



THE EXHORTER

“And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.” Acts 2:40

The Palmer Road church of Christ, Westland, Mi. (prchurchofchrist.org)

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Philippians 4:4 "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!"

Our verse is a very well known passage. We hear it often in sermons. It is interesting that an apostle in prison tells brethren who have freedom to rejoice. We'd expect it to be the other way around. There are some layers we must peel back here.

First, rejoicing and happiness are not the same. We tend to use those words interchangeably. Happiness is based upon what is happening. There are many things in a day that happens which does not bring happiness. Changing dirty diapers would be high on the list. Paying bills is up there. Stuck in long lines of traffic. Waiting in waiting rooms for what seems to be hours. Getting shots, whether you are a little one or a big one, is no fun. Cable going out during a ballgame you are watching. Getting pulled over by the police. Stepping in a puddle of water and getting your foot wet. Those happenings do not bring happiness. Joy is not based upon what happens. The problem with happiness is that it is based upon the exterior things that are beyond your control. Rain during an outdoor wedding. You can't do much about that. It happens. Joy is internal, not external. It's based upon who you are, not where you are. It's based upon being forgiven by Christ and walking with the Lord in fellowship. This is why a tired, old apostle, in a Roman prison, could tell others to rejoice. He was rejoicing. The prison wasn't nice. The conditions weren't good. What was "happening," wasn't worth bragging about. But on the inside, he was one with the Lord and he knew that he would be with the Lord very soon. This is why we can have a joyful outlook and a joyful spirit while awaiting chemo treatments, or going to a funeral, or having to deal with the hassles of insurance forms. Our joy doesn't change because of what happens to us. The insides are not affected by the outsides.

Second, it's interesting that Paul had to remind the Philippians to be joyful. You'd think it ought to be something that they were by nature, but it's not. Paul in prison, in Rome. Things looked bleak. Life is hard. Things can get confusing. And all these exterior things can keep us from forgetting who we are on the inside. Forgiven. Heaven bound. Declared to be one of God's children. Blessed by the Lord. Included in the mighty work of God's kingdom. Those are things that the weather doesn't change. Those are things that sick days, traffic jams, piles of work to be done, bills to be paid, never touch. There is much to rejoice about. With God, we see this world from His perspective. We see what really matters in life.

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We see that Satan is soon to be defeated once and for all. Why tell the Philippians to rejoice? Because we forget these spiritual treasures. We get caught up with what is happening at the moment and fail to look deep within us at the blessings of God.

Third, being joyous changes your outlook and your attitude. You tend not to be bothered so much with superficial things that are temporary and do not last. So, there is long lines of traffic. Use the occasion to pray. So, you are waiting and waiting in the waiting room, use the occasion to read God's word. While paying your bills, be thankful to God that you have a job and the money to pay those bills. As you pay them, it reminds you to consider not only how generous God is, but are we being generous? It makes us think of others who we could drop a note to, or send a text to. Cheer someone up. Put some sunshine in someone's day. The joyful look opens your eyes to a wonderfully big world that you can help others with. Being joyful, makes you thankful. Being joyful makes you be helpful.

Fourth, being joyful is a choice that one must make. We leave the house and we can be grumpy, bitter, sour, discouraged, mean, annoyed, or we can be joyful. It's a choice that we make. Many wake up and the weather determines their mood and spirit for the day. A sunny day and they might be cheerful today. A dark gloomy day and that's the spirit that they will carry. The joyful person doesn't need to look outside the window to determine what he will be like. He looks within. He sees how God has been good to him. He realizes that he is blessed and that God is counting on him today. So, on the darkest of days, the child of God can be joyful. People at work won't understand. They may even ask, "What are you so happy about?" They do not understand that it's joyfulness not happiness that is radiating through our hearts, smiles and outlook.

Finally, being joyful doesn't mean someone has to be on vacation, lazy or taking a day off. A person can be up to their eyeballs in work and have a schedule full of things to do and still be joyful. A person can be sitting in a Roman prison and be joyful. It's not the location and it's not what we are doing, but it's the state of our heart as we are connected to the Lord. So, for the young couple in a small apartment. Don't assume that you can never be joyful until you get your own house and have some room. If you can't be joyful in an apartment, you'll probably never be joyful in the largest house you can afford. Here is a person who has an entry level job. He doesn't make much and the work day is long. He assumes that once he moves up, makes more money, gets his own desk that he will be joyful. That probably won't happen. If he can't be joyful now, he won't be joyful later. Here is a young couple with lots of babies. They demand all kinds of time and attention. The parents are constantly worn out and tired. If we can just hang on until they are all in school, then we will be joyful. Most likely not. They may be better rested, but joyful? No. If you can't be joyful now, you won't be when they are in school. Here is a man who is soon to retire. He has the days numbered. He dreams of travel, sleeping in and finally doing whatever he feels like. Then, he believes, he will be joyful. Nope. If he can't be joyful now, he won't be later.

Maybe Paul was telling the Philippians to be joyful because the days would come when some of them would be in prison. The persecution would be worse before it got better. If you can't be joyful now, you won't be joyful then. Paul was joyful. He was the example. He was showing them that it's an inside concept. What happens on the outside doesn't change the inside.

Oh, if we could only get this. Nothing worse than a bunch of grumpy Christians shuffling into the church building to worship on Sunday morning. They are cranky, crabby and spreading their misery. It's cold they say. Yep. It's raining outside. So? It's too early. And in the background of my mind are the words written from a prison, "Be joyful." We get to worship the King! We get to put a smile on the face of God.

Joyful...yes. Joyful...always. Joyful...it's up to you.

Roger Shouse (Used by permission)