us, "Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and joy in his dwelling place. Nehemiah said, "The joy of the LORD is your strength." David knew where joy came from when he said, "But let all who take refuge in You be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in You." Again he said, "You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." And, "My lips will shout for joy when I sing praise to you-- I, whom you have redeemed" (Ps. 71:23). All throughout Isaiah and Jeremiah joy is linked with knowing God and worshiping him. Our Hebrew roots declare that joy arises out of our relationship with God.

In the New Testament joy continues to be a fruit of the Spirit. Our Lord was joyous in his relationships with people. He went to parties and drank and ate with the party people. He was not there scowling and condemning the participants because they were having fun. He even made wine for them when they ran out. When they drank up all the wine that the hosts had provided, some of them must have had a load on. Jesus knew this, but he did not refuse to do his first miracle. He turned water into wine so the party could continue. Still, His attitude about having a joyous time got him into real trouble with the religious authorities of the day. The very idea of a rabbi sitting joyously down to eat with tax collectors, prostitutes and other assorted sinners was an abomination in their eyes.

Today joy is promised if we drink Budweiser, wear Lee Jeans, drive a BMW, have an attractive woman or man on our arm, or watch some of the infantile shenanigans on ESPN. They do produce a kind of joy, but it is not a joy that lasts. Everlasting joy is not to be found in any of the things the world offers.

That the Holy Spirit is the source of joy was remarked on by our Lord when he saw that the disciples were joyous over the results of their evangelical outreach. He told them it was alright to rejoice over their accomplishments but it was more important to " . . . rejoice that your names are written in heaven." At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure."

From the scriptures, then, it is clear that joy is to arise out of our relationship with God. What has happened to bring us to such a joyless religion as we find in many churches today? The answer is that most people have been fed a diet of joyless religion. Joyless religion is evidence that the Holy Spirit does not indwell the person who professes to be a Christian or that the Spirit has been quenched or grieved. In our covetous, greedy world the Spirit is often quenched in most of us by our worship of the other god--money. We are not aware of it because this sin is insidious and so tied to our existence.

Sherwood Wirt in his excellent little book entitled, *Jesus ,Man of Joy*, asserts emphatically that the joy Jesus had came from his Father. Pleasure is a derivative of joy. God took pleasure in creating the universe. He took pleasure in creating man in His image. The prophets quote Him as saying that we should take pleasure in what he created. As I drove to work this morning I took great pleasure when I surveyed the fall colors so beautifully displayed on the trees. There were brilliant yellows, reds, burgundies, oranges, browns and colors in between. They were not splashed on the background like one sees in some of the things they call contemporary paintings. Instead they were carefully arranged to provide the greatest beauty. I was awed at the beauty, but I was filled with joy that the Lord had so graciously created something like this for our pleasure, and created within us an appreciation for it. We have a wonderful God!

Wirt says that theologians attribute divine perfections to God. They say He is infinite, eternal, immutable, illimitable, immortal, all-wise, all-knowing, all-goodness, spiritual, holy, sovereign, righteous, gracious (loving) and true. They never say that He is joyous, and although he is said to be love, they use the word gracious instead of loving. God does have emotions. He would not have given us so many if he did not possess them himself. Jesus who displayed the full range of emotions was said to be the visible evidence of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). He certainly provided us with evidence that God is an emotional being. Like Jesus, God created us in his image so if he is joyous why should we not be joyous too?

How did the joylessness of Christianity get started? Wirt attributes it to a forgery published in the 1500's. It was authored by a fictitious Publius Lentulus. In this alleged eyewitness description of Jesus, it was said that no man had seen Jesus laugh. This forgery has had a profound effect on the Christian world since. People do not want to be seen laughing or showing any kind of emotion when involved in religious activities. It is wrong to do so. If you have trouble believing that the Christian world is joyless, go to a mainline church on Sunday morning. Chances are you will see some of the most solemn people you will find in our society. The influence of Publius Lentulus is also seen in religious movies. All of them portray our Lord as a serious and unemotional man without joy. One portrayal gave him a pseudo-mystical countenance but not a joyous one.

Now I am sure many of you can tell me that your church has joy in it, but I will counter by saying that maybe yours are exceptions. But even so, I would then ask you if you ever shout when praising the Lord there (Ps. 66:1)? Do you clap when a joyous song is being played (Ps. 47:1)? Do you show joy when you think of the wonderful things He has done for you (Lev. 23:39,40)? Do you rejoice when a person is saved (Luke 15:6,7)? Have you ever danced for joy when worshiping God (Jer, 31:11-13)? The Bible tells us we should do these things or will do them when we have the joy of the Lord.

