

A Celebration of Joy

1 Thessalonians 2:19-20

By Phil Johnson

Our text this morning is 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20, where the apostle Paul writes, "**For 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.**"

This is one of several verses in 1 Thessalonians where Paul speaks of joy. He practically starts off the epistle with a reference to the joy the Thessalonians had at their conversion. He remembers and rehearses how they had turned to God from their idols, and he writes in 1:5-6: "**Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit.**"

Then here in our text, Paul refers to the Thessalonians themselves as his crown of rejoicing; his glory and joy.

And just a few verses down, in 3:9, he asks this rhetorical question: "**What thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God?**" And finally, in 1 Thessalonians 5:16, he gives them this command: "**Rejoice always.**"

So joy is a running theme throughout this epistle, as it is in 2 Corinthians, and even more so in the book of Philippians.

In fact, throughout the Pauline epistles, we see this theme of joy. The only time Paul *doesn't* regularly speak of joy or rejoicing is when he is combatting false doctrine or confronting serious discipline problems in the church, like in Galatians and 1 Corinthians. But even in Galatians, in the midst of confronting a serious doctrinal threat to that church, he names joy as one of the

fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). And in 1 Corinthians, where he is trying to sort out so many difficult problems in the discipline and practice of that church, he reminds them (in 1 Corinthians 13:6) that true love "**does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.**"

Everything ultimately drew Paul's thoughts back to joy and rejoicing. He was full of joy, and his epistles reflect that. He constantly reminds believers that joy is not only a privilege, but a *duty*, for every Christian. Again, 1 Thessalonians 5:16, the second shortest verse in the Bible, "**Rejoice always.**" and Philippians 4:4: "**Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.**" Those are *commands*, and they make joy our solemn duty.

Now it would be good to start by looking at what *joy* is—and especially what Paul means by joy—because there is a lot of unnecessary confusion about this. What is *joy*? What does it mean to be joyful?

A few years back, one of the best-known evangelical leaders in America wrote a book on joy that became a national best-seller. The book was loosely based on Paul's epistle to the Philippians, but it's one of those books where you really have to be paying attention to notice that he is actually dealing with a biblical text. This author didn't stick very closely to the text of Philippians. And worst of all, the book became a huge best-seller. It was a great opportunity to say something edifying about Christian joy, but it was largely a squandered opportunity, because the author portrayed joy in a grossly *unbiblical* way.

He never actually defined *joy* or described it in biblical terms. But from the synonyms he used throughout the book, it was pretty easy to discern what *his* concept of joy is. Here are some of the terms he used to describe joy: "*a spirit of fun and laughter*"; "*a sense of humor*"; "*an attitude of [outrageous] happiness.*" Throughout the book, he portrayed joy as levity, humor. He seemed to think *joy* is all about hilarity, comedy, fun. He made joy

out to be a giddy sort of amusement that simply laughs at everything in life. And those are practically the very words he used. Throughout the book, he equated *joy* and *laughter*. Every chapter closed with something about the importance of laughter. In fact, this author wrote about joy as if the truest expression of joy would simply be side-splitting, out-loud laughter. I'd say the truest expression of Christian joy—under the true, biblical concept of joy—is a glad heart that naturally expresses itself in worship. Boisterous expressions of merriment are often nothing more than a substitute for real joy—a kind of coverup for gloom and melancholy or even an expression of suppressed rage. You see that in the way the world uses humor to mock and deride. (Some of the most effective critiques of our country's politicians and public policies nowadays come from comedians. They are funny—but trust me, there is no joy in that kind of sardonic laughter. Most of the laughter today is an expression of scorn, not joy.)

But this evangelical author seemed to imagine that the best way to stimulate joy in his readers was by telling a lot of jokes and funny anecdotes and trying to get people to laugh. In fact, even the title of the book is about laughter, as if laughter and joy were the same thing.

Now, obviously, joy can produce laughter, but laughter is a *fruit* of joy, not the *essence* of joy. Don't make the mistake of equating laughter with joy. In fact, modern society is filled with laughter but almost totally devoid of real joy. That's my point: Some of the angriest people in the world are our best-known comedians. Their laughter is used to mask the utter absence of genuine gladness. The world has made humor a substitute for authentic joy. We in the church should not make that same mistake.

And yet, I am not trying to divorce the idea of happiness from true joy. When Paul speaks of joy, he has in mind a pure sense of

well-being, delight, gladness. The joy he speaks of is a vivid pleasure that arises from a sense of well-being and satisfaction. It is a wholly positive thing. It *does* often produce smiles and laughter. I'm not suggesting otherwise. I'm simply trying to point out that most of the laughter and hilarity you see in modern secular society today has nothing whatsoever to do with joy, and we as Christians should not think of joy in those terms.

