

Composed Christians in a World of Crises



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[This message was delivered in the seventeenth century by Thomas Manton. We have paraphrased it in modern English, and its message is just as potent today as then. Composed Christians are those who have learned to rejoice in any and all circumstances.]

"Rejoice evermore!" is a command, and a command for all Christians of all time. God is saying that His children must make it a matter of conscience to rejoice in Him at all times and under every circumstance. Rejoicing is not our choice; it is God's command. If we are tempted to treat these words as an option, we undermine God's own imperative to us.

God doesn't have our heart until He has our delight. I want to amplify this truth by challenging you to take three steps toward rejoicing in God our Savior: 1. Put aside every obstacle that interferes with rejoicing; 2. Persuade yourself that rejoicing is necessary; 3. Practice rejoicing evermore.

I. Put aside every obstacle that interferes with rejoicing.

Let me prepare you right now, this won't always be easy. For instance, how can we rejoice when we realize it is God who has allowed afflictions to come down on us in the first place? Isn't it stupid to be happy when He is angry or to be joyful in tragedy that he could have prevented?

You may think it doesn't make sense, even if we can rejoice in trouble and persecution. How can we rejoice when God's own hand sends stinging chastisement to correct us? Are we to be happy in that? Let me answer without hesitation — God does expect us to rejoice in the trials that come directly from Him. "Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls; yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation" (Habakkuk 3:17, 18). Even if God chooses to correct us with famine and failure, "yet I will rejoice in the Lord!"

Spiritual rejoicing is neither ignorance nor irreverence but an honor to God when we are satisfied in Him although everything else fails. Godly satisfaction shows Him that His comfort is all we need, since He Himself is out of trouble's reach. To extend faith above our circumstances by living each moment in a hidden, high cleft of love for God, we learn to smile when natural forces try to make us cry. "At destruction and famine shalt thou laugh; neither shalt thou be afraid" (Job 5:22).

To rejoice in the Lord when every outward reason for rejoicing dies is far from being a sin; because no matter how bitter our portion might be in the world, our present and future inheritance in Christ is kept for us in glory, guarded by God Himself.

If we are godly, we will suffer persecution, but we won't be forsaken.

We need to distinguish between the affliction and the support so we won't fall under the problem. Both can and must stand together, for in all worldly tribulation we must "weep as if we wept not" (I Corinthians 7:30). In short, problems are necessary to make us know God's sovereign strength; meanwhile, His comfort makes the problems bearable.

Certainly the God of all comfort does not want His children to faint in anguish as if all joy were gone. We are never utterly destroyed as long as we still have Him as our portion. "The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in Him" (Lamentations 3:24). If we are godly, we will suffer persecution, but we won't be forsaken. We will be troubled, but we won't be defeated. We might be cast down, but we won't be destroyed. How can all this be? God is alive in us! Only through trials of our faith will we ever know Him as the real joy and delight of life.

We can endure these hardships because we look up to the Father and find love while He is correcting us. The discipline doesn't come only from His justice; mercy is the rod He refines us with. "The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?" (John 18:11). We are able to take that bitter cup because faith assures us it is the hand of a compassionate, all-knowing Father who holds the other side of it.

This Father who pities His children has enough mercy to turn that bitter cup around for our good. "For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but He for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness" (Hebrews 12:10).

Why should we keep feeling dejected when God is stirring us up to more humility, contempt for the world, and confidence in Himself? How can we be disquieted and unhappy when He has waited so long for us to place our heart's desire in Him alone? Because our holy, chastening God is also a loving heavenly Father! We can drink the cup of suffering and affirm with the Psalmist, "O taste and see that the Lord is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him" (Psalm 34:8).

If our Father allows temporal affliction to make us ready for everlasting glory, there is still a fountain of joy pushing its way up through the tears. "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." (2 Corinthians 4:17).

"BLESSED ARE THEY THAT MOURN; FOR THEY SHALL BE COMFORTED" (Matthew 5:4). A misconception concerning rejoicing is this: since Christ has promised to bless those who mourn for sin, how can we rejoice? Mourning for sin is the only gate into repentance because of the sin and curse that naturally hold us back from righteousness. As long as we were outside Christ, we had nothing to comfort us, nothing to answer the terror of the law, nothing to meet accusations of conscience, nothing to protect us from approaching judgment and hell.

