

3 JOHN 2-4

NO GREATER JOY

“Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul. For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.”¹

The writer identifies himself as “The Elder” [VERSE ONE]. This individual does not identify himself beyond this designation; however, from earliest days, church leaders have testified that John, the Beloved Disciple, was the writer of this letter. Internal evidence in this letter, as well as in the other letters ascribed to John and the Gospel that bears his name, lead to a similar conclusion that he is the author. It is evident that the writer is sufficiently well known so that he need not name himself, choosing instead to simply identify himself as “The Elder,” a term that was used of one appointed to provide guidance within a congregation. Among the first churches, the term was used interchangeably with the terms “Bishop,” or “Overseer,” and “Pastor.” Therefore, it is appropriate to conclude that the writer enjoyed recognition as a pastor, perhaps even as one to whom other pastors looked to for guidance.

The Elder wrote to an individual who afforded him great joy. Perhaps you have such a friend that one brings you great joy whenever you think of him. This would be an individual whom you trust implicitly, who walks consistently in the path of righteousness, who seeks God’s glory and the good of fellow worshippers. Blessed is the individual who has such a friend. As a pastor, I can attest to the veracity of John’s words. There is another side to that statement, for just as there is no greater joy than to hear that one’s children are walking in the truth, there can be no greater sorrow than to hear that one’s children are pursuing their own desires.

JOY IN CHRIST — “I have no greater joy,” enthuses the Elder. The words are not meant to quantify the experience of joy, but to state that the joy spoken of suffuses the Elder’s life. What is often neglected by many Christians is the fact that the Christian life is to be a joyful life. Joy should mark the life of a believer—and it does identify the child of God. Unfortunately, we tend to confuse “joy” with “happiness” in our modern experience.

Let’s think about this for a moment. Happiness is ephemeral, evanescent, fleeting—just when you think you are happy, the feeling is gone. Why is this? The reason is found in the word itself. Happy is derived from the old English word “hap.” The word spoke of “luck” or “chance.” “Hap” spoke of one’s circumstance; it described one’s situation. In other words, “hap” spoke of conditions over which an individual had no control. Thus it is that happiness speaks of one’s response to conditions over which he or she has no control. Happiness always points to an outside agency and to one’s response to that agency. In this day, happiness has come to identify our feelings in response to what gives us momentary pleasure.

Joy, on the other hand, describes a condition that is unrelated to our particular situation. Joy speaks of settled contentment that is separate from what is occurring outside of one’s self. Joy describes the condition that arises from confidence that God is in control of one’s life, guiding and directing the individual’s path, and guarding against assault by those intent on evil.

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As a Christian, you may be happy, but happiness will never continue unabated in your life. We live in a fallen world, and there is always something to steal our happiness. However, as a Christian, you are assured of joy. Joy is our heritage because the God who gives joy is our Father. The presence of Christ the Lord ensures joy. At the birth of God's Anointed One, Jesus the Messiah, an angel announced to shepherds tending their flocks, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you *good news of great joy* that will be for all the people" [LUKE 2:10].

Whenever someone comes to faith, we are taught that there is joy in heaven. Remember the parable the Master related of the lost sheep? "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbours, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, *there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents* than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" [LUKE 15:3-7]. Scope in on the last statement: "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." All heaven rejoices when a sinner comes home.

Indeed, whenever an individual comes to faith, he or she cannot help but rejoice. Jesus said, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then *in his joy* he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field" [MATTHEW 13:44]. Finding life in the Beloved Son brings joy—tangible, palpable joy!

Jesus spoke of the joy that is the heritage of all who believe as he prepared His disciples for His exodus. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. *These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full*" [JOHN 15:1-11].

Shortly after this, we witness the following teaching provided by the Master, "A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me." These words caused consternation among the disciples; they did not understand what He was saying. However, Jesus knew that they had questions, so He provided further instruction for them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but *your sorrow will turn into joy*. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and *your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you*. In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, *that your joy may be full*" [JOHN 16:16-24].

The birth of Christ meant joy in the world. Whenever one is born from above, there is joy in heaven. For the disciples who gathered about Jesus, His death was a sorrowful affair, but He assured them that their sorrow would shortly turn to joy. Thus it is that because He lives, those who are born from above and into the Family of God have abiding joy; and no one can take that joy from us. Now, as we ask for that which honours the Living Saviour, we will discover joy that fills our lives. In His High Priestly prayer, Jesus asked for all who would follow Him, “Now I am coming to You, [Father], and these things I speak in the world that [disciples] may have ***My joy fulfilled*** in themselves” [JOHN 17:13].