Also, real joy has nothing to do with *temperament*. I hope you don't think of joy as a personality quirk that belongs to naturally upbeat people. Authentic joy is a fruit of the Spirit.

Therefore, real joy does not come from some external stimulus like slapstick or jokes or funny stories. True joy is not a sensual emotion. But *authentic* joy—the kind of joy the apostle Paul wrote about; the kind of joy we have a duty to cultivate—is a deep gladness that springs from within. It is impervious to external circumstances. Its ultimate source and object is God. Scripture speaks of it as "**the joy of the Lord.**" Nehemiah 8:10: "**the joy of the LORD is your strength.**"

It is called "**the joy of the Lord**" because it *comes from* God. It is His gift to us. It is the birthright of every Christian and a natural result of our unshakable security in Christ. Again, it is not dependent on sensual delights or any external catalyst. Its source is God Himself. That is precisely what Scripture means when it calls joy a *fruit of the Spirit*. It is one of those inner qualities that comes to every true child of God when our heavenly Father causes us "**to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in [our] inner being.**" The Spirit of God indwells every believer, and Scripture says (Romans 5:5): "**God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.**" Joy is a natural, and predictable fruit when the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts.

Also, it's called "**the joy of the Lord**" because the ultimate object of this joy is God. It is "**the joy of the Lord**" in the sense that we rejoice in the Lord.

What is the chief end for which we were created? *To glorify God and to enjoy Him forever*. That enjoyment—a delight in God, a love for Him, and an attitude that finds gladness in every one of His attributes—that great delight and satisfaction is the best expression of true Christian joy. It's not merely a sense of humor or a love of laughter *per se*. But within the context of delighting in God—when *He* is the source of our joy—there is no limit to the happiness and rejoicing and pleasure we are entitled to enjoy. Spurgeon said, "You cannot be too happy, brother. Nay, do not suspect yourself of being wrong because you are full of delight. . . . Provided that it is joy in the Lord, you cannot have too much of it."

G. K. Chesterton said, "Joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian." It's a shame Christian joy is such a *secret*. It ought to be one of the outstanding marks and distinguishing characteristics of our lives. It ought to be one of the first things people notice when they interact with us. There's no reason to keep our joy a secret. There's no reason to be suspicious that too much joy is a bad thing. Joy is our duty, and according to 1 Thessalonians 5:15-18, it is a *moral* duty on the same level as prayer and thankfulness and doing good to one another.

In other words, real joy is one of the *distinctives* of Christianity. The Stoic endures everything in sheer agony; the Epicurean seeks raw pleasure for pleasure's sake; the Hindu hopes for a better reincarnation; the Buddhist seeks Nirvana by trying to detach and isolate his mind from reality; the Muslim passively submits; the modern Jew hopes for a different Messiah; the atheist has nothing eternal to be truly joyful about. *Only the Christian can truly rejoice in this life.*

And it is our duty as Christians to rejoice. Baal worshipers can cry aloud and "**cut themselves with knives and lancets, after their manner.**" But Jesus said *you, even when you fast, "anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others."* We are supposed to be cheerful, contented, always rejoicing in the Lord. That is part of our testimony, and if your countenance is barren of joy and gladness, you are not being a good testimony for Christ.

And yet, when we contemplate joy as believers and as ministers of the gospel, let's recognize that true biblical joy has as much gravity as gaiety in it. It is not the superficial happiness or pleasure this world seeks in comedy and entertainment. It is a joy that is perfectly compatible with pain and sorrow. In fact, it is the very thing that lifts us *above* the hardships of this life and enables us to endure our heartaches and our sorrows even in the midst of them. The apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:8-11:

**We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;
perplexed, but not driven to despair;
9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but
not destroyed;
10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus,
so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in
our bodies.
11 For we who live are always being given over to
death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus
also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.**

In Romans 5:3, Paul wrote, "**we rejoice [even] in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance.**" James said we ought to count it all joy when we fall into diverse temptations. In other words, the true Christian's joy is a joy that is unhindered by tribulation, distress, or even the most profound sorrows.

In 2 Corinthians 6:10, Paul writes, "**[we are] sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.**"

"Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing"! It sounds like an oxymoron. But if you understand the kind of joy Paul was describing, you know exactly what he was talking about. For the Christian, there is a true joy that wells up even in the most extreme kind of sorrow. There is a peace that passes understanding, a security that nothing can shake, and a joy that floods the heart even in a moment of grief. It's one of the greatest benefits of being a believer, and it is one of the greatest assurances that all the promises of Scripture are true.

