

# Joy – The Neglected Commandment

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I was anything but joyful. Over the previous few years, my workload had increased bit by bit with family, work, and the ecclesia. I had to structure my days and weeks so that I could fit in the maximum amount of activity to keep up with the ever growing demands on my time. But as much as I loved serving the Lord, in among all the pressure and the constant tiredness, I lost my joy. Now serving the Lord was no longer a pleasure, it was a chore. Now my days were no longer filled with happy anticipation, they were filled with dread. I no longer looked forward to speaking, writing, or serving in the ecclesia because it was all just another thing to do, just more pressure.

I realised that my joy was missing — so I took on another project. I did a study on Joy, to present at our Bible class. One week into the presentations and everything fell apart. One Sunday afternoon my asthma started to play up, I felt my stress levels rise, and unscheduled events destroyed my finely balanced timetable. I had a major breakdown. A burnout. The burnout, anxiety, depression and chronic fatigue would take seven years (and counting) to recover from.

That Sunday night I was reduced to a shaking jelly, crying uncontrollably on the bed with no strength left for anything. Most of my commitments and responsibilities had to go. All I could cope with was surviving and sleeping. But I was determined that if there was one thing left that I was going to do, I was going to finish the remaining four sessions on joy. It was hard work. Really hard. But the Bible study and presentations I did on joy at that time gave me the basis for my healing, and kept the worst of all my mental health issues at bay.

The words Joy and Rejoice occur about 357 times in the Bible. On the other hand, the word Atonement occurs about 70 times through the Bible. Atonement has 9 letters in it and is a long and complicated word. Many people have no idea what it means. Joy has 3 letters in it and everyone has some idea of what joy means.

That's interesting, isn't it? In our magazines and at Bible classes and Bible Schools, the proportion of talks, discussions, and arguments on the atonement would far outweigh the amount of discussion on joy. Yet according to the proportion of times these words are used in the Bible, Joy should be the more important topic. I am not saying it is wrong to discuss important topics like the atonement. We need to do so — they are very important — but we need to keep perspective on what God wants us to understand, and we need live the things that are really important. That's why I felt it was important for me to do a study on joy.

One reason we are drawn to topics like the atonement, last day prophecy, or our basic doctrines, is because there is something to debate. In many ways they are quite complicated topics. People have a huge range of ideas and beliefs surrounding them. And, of course, all our own personal ideas and beliefs are the right ones — it's everyone else that needs to change!

But while God tells us to have joy, joy seems too simple. It's so simple we don't even feel the need to talk about it. Instead we prefer to contend for the meanings of disputed Bible verses so that we can defend the truth against decay. We would rather argue black and blue in a debate to prove God (and ourselves) right. Yet when we argue and fight over the things that are "right", we lose our joy — the very thing that God wants us to keep. When we are so busy serving God and doing what is "good" — like I was — it's easy to lose our joy.

Instead of obeying God's commands to have joy in our lives, we make ourselves miserable by fighting about debatable topics, and attending meetings until we drop. We focus on the complicated things of faith and the great tasks, and lose the basics — just like the spiritual leaders did in Jesus day. Just like I did. We get so tied up in what is happening all around us — finances, pandemics, work, and the rush of a busy lifestyle — that joy is pushed out.

Are we trying to please God in complicated things while ignoring his simple commandments?

## Focus on Joy

So let's focus in on joy. It doesn't matter if you don't understand all the ins and outs of the atonement or last day prophecies — have joy anyway! God wants us to be joyful. He wants all of us to be filled with joy and to show it in the way we live.

Let's find out what sort of a commandment this is. Is it just that joy is mentioned a lot, or are we actually told specifically that we must have joy? Is joy just another thing to add to our list of things to do, or should it be a pleasure?

I want you to listen carefully to some of the direct instructions the Bible gives us about showing joy in our lives.

*Shout for joy to the LORD all the earth. (Ps 100:1)*

Here is a simple commandment telling us we need to shout for joy. And look again. If you live here on earth, it's addressed to you!

This is a direct instruction straight from the word of God telling you and me to shout for joy to the Lord. When we argue, we shout at each other and we lose our joy. We should be shouting for joy instead!

*Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him. (Ps 33:2)*

So here is another direct instruction to sing joyfully to the Lord. Let me just assume something about you: If you are reading this, I would think that you are someone who desires to be upright or righteous. If that is so, then this is an invitation for you. Sing joyfully to the Lord — and I don't think that is restricted to Sunday morning!

*Rejoice and be glad, you righteous; sing all you who are upright in heart. (Ps 32:11)*

This one is very similar to Psalm 33, but it reinforces the fact that to rejoice and be glad is a commandment. For you. And me.

*Shout with joy to God, all the earth. (Ps 66:1)*

Again, if you live here on earth, the simple commandment is to shout with joy to God.