Joy is the heritage of the believing child of God. If we are not joyful, either we have not seized our heritage, or we have not understood the intent of the Master, or we are mere pretenders to grace. Happiness will ebb and flow, but joy will remain. Moreover, the joy of the believers will be spread about, and as others witness the freedom that is given in Christ the Lord, the joy that fills our lives will touch the hearts of others, for the joy of Christ is infectious!

When the disciples were scattered by the persecutions unleashed by Saul of Tarsus, one of the servants of the Jerusalem congregation travelled to Samaria where He proclaimed Christ. We read of the impact of Philip’s preaching in that city. “The crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralysed or lame were healed.” Now focus on the summary of his ministry in the next verse: “So ***there was much joy in that city***” [ACTS 8:4-8].

When Jewish worshippers in Pisidian Antioch rejected the preaching of Paul and Barnabas during their first missionary tour, the missionaries “Spoke out boldly, saying, ‘It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying,

“‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’

“And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region. But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium. And ***the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit***” [ACTS 13:45-52].

The salvation of others, whether through our own witness or because of the witness of others, is a source of joy to the people of God. After their first missionary venture into Gentile regions, the Apostles found it necessary to confront a growing error among the Jewish believers. Here is the account as it is recorded in Acts. “Some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’ And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.” In itself, the information to this point is of scant moment to our study today. However, it is the next verse that provides insight into the attitude of believers. “So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and ***brought great joy to all the brothers***” [ACTS 15:1-3].

I have found myself dismayed on more than one occasion at the response of some professed Christians to God's work as lost people are coming to faith. As a young believer, I preached in a prison farm in a rural area. God blessed, and a number of men and women who were imprisoned came to faith. We arranged with the warden to baptise those who wished to identify with Christ, and having received authorisation from the congregation to which we belonged, we conducted baptisms in the prison stock pond on a monthly basis.

Of course, when the prisoners got out of prison, some came back to Dallas to live. I felt some responsibility for these young believers, and thus it was that Lynda and I worked with some of those prisoners, assisting them in finding housing, securing work and reintegrating into the community. It so happened that among those who were coming to faith were some who were black; but when they came to services with me, they were not welcomed by the church leaders. My pastor advised me that they would need to find another church where they were welcomed. At the insistence of the deacons of that congregation, he sent me to speak with a black pastor to ask that he receive these new believers into their fellowship. That good man gave me some of the finest advice I ever received when I asked for his help. "My young white brother," he intoned from behind his desk, "if you are going to fish in my pond, keep what you catch."

When I moved to Canada, I thought that I might have left behind such attitudes that overrode the grace of the Lord. However, I discovered that not everyone rejoices at the salvation of the lost. Pastoring a congregation in the Lower Mainland of our province, I witnessed a powerful movement of the Spirit of God. Within a short time of arriving at one congregation, we witnessed many people coming to faith. They represented the community in which the church was located; the congregation was taking on a multi-racial hue. Sundays changed from a handful of elderly people huddled in the pews to a congregation in which people were lining the walls in order to be present. God was blessing and the Spirit was present.

On a Sunday morning early in my pastorate at this particular church, I extended an invitation for those who wished to place their faith in Christ to come to the front and confess their faith. The first person out of the pew was a gracious black woman from Barbados. I was overjoyed at the response. Others came that day, and after counselling with them, we heard their testimonies of God's grace. As I came to that black lady, the chairman of the deacons jumped to his feet and shouted, "Ain't nobody getting' saved 'til I say so. I ain't questioned her."

His display of ignorance created a stir and caused a good deal of consternation. Being young, and not wanting to subject this gracious woman to any further embarrassment, I requested that this bellicose man join me and the young woman in my office. After a few moments, he agreed to permit her to receive baptism.

You can imagine that the subject of salvation was on the agenda for the next deacons' meeting. Those seven men pondered the situation, and after more than an hour decided that I could recommend to the church that it receive people for baptism if I heard their testimony. I had just witnessed the first salvo in the final battle that would lead to the demise of that church.

It was only a few weeks after this incident that this same man stood in a congregational meeting and solemnly intoned, "We asked this young pastor to come here to bring people into this church; and he has done what we asked! But, he brought the wrong kind of people!"