Think of the apostle Paul's life and ministry. In the *early* part of his ministry, he was constantly persecuted. At the height of his ministry, he was besieged with problems in the church, heretics who undermined his work, and enemies who deliberately challenged him at every turn. During the *final* years of his ministry, he was a prisoner of the Roman government. Some of his most effective ministry took place, and some of his years of his most important epistles were written, while he was in chains. His ministry was not the sort that naturally lends itself to joy. And yet joy was a constant theme in everything he wrote.

I enjoy going to pastors' conferences and denominational gatherings that bring together pastors. It's always a great encouragement to meet other pastors and hear about both their triumphs and their struggles. Some pastors focus on numbers, as if the size of their church were the only gauge of the health of their ministry. Other pastors seem to corner you and rehearse all the controversies and internal strife in their fellowship. One group I belong to has special sessions where every pastor and every member church takes 15 minutes or so to give a report on how the ministry is going.

No one ever gave a ministry report like the apostle Paul. Listen to how he chronicled his ministry in 2 Corinthians 11:23-30. He said he had endured:

labors . . . imprisonments . . . countless beatings,
and [he was] often near death.

24 Five times [he says] I received at the hands of
the Jews the forty lashes less one.

25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was
stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night
and a day I was adrift at sea;

26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers,
danger from robbers, danger from my own
people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city,
danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger
from false brothers;

27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless
night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in
cold and exposure.

28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily
pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made
to fall, and I am not indignant?

30 If I must boast, I will boast of the things that
show my weakness.

The apostle Paul endured all of that, and yet one of the central themes of his ministry was *joy*. His ministry was a joyful labor of love, despite daily tribulation, hunger, thirst, persecution, beatings, shipwrecks, the attacks of false brethren—and everything else he endured. By comparison, our lives are blessed every day with an embarrassment of riches, comforts, and tender mercies from the gracious hand of our God. We *ought* to be joyful, right? We don't suffer a fraction of what Paul endured. But he kept that perspective of joy, all through his ministry. And a spirit of joy colors everything he wrote. You see it expressed in the passage we are looking at here. He speaks of the believers at Thessalonica as his crown of rejoicing. He tells them (2 Thessalonians 2:20): "**You are our glory and joy.**"

How did he keep that joyful perspective? How did the apostle Paul rise above all those heartaches and maintain joy in the midst of such a troubled life? The immediate context here gives us several clues, and I want you to see them.

First,

1. HE LOOKED TO HIS PEOPLE

Notice carefully what Paul is saying here. Verse 19: "**For what is our . . . joy?**" "**Is it not you?**" In verse 20, he states in explicit terms: "**You are our glory and joy.**" And then down in 3:9, he says, "**What thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God?**" These people gave joy to the apostle Paul. He regarded them as his "**crown of exultation.**" That's how the NASB renders it: "**[our] crown of exultation.**" *Exultation* is a ten-dollar word for the most triumphant and rapturous kind of joy—elation; ecstasy; jubilation.

How different is that from the what so many pastors are inclined to think! Some of you who serve in ministry or teach Bible studies might even be tempted to think, "*People are the source of my frustration, not my joy!*" Like the seminary student who told me, "Ministry would be easy if we just didn't have to deal with *people.*"

It's easy to feel that way. Every problem in the church is ultimately tied to *people*. Is there division in the church? It stems from people who can't get along with one another, or people who refuse to esteem one another as better than self. Is there rebellion and a spirit of mutiny against the church's leaders? It stems from people like Korah, who despise authority and want to have the preeminence for themselves. Every church and every pastor from time to time has to deal with a Diotrephes, or Euodias and Syntyche, or even a Judas. And if we're not careful, people like that will skew our perspective of the rest of the flock. We become

so preoccupied with the problems our people cause, that we lose sight of the joys our people bring us.

I'll confess to you that sometimes after a week of counseling—listening to problems, trying to untangle the mess sin can make of a person's life, trying to help people deal with heartbreaking conflicts, soul-threatening issues, and life-shattering problems—it's easy to become discouraged. Then I'm always reminded when we come together on Sundays that for every ounce of *problem* we face in our flock, there is a pound of potential.

The apostle Paul could remain joyful despite all the problems in the churches he dealt with, because he stayed focused on his people's *potential* more than he was fixated on their *problems*. And that is why he described his people as "**our hope, [our] joy, [and our] crown of exultation.**" These were people he had invested hours of ministry in. He knew them, and loved them, and longed to see Christ fully formed in them. Not only that, he was certain God would eventually conform them utterly and perfectly to the image of Christ.

I'm sure the Thessalonians had their share of busybodies, and rebels, and problem people. But Paul saw past those problems and trusted what God was doing in his people, and that was a source of overflowing joy for him. It was the main hope he clung to during those years of imprisonment, and it was the main source of his joy.

One sure way to cultivate a joyful perspective of other people is to be a soul-winner. Cultivate a zeal for evangelism. Father spiritual children, and your joy will be multiplied.