Because we have carelessly earned these wages of sin, what else can we do but cry out to God with strong tears and supplication? His first work in conversion is to put us out of fool's paradise, with its vain rejoicing and delight in anything and everything except Christ. Thus, broken-hearted humiliation is required to deaden the exciting taste of sin. It is worth the long hours of pain and weeping when we can esteem the healing grace of Christ more than all the pleasures and prizes the world awards so attractively.

The most perilous position in the world is that of a man who realizes he is lost — in danger of condemnation — and yet isn't grieved for his sin. But for a person who sorrows in earnest repentance, joy is in the making! God is ready to heal as soon as our need takes us to His throne of grace. "For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones. For I will not contend for ever, neither will I be always wroth: for the spirit should fail before me, and the souls which I have made. For the iniquity of his covetousness was I wroth, smother him: I hid me, and was wroth, and he went on frowardly [backsliding] in the way of his heart" (Isaiah 57:15–17). But then the Lord adds, "I have seen his ways, and will heal him: I will lead him also, and restore comfort unto him and to his mourners" (v.18).

It is evident why mourning for sin contains a kernel of joy; the humble Christian is glad his heart can still break because of sin! An hour of sincere, soul-searching repentance means more to him than many evenings of exciting entertainment; he wouldn't trade the comfort of God's chastening hand for all the fun in the world. He even prefers to taste the bitter tears of repentance that deaden sin, along with the precious captivity of Christ's love, to all the prominence the world would offer him. To be able to hurt when we have hurt God is a requisite part of delight in Him.

A penitent, broken believer wouldn't change places with the most successful, prestigious of ungodly men. And this priority points to proof that an unbreakable joy forms the very nucleus of our being. It isn't perfect joy in the Lord, not yet — not until heaven will we know that kind of glory — but it is joy mixed with sorrow and with groans that can't be uttered. In Christ, genuine repentance is a glorious, unspeakable joy in itself.

II. Persuade yourself that rejoicing is necessary.

Unless we love and long for Him more than for anything else, He is not our God. Whether the world crumbles or stands, whether we lose or keep everything and everyone precious to us, the Lord Himself remains the source of our satisfaction! "Delight thyself also in the Lord: and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart" (Psalm 37:4).

Our heart, however, is not whole until we are so taken up by love and praise for our Redeemer that we don't think about whether we're rich or poor, famous or ignored. Only as we are stripped of all natural coverings and esteem a naked Christ reason enough for joy do we actually love Him with our whole heart. "Thou hast put gladness in my heart more than in the time that their corn and their wine increased" (Psalm 4:7). This kind of devotion to God frees us to lose everything else and still have what we want the most. "For whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ" (Philippians 3:8). Paul wrote a sequel to this "spoiling of goods" that the world won't even read: "Knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance" (Hebrews 10:34).

Once this divine joy is settled, anchored by God in our hearts, it becomes a solid support in times of pain and poverty and disgrace. Nothing can overcome our joy then. "Your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you" (John 16:22).

God created a place in His children for joy. This place will be filled with something, either with the toys and trivia of worldly achievement and accumulation or with heavenly things of the Creator. Since the love of sensual pleasure forms the root of sin, there will always be carnal cravings that lure us away from God. "But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed" (James 1:14).

The bent toward gratifying flesh is the downfall of the church today. Since this kind of need has been born and bred in us, deeply ingrained in our nature, it doesn't come out without a fight. For example, if we decide to feed those needs for power and prestige, with even a few unnoticed crumbs of pride at a time, they grow so strong that they soon impale our souls to temporal plateaus of sensual pleasure. So, then, in order for us not to be bound by serving flesh, we can turn to a higher joy, much the same way that a greater nail tears into wood and drives out the lesser nail.

While the sinful nature loves pleasure more than "the naked Christ," the renewed nature of man makes God his exceeding great reward and favors things of the Spirit. "They that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit, the things of the Spirit" (Romans 8:5). Just as we don't cherish acorns anymore when we taste fresh wheat bread, carnal appetites die a little at a time as we possess incorruptible treasures in Christ.