Such ignorance is breathtaking, to say the least! I responded to this illiteracy by asking, "What is wrong with these people? For the most part, they have two eyes, two arms, two legs—what is wrong with them?"

"They ain't like us," he thundered.

"No, thank God," I replied, "they are saved."

I could not understand then, and I cannot understand now, how anyone could fail to rejoice at the salvation of another person. The problem is not confined to just a few churches, but it seems to be almost universal. In a previous church, when a gracious Metis lady came to faith and requested baptism, some of the elderly women of the congregation suggested that she didn't fit there—she belonged somewhere else. They let me know that they were founding members, and that church had never had natives in the congregation. Natives, they informed me, would be happier at another church. They couldn't rejoice in the knowledge that this woman had found life in the Living Son of God; all they could see was their reputation. Listen, reputation is what people think you are; character is what you are. And the character of these sisters did not live up to the reputation they imagined that they had.

It is not unlike the attitude of some parents in a church I served for a period. Because the church had no youth ministry, a young couple volunteered their time to reach youth of the community, winning them to Christ and training them in righteousness. Some of the youth that began to attend were not “cool.” A man whose family were reputed to be leaders in the congregation came to my office to insist that I restrict one family from coming to youth events. You see, the children of that family weren't cool, and his daughter would no longer come if these other youth insisted on coming. My response was not what he sought, and probably contributed to tension that persisted throughout my time in that congregation. I told him that we would miss him and his family. He could not rejoice in the knowledge that young people were hearing the Word of God and being established in the Faith. All he and his wife could see was that there were young men and women present who were not really part of his social class.

The Word of God tells us that the believers rejoice at the salvation of the lost—even when it is Gentiles or Samaritans who are coming to faith. Even when Natives, or Blacks, or Orientals, or Whites, or rich, or poor, or educated people, or uneducated people come to faith, the people of God rejoice and experience great joy in the evidence of God's blessing. I can only conclude that those who experience no joy in His grace extended to others do not know either Him or His mercy, or they are in deliberate rebellion to the grace He freely extends!

A THEOLOGY OF JOY — The information given thus far is certainly descriptive, though some might argue that it lacks validity because it is anecdotal. Therefore, we need to develop a theology of joy for the people of God. Certainly, the New Testament Letters have quite a bit to say concerning joy, and we will benefit from studying God's view of joy as we serve Him.

In the letter written to Roman Christians, the Apostle Paul makes a significant statement when he speaks of the Kingdom of God. He writes, “The Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and *joy in the Holy Spirit*” [ROMANS 14:17]. This addresses in tangential fashion something to which I alluded only moments before. Professed Christians made race a condition of fellowship, just as others make socio-economic status, or educational levels, or political views a condition of fellowship. In the particular instance Paul was addressing, people were hindering brother and sister Christians on the basis of diet; some Christians had gone so far as to endeavour to destroy others on the basis of food. However, the Apostle says that the Kingdom of God is characterised by righteousness, peace and joy. Moreover, these graces are centred in the Holy Spirit.

Those who walk in the Spirit are marked by joy, among other graces. Listen to a familiar passage once again. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, *joy*, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

“If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another” [GALATIANS 5:22-26].

Spirit-filled Christians are joyful people. They experience love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control along with the joy that marks them as Spirit-filled. When these graces are absent, a person cannot be said to be Spirit-filled. Moreover, the absence of these graces precludes maturity in the Christian Faith. Take note! Whenever a church leader lacks joy in their service, beware of following that individual.

Christian joy begins with salvation, as we have already seen [see ACTS 8:8; 13:52; 15:3]. Based upon this knowledge, it should be apparent that joy is the heritage of the believer. However, joy is not a static state—it must be cultivated. The way in which we cultivate joy is through growing in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. As we grow more like Him, we reflect more of His character; and He exuded joy. Consider one example of the joy of Christ, especially as it serves to encourage believers.

The author of the letter to Hebrew Christians sought to encourage these suffering saints. They had already paid a horrific price for remaining steadfast before their persecutors. Now, they were threatening to slip back into their old way of life in an effort to lessen the opposition. They seem to have decided that compromise might be worth considering in order to reduce the cost of righteousness. The author pointed them to Jesus even as he reminded them of those who had preceded them in the Faith. Listen to what he has to say.

“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, *who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross*, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” [HEBREWS 12:1, 2].