*Shout for joy to the LORD all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music. (Ps 98:4)*

This is the fifth time we have read something very similar telling us that we need to be acting with joy before the Lord, shouting and singing. *Burst* into jubilant song. When was the last time your joy overflowed so much that it burst out of you as a song?

If you are wanting to grow joy in your life right now, then start with your mouth. When we start singing and shouting praise to God with our mouths (as we are told to do), we will begin to grow the process of joy in our lives. That's been one of the things that has helped me put joy back in my life.

We have seen five sample verses from the Old Testament (and the Psalms in particular) that tell us we need to have joy. There are plenty more where they came from! But is this just an Old Testament thing? Let's have a look at some New Testament instructions about joy to see if they present the same invitation and commandment from God, and invitation to join him in joyfulness.

*Be joyful always. (1Thess 5:16)*

That seems like a non-negotiable sort of instruction to me. And when we are told to be joyful always, we need to remember that "always" should take up a lot of our time. God is wanting us to have a lifetime of joy! He's full of joy and he wants us to share his joy. Nowhere in the Bible does God say "Be miserable always." So why do we choose it — even for a moment?

*Rejoice in the Lord always; I will say it again: Rejoice! (Phil 4:4)*

Here is another simple instruction. Paul thought it was important enough to repeat after he had only just said it: Rejoice! And again I say, Rejoice! He repeated the message about rejoicing because it is so important, and because we so easily forget what's good for us.

*Be joyful in hope. (Rom 12:12)*

Hope is what keeps us pinned to our faith, so the instruction here is that while we have faith and hope, our task is to rejoice in that hope.

So here are three commandments in the New Testament that tell us the same as the Old Testament, that we need to rejoice and have joy.

## Rejoicing Always

Rejoicing is all very well when things are going well, like when you have been stirred up on a Sunday morning, or when you have something special to celebrate. Bursting into song, giving thanks for your hope, shouting with joy are all much easier when life is good. But the commandments about rejoicing don't only apply when life is good. Rejoicing is a commandment even when things start to go pear shaped. Even when you face persecution — or the effects of a burnout.

This next quote is from Jesus.

*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. (Matt 5:11–12)*

Persecution and insults mean things are going to feel pretty bad. But here is the commandment in black and white, “Rejoice and be glad,” even in the darkest times. And if you choose to have joy in the dark times, I can tell you from experience that it makes that dark times so much easier to bear.

One last New Testament quote reinforces what Jesus said about rejoicing in the hard times.

*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, when you face trials of many kinds. (Jas 1:2)*

Yes, joy is a commandment even when we seem to be walking through the valley of the shadow of death — even after we have been crying uncontrollably on our beds.

## The Joy Commandment

The instructions to have joy might be commandments, but they are not there to give us another unachievable thing to do in life. The commandments to have joy are to make our lives easier, more fun, to reduce our burdens and to make us more like him. They really make a difference.

We have seen five commandments from the Old Testament, and five from the New Testament. If they were the only times God had told us to rejoice through the Bible, that would be enough. If something is repeated ten times through the Bible, we know that it must be important. But the command to have joy is repeated much more than that.

What if these are suggestions rather than commandments? Would that mean we could get away without having to obey this simple and pleasurable commandment of having to rejoice? Let’s look at the context around the “Be joyful always” commandment we read earlier, to see if the whole passage gives us any ideas as to whether these are suggestions or commandments.

*Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong but always try to be kind to each other and everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. (1Thess 5:15–18)*

We know the command about paying back evil of evil. That’s definitely a commandment. Jesus explained it in his sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:38 – 48. We also know that Jesus

commanded us to be kind and to love even your enemies, so being kind is not negotiable either. And then we have the instruction to be joyful. In the same context it is plain that it is a commandment — not just a suggestion. To “be joyful always” is equally important as not repaying evil for evil, as being kind, as praying, as giving thanks... and this is God’s will for us in Christ Jesus.

To rejoice is a commandment that is repeated more in the Bible than most of the other commandments we do our best to keep. We understand it. We know what it means. It’s also something that we are going to enjoy, that’s going to make life better, easier and going to turn us into more godly people. But we don’t give joy the attention it deserves. This simple commandment — the commandment to be joyful — is so easily ignored and forgotten.

Joy is a spiritual discipline. It’s a fruit of the Spirit that should be developing in our lives. If we are living the way Jesus wants us to live, then our joy will be growing and blossoming. We are told that,

*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. (Gal 5:22–23)*

Joy is a very important part of our Spirit fruit.