When our joy presses upward to the heavenly goal of being God's pleasure, it drains the dregs of contentment collected below. Sensual, petty satisfactions become bland compared to the Christian's joy in Christ. Once we know God's hidden manna, the garlic and onions and flesh-pots of Egypt are sickening. "We will be glad and rejoice in thee, we will remember thy love more than wine" (Song of Solomon 1:4). Rejoicing in God puts out carnal delights, as much like the brightness of the sun dims the fire!

Next, "The joy of the Lord is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10). Joy lifts us to a life of holiness. Often we feel natural apathy or dullness when we think of serving God. And this deadness can be overpowered only by the entrance of delight in Him, something which works as smoothly as oil poured on sluggish wheels.

III. Practice rejoicing evermore.

"Rejoice in the Lord, ye righteous: for praise is comely for the upright" (Psalm 33:1). Those who have had a new, divine nature put into them by the almighty God aren't satisfied with things of the world anymore. When our new nature keeps turning to the Father, we can walk away from fleshly pleasures, leaving them as husks for swine to feed on. "Ye may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust"

(2 Peter 1:4). A change of heart, then, implies a change of desire too. A pure heart after God wants what He wants.

Our very life must be altered. Holy obedience conceives the beautiful fruit of joy every time. "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love. These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full" (John 15:10, 11). Walking in the fear of God and divine comfort, then, are the inseparable arms of divine love: "Walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 9:31). The godly life is the only serene life: "For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation [conducted ourselves] in the world" (2 Corinthians 1:12).

If we fall into sin that separates us from God's peace, then our rejoicing in Him will suffer critical injury. A tender heart that beats for God's continual caress can't make light of the sin that breaks this cherished communion.

Now here is a practical side of rejoicing. It can't be sustained if it isn't continually exercised. If we neglect this great portion of God's salvation in us, it will become shriveled and crippled and too sluggish to sing out love songs to Christ. But by constant use we keep it and increase it until at last it becomes the strongest fiber of our soul, willing and able to control every other affection.

The crowd who listened to John the Baptist's message of repentance "were willing for a season to rejoice in his light" (John 5:35). And the stony ground in Jesus' parable "received the word with joy, and for a while believed, but in time of temptation fell away" (Luke 8:13).

Because rejoicing in God's goodness can be overmastered by malignant weaknesses of the flesh, we must make it take firm root in our will and nourish it with constant use so it will grow and flourish until we see Christ — and beyond!

Now it is time to reconsider something I've already mentioned. Sin invades and abuses our spirit to the point that rejoicing struggles to survive the turbulent aftermath of sorrow. David understood from personal experience how sin clouds God's face and absorbs all joy. "When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer" (Psalm 32:3–4). "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption" (Ephesians 4:30).

Sins of the tongue betray what is concealed deep in the heart.

Notice Paul's persuasive statement about grieving the Holy Spirit: "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying" (Ephesians 4:29). Sins of the tongue betray what is concealed deep in the heart, and no measure of clever conversation borrowed from the world is worth cutting off the flow of joy to and from our holy Father. "Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient [fitting]: but rather giving of thanks" (Ephesians 5:4). "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you" (Ephesians 4:31).

By giving in to discontent, impulsive rage, argument, and microscopic seeds of envy and revenge, we let tiny words become raging destroyers of joy in God. Any form of vain conversation, then, whether it be a skillfully maneuvered put-down, explosive anger or the slightest insinuation of an encroaching sexual appetite, is a murderous act and must be conquered and put away so we won't have to exist with a seared, numb conscience.

But what if we have already wounded our conscience? Because of God's mercy, we don't have to remain arrested by this pain forever. We must first humble ourselves and repent, renewing faith in Christ Jesus, accepting forgiveness and letting His grace deliver us from desolation. Because God has given the gift of repentance, we can believe Him to restore the joy of His salvation so our broken heart can be revived and made whole again. "Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice" (Psalm 51:12).

God is ready to receive lapsed penitents who confess sin and yearn to return to Him. "I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord: and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin" (Psalm 32:5).

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