My friend Fra. Richard Thomas S. J. does them all. He rejoices constantly in the Lord. He loves to dance before the Lord. He often shouts with joy. He even rejoices when they put him in jail for picketing abortion clinics or protecting a youth who was being abused by the police. He obeys the Lord's charge, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." I love to be around Rick for his joy is infectious. Still I go to a church where there is no joy and I get infected by the solemnity of the service. There is no joy in my soul. When I have worshiped with Rick my soul is filled with joy. There is shouting, dancing, there is celebration. When I leave the service, the world seems brighter and cleaner. The whole universe seems to sing with joy.

Let's contrast a group of people leaving a football or basketball game with the people leaving church on Sunday morning. Even if we exclude the people who have been drinking, the difference would be profound. If their team had won the football game, fans would have a smile on their faces and they would be laughing as they recounted the highlights of the game. They would be rejoicing that their team had been successful. When they got home, they would continue to recount the success of their team and might even call friends who did not attend to tell them the good news. Last evening my wife, who is a basketball fanatic, attended an exhibition game at the university where I studied and taught for 35 years. She was jubilant when she came home. They won over a group of all stars by a large margin. She had to tell me with great joy that the freshman guard who scored 25 points was really wonderful. This morning she read the account of the game and asked me if I was not pleased that the team showed so much promise.

On the other hand, have you seen anyone come home from church filled with joy, so much so that they want to recount the wonders of the revelations in the sermon? Do they call friends and say, "Man you should have been in church this morning? The music was fantastic, the sermon brought all kinds of new revelations to me. I sure am glad that I am reassured I have eternal life. You should have been there. It was great!" Or do they say with the same enthusiasm my wife had, "Wow! We had 2 people saved in church this morning?" Do they recount how they got so filled with joy that they couldn't help dancing in the aisles? Do they go out in the backyard and shout with joy at the beauty of the universe, or shout anywhere because of God's beneficence? I doubt that you

have seen any such response of pervasive and lasting joy as a result of a church service or because a soul got saved.

It is true that a church service is not a recreational event. We go to church for reasons that are quite different from our attendance at a football game. We have different expectations. But that should make no difference. We should go to church to encounter God, and if we are successful we "will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands (Isa. 55:12).

The question raised by the forgoing discussion is simple. How can we access the joy that is available to us? The answer lies first in being filled with the Holy Spirit. Second, we have to give thanks to God in all circumstances. Third, we must find the right church to worship in. We want a church where the congregation worships in the Spirit. The music has to be joyful. It should include some of the older hymns such as *Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee*, or *Joys Are Flowing Like a River*, or contemporary songs like *Jesus You're the Center of My Joy*, or *The Trees of the Field*, *Zephaniah 3:17*, *Joy to the World*, and *The Joy of the Lord is my Strength*. It also has to include real praise music.

Find a church that not only has joyful music, but also . . ."a pastor whose prayer life results Sunday after Sunday in true Bible preaching; who will feed your soul with a Gospel sermon out of The Book and leave you wishing for more; and whose real life matches his ministry (Wirt)."

Find a church whose members are a true priesthood of believers (1 Pet. 2:5). Such a church will have a program of discipleship that prepares the members to be in ministry. Jesus said that unless we have fed the hungry, given water to the thirsty, clothed the naked, visited the sick and prisoners we will not be welcome in the Kingdom. Ministry includes other things such as bearing one another's burdens, loving one another as He has loved us, comforting those who are suffering hardships and trials, and also proclaiming the Gospel to the lost, battered and bruised people in the world around us. I would reemphasize the idea that leading someone to Christ is productive of profound joy. Jesus made that point in the story of the lost sheep (Matt 18:12,13).

To close I would like to quote the words of a song that speaks about joy.

**The joy of the Lord is my strength
The joy of the Lord is my strength
The joy of the Lord is my strength
The joy of the lord is my strength
If you want joy you must shout for it
If you want joy you must shout for it
If you want joy you must shout for it
The joy of the Lord is my strength.**

Other verses repeat with a different key word like ask, praise, leap, dance, hop etc. It ends with two more verses.

**He giveth living water and I thirst no more
He giveth living water and I thirst no more
He giveth living water and I thirst no more
The joy of the Lord is my strength**

**He heals the broken hearted and they cry no more
He heals the broken hearted and they cry no more
He heals the broken hearted and they cry no more
The joy of the lord is my strength.**