I tend to think of the fruit of the Spirit as just one fruit, called Love. Love is made up of all the different parts of the fruit, like the segments in an orange: patience, kindness, peace, self control... and so on. An impatient person does not show love. Nor does someone without self control. An unkind person does not show love. In the same way, you can’t have love without joy. Does a joyless, grumpy, argumentative, woeful person display the love of God? I think you know the answer to that! We need joy if we are going to develop the love of God and have the fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

Occasionally you might have seen people cautioned for making trouble, causing division, taking away peace. Someone you know might have been told off sometime for being impatient or unkind. Many people have come down hard on those who are unfaithful and cause marriage or relationship breakdowns. Nearly all the parts of the fruit of the Spirit are taken seriously when they get turned on their head. But has anyone been reprovved for their lack of joy? I suspect not. If we are serious about developing love, the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, then joy should be as high a priority as the rest of its parts.

## Growing Joy

If we are going to grow joy, then we need to help each other have joy. Paul's letter to the Philippians is a great encouragement to all of us — to have joy, and to grow it in each other. Here are some of the things he said to them:

*In all of my prayers for all of you I always pray with joy. (Phil 1:4)*

We need to be people like the believers in Philippi, whose lives made other people joyful. They made Paul joyful. They made him so joyful that he always prayed with joy when he remembered them.

*I will remain and will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me. (Phil 1:25–26)*

Paul was a joy spreader! One of his aims in life was to infect other people, like the believers in Philippi, with joy. That should be our aim too. When we meet with other people we need to be joy spreaders, pointing each other to Christ and the joy that we have in him. When we go to a meeting or a Bible class, we should aim that those we talk to may leave more joyful than when they came. Imagine how big our Bible classes and other meetings would get if we all did that! We would actually want to come!

*Make my joy complete by being like-minded. (Phil 2:2)*

The more united and like-minded we are, the more joy we will create. So if we want to create joy, let's also create unity. Be united to create joy in each other.

We have seen that our joy is very important to God. It was so important to God that he set aside certain times in Israel especially designed to create joy. The Sabbaths, three weeks of feasting and holidays (except for the day of Atonement), and various other celebrations were all designed to grow joy in God's people. They were commanded to have three weeks of joyful celebration compared to one day mourning. Their sacrifice and offering, their thankfulness for God's provision and harvests, their protection from their enemies, all should have grown their joy. God wanted them to be a nation of happy people. He wanted Israel to be his shop window to the rest of the world to show what a joy it was to serve the Lord. But instead, like mine, Israel's service became rituals and sacrifice done grudgingly, obeying to the letter — arguments and work

without the spirit of joy. Their joyless spirit was so repulsive to God that he ejected them from the Promised Land and said,

*All these curses will come upon you ... because you did not serve the LORD your God joyfully and gladly in the time of prosperity. (Deut 28:45,47)*

What about us? Are we serving God joyfully and gladly right where we are, right now? Because if we are not, we are placing ourselves in the same danger of ejection from God's kingdom as Israel was. If you are like me and finding joy is elusive, then stay tuned in because in future articles I want to show you how to grow your joy back again.

You might be thinking, "Aren't we supposed to bear our afflictions, endure, fight the fight, persevere under trial, repent, confess, and carry our cross?" Yes, there are times when all these need to be done, but joy can still lead the way. Jesus very literally carried his cross from the city to the place of his crucifixion. That can't have been a happy time. But in Jesus, even the walk to the cross was motivated by joy. The writer to the Hebrews encourages us to look to Jesus as our example. This is what he says:

*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb 12:2)*

Joy is a simple little word. Three letters (in English), repeated hundreds of times through the pages of the Bible. Joy is a commandment, a commandment that we humans forget all too quickly, a commandment that we take too lightly, a commandment that we think is not as important as all the rest. And yet, joy is a more than a commandment. It's an invitation to enter into the joy of our Lord. But if we disobey, we have Israel's example to look to.

## Expressing Joy

Joy is easy to do and I am going to share with you what has helped me grow my joy in the next few articles. To be joyful is a pleasure. Having joy is fun! God wants us to enjoy our lives and the hope that we have. So if you want to start right now then start with these ideas:

*Be thankful,  
burst into song,  
make music,*



*be thankful,*  
*be enthusiastic,*  
*encourage others,*  
*stop arguing,*  
*give thanks,*  
*be united,*  
*celebrate,*  
*and express your gratitude.*

And while you are at it, make sure you tell your face that you are joyful! Someone once said that the fruit of the Spirit is not prunes! Make sure your face doesn't have the look of a sour prune when you are supposed to be showing joy.

Think about what it looks like when someone has joy. A mother with a brand new baby, The shepherd who finds the sheep that was lost. A bride or groom on their wedding day. They don't just have inside joy. They are not rejoicing on the inside and looking miserable on the outside. Their joy overflows! It shows on their face, in their actions, in their words. That's the sort of joy that we should be showing. That's the joy that God wants from us. That's the sort of joy that should be showing on our faces.

The fruit of the Spirit is joy. Joy is a commandment, and a pleasurable commandment at that. It's an invitation into the joy of our Lord. And joy will bring us healing and love. It has for me, and it will for you too. Let us have joy in our lives and let our faces show it.