Let me translate that into this present day. You and I must learn to take a long view of life. We must guard against allowing ourselves to grow content to live for the moment; rather, we must always bear in mind that we are moving toward eternity. This present life is transient; eternity is for a long time. Thus the Master, focused on what would be accomplished through submitting Himself to the cross, drawing joy in the knowledge of what would He would accomplish—salvation for His fallen creature. Similarly, you and I need to look forward to the transformation that is coming. Recall the encouraging words that John has written: “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” [1 JOHN 3:1-3].

If we focus on what is promised, we can endure almost anything. If we focus on our own comfort, we will endure nothing. Moreover, if we focus on what is promised, we will be filled with joy despite the hardships we face. If we focus on our own comfort, we will be miserable, for we will know that we are neglecting the greatness for which we are saved.

Writing the Thessalonian Christians, Paul noted their perseverance and their joy. Listen to his assessment of their character. “You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with *the joy of the Holy Spirit*, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia” [1 THESSALONIANS 1:6, 7]. Their eyes were fixed on Christ and what He has promised, so they adopted as models for their own lives the missionaries who had brought them the Word of life.

Similarly, the author of the Letter to Hebrew Christians reminds them of what they had experienced previously. Listen to what he wrote, weighing the import of his words in your life. “**You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property**, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one” [HEBREWS 10:34]. What a rebuke to us! In our materialistic society, we esteem material goods we possess as of greater value than our integrity, our character or our relationships. These saints, however, were focused on what was promised rather than what they held for a moment. They knew they would not take earthly possessions with them into eternity, but that they were promised untold riches at the Master’s return.

Material wealth has some immediate advantages, but it cannot provide joy. It may make us happy for a brief while, but we will have no joy if we depend upon what we have rather than who we are. Remember, joy arises from inside the life, and not from what is held in life.

James makes much the same point as the writer of the Hebrew Letter when he says, “**Count it all joy**, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” [JAMES 1:2-4]. In other words, focus on the fact that God is at work in your life rather than what you are experiencing. Understand that God is always at work preparing you for eternity. Do you remember those exciting words Paul wrote? “We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified” [ROMANS 8:28-30].

I assure you on the authority of God’s Word and God is at work in your life if you are His child. This is reason to rejoice. With Peter, each Christian can exult, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and **rejoice with joy that is inexpressible** and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls” [1 PETER 1:3-9].

If we stay focused on our coming Saviour, we will experience intense joy. As we walk with Him, we will continually experience His joy permeating our life. Writing the Philippian Christians, Paul spoke of that joy of giving Himself to serve them and the Saviour. He wrote, “I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honoured in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, **for your progress and joy in the faith**, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again” [PHILIPPIANS 1:18b-26].

To be certain, Paul urges the Philippian believers to boldly seize the joy that is found in Christ the Lord. Listen to what must undoubtedly be familiar words that occur near the end of that letter. “**Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.** Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understand, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” [PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7].

Before moving to the next point, I want you to think of the way in which John began his first letter to Christians. “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that **our joy may be complete**” [1 JOHN 1:1-4].

We come to faith in the Living Christ with joy. As we walk with Him we discover growing joy. As we focus on His return, we rejoice and the joy we experience grows more intense. At His return, we will be eternally joyful. Joy is the heritage of the people of God. There can be no finer benediction with which to conclude this point than that pronounced by Jude. “Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory **with great joy**, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen” [JUDE 24, 25]. Amen, indeed.

JOY IN FELLOW CHRISTIANS — While I do not deny that the joy we experience and which we anticipate is joy for us as individuals, I am compelled by the Word to point out that Christian joy is always shared joy. The joy of the child of God breaks out in the soul like the measles; we can’t hide the joy that the Master pours out into our soul. The joy of the Master encourages us, just as it encourages others. Others are comforted by the joy of Christ seen through our lives. Each of us is made stronger by the joy witnessed in others; and as we share our labours, the joy we share intensifies.

I know that Philippians is often spoken of as the Letter of Joy, but Paul speaks of joy quite frequently in his second letter to the Christians of Corinth. Early in the letter, He writes, “**We work with you for your joy**, for you stand firm in your faith” [2 CORINTHIANS 1:24]. Because these saints had accepted the rebuke he presented in his first letter, demonstrating steadfastness in the Faith, the Apostle rejoiced and stated that it was for their joy that he have been so stern. He knew that when they were obedient to the Spirit of God they would experience joy; and when they were joyful, he would share in that joy. It always works that way in the Christian life.

The Apostle makes the same point soon after as he recalls the demanding position he was compelled to adopt in his previous letter to the church. “I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, **that my joy would be the joy of you all**” [2 CORINTHIANS 2:3]. The Apostle knew that when the believers honoured God they would experience the joy of Christ Jesus. When they proved obedient to the will of the Spirit of God, Paul could testify of his joy that he shared with them. “I am acting with great boldness toward you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. In all our affliction, **I am overflowing with joy**” [2 CORINTHIANS 7:4].

Later in the letter, Paul spoke of his joy arising from the report that Titus brought. This joy was not only because Titus was exultant, but because the Corinthians had demonstrated their Christian character in his presence. “*We rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus*, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all” [2 CORINTHIANS 7:13]. I can assure you that a pastor experiences deep joy at every expression of Christian character witnessed in those under his tutelage. However, I am equally certain that each Christian rejoices in the godly success of his or her fellow believers. As we advance the cause of Christ, we each rejoice in Christ and His goodness.

Writing the Philippian saints, Paul began that letter by saying, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all *making my prayer with joy*, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” [PHILIPPIANS 1:3-5]. Knowing that they had stood with him through hard times and through good times gave him joy. However, he also knew that they needed encouragement if they would continue to honour the Lord, thus giving him joy. So, he urged them, “If there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, *complete my joy* by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” [PHILIPPIANS 2:1, 2].

When a church is united, when the believers seek to build one another, when they love one another deeply from the heart, the pastor rejoices. But no less do the members of the assembly experience deep joy, for the Spirit of God reigns in the congregation and the Spirit of Christ walks among them, and He is honoured. Thus, those who are known by Him are filled with joy.

Witnessing the service that a fellow believer rendered to others brought joy to the Apostle, just as it brings joy to each one among us. To his friend Philemon, the Apostle wrote, “*I have derived much joy and comfort from your love*, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you” [PHILEMON 7].

Because the people of God recognise that they are not an exclusive club, but that they are part of a great family, they joyfully receive other believers, rejoicing in the knowledge that God is working throughout the world. This becomes obvious in Paul’s instruction to the Church of Philippi. “I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. So *receive him in the Lord with all joy*, and honour such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me” [PHILIPPIANS 2:25-30].

As people come into the Faith, those who know the Lord cannot help but rejoice. At the thought of others whom we have been privileged to lead into real life, or who were influenced toward righteousness by our prayers and by our testimony, we cannot help but rejoice. Paul testified, “What is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For *you are our glory and joy*” [1 THESSALONIANS 2:19, 20].

Recognition of divine order in the assembly is a source of joy for the people of God. We read in the Letter to Hebrew Christians an admonition that reveals this truth. “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. *Let them do this with joy* and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you” [HEBREWS 13:17].

John wrote, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.” The words are reminiscent of something that he had written in an earlier letter to another saint. “I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father” [2 JOHN 4]. Then, as he draws the letter to a conclusion, he writes of his desire, to “talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete” [2 JOHN 12]. Fidelity to the teaching of the Word, commitment to Christ, steadfastness in the face of pressure, ensures that other Christians are encouraged, and in their encouragement, they discover joy. This is joy that grows and spills over to cause even greater joy as it is shared in the Lord. There will be no joy when we turn from pursuing righteousness and when we turn to embrace our own desires.

I pray that this will be a joyful congregation. I long for the joy of Christ to be so evident among us that all who know us will be compelled to testify that Christ is indeed among us. I confess that I long for the joy of Christ to spill outside the walls of this church building so that our joy will encourage other believers, drawing them into that same great joy. And I long for the joy of Christ to draw outsiders to ask the reason for the hope that lies within us.

That joy is not a secret reserved for a select few. As I have said repeatedly, joy is the heritage of the people of God. If you are tired of pursuing the bluebird of happiness, that will o’ the wisp that seems somehow to always elude those who chase breathlessly after it, we offer joy—infectious, life-changing joy. That joy begins with life in the Beloved Son. This is the Word of the Living God. “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ believing in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. For with the heart one believes, resulting in a right standing with God; and with the mouth one confesses, resulting in salvation.” The promise of God is that “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].²

Our sincere prayer is that you also enjoy the salvation found in knowing Christ the Lord. However, if you have somehow delayed placing your trust in Jesus the Lord, we pray that you will do so even now. May God bless you with His joy, given in Christ Jesus the Lord. Amen.

² Author’s translation.