We should be working to populate our church with converts, not just sheep who wander in from other flocks. People often complain that Calvinism quenches evangelistic zeal. My reply is that that kind of Calvinism is not real Calvinism. True Calvinism is a message about how God sovereignly seeks and saves the lost,

and the person who has embraced the spirit of genuine Calvinism will be zealous for evangelism, eager to get the message to the elect, because we know that God has many people in this place. People aren't saved by election alone. **"Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ."**

In fact, one of the major reasons Paul was so joyful when he thought of the Thessalonians is that he was their spiritual father. He had brought the gospel to them. He had acted as both father and midwife in their spiritual birth. Birth is a painful and messy process, but its end result is *pure joy*.

Paul had brought these people to Christ. So clear was the change in them and so zealous was their faith that Paul said he was confident of their election. Chapter 1, verse 4: **"We know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit."**

Those people were a joy to him because he was confident of their election. He knew what a change had been wrought by their conversion. And he was confident that God, having begun a good work in them, would be faithful to complete it. And that is how Paul was able to see past whatever petty problems or internal difficulties might arise in the church at Thessalonica from time to time, and regard the people as a rich source of pure joy and rejoicing.

And that brings me to my second point. First, Paul had joy because he looked to his people. Second, he had joy because—

2. HE LOOKED TO THE FUTURE

Notice again what he says in 2:19: "**For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming?**" Here's why when he thought of those people, it brought him such great joy: he was anticipating that day when Christ would be fully formed in them. He knew God was conforming them to the image of His Son, and he knew God would fully complete that work.

Romans 8:29-30: "**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.**"

Grammatically, he puts glorification in the past tense, even though it is yet future. He does this because he regards it as a sure thing—a guarantee that is sealed by God's own faithfulness.

The work of God in every redeemed person progresses steadily toward that goal of perfect Christlikeness. Paul was confident of that. Chapter 1, verse 4. He was assured of their election. Therefore, looking past whatever petty problems and difficulties might exist in the Thessalonian church, Paul was able by faith to see those people fully conformed to the image of Christ, entirely mature, perfectly Christlike—so that even though "**what we will be has not yet appeared . . . we know that when he appears we shall be like him**"—and that expectation brought him joy.

Paul was *confident* that the transformation into perfect Christlikeness was already taking place and would one day be complete. That confidence is a theme throughout his writings. In 2 Thessalonians 3:3-4, he writes to these same people, "**But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command.**"

And Paul's confidence wasn't reserved for the Thessalonians only. He had the same confidence when he dealt with churches where *problems* multiplied. In Galatians 5:10, he writes to the Galatians: **"I have confidence in you in the Lord."** In 2 Corinthians 7:16, he writes, **"I rejoice, because I have perfect confidence in you."**

Why did Paul express so much joyful confidence in these people? It wasn't bare confidence in the goodness or the willpower of the people themselves; it was a conviction that God would bring them to ultimate perfection. Paul declares that certainty in chapter 5, verses 23-24, where he prays for the Thessalonians, **"Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it."**

And here's the point: There is a deep joy that springs from the assurance that all the future, no matter what happens, is guaranteed by God's faithfulness, His goodness, and His love for His people. Those things are not changeable or subject to any deviation, but they are fixed and immutable, inextricably linked to the Father's purpose of honoring His son by presenting Him with a spotless bride.

And so as we look to the future, we ought to realize that God's ultimate purposes are certain, sure, trustworthy, secure. The future for the Christian is not something to fear, but something to embrace—a source of great joy. Imagine everyone in this flock—even the ones who right now are spiritually weak and struggling—the full-time critic, the part-time backslider, the brand-new, still-immature believer—*all of them will one day be brought to the perfection of total Christlikeness and will appear with Him at His coming.* That is what Paul was anticipating. Look at our passage again (1 Thessalonians 2:19): **"For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming?"**

That is what brought him deep joy when he thought of the Thessalonians. He was projecting into the future and by faith he was seeing these people as they would ultimately be. That is the secret to a joyful perspective on life and ministry.

But there's one more, and I have already hinted at it. Paul found joy by looking at his people. He found joy by seeing through the eyes of faith into the future. And finally, he had this joy because—

3. HE LOOKED TO GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

I want you to notice the progression of the argument here. The two verses we are looking at today are really a parenthesis in the flow of this epistle. Paul is recounting how he wanted to visit the Thessalonians in person and tried to come see them, but he was hindered. Verse 17:

**But since we were torn away from you, brothers,
for a short time, in person not in heart, we
endeavored the more eagerly and with great
desire to see you face to face,
18 because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul,
again and again—but Satan hindered us.**

Then he interrupts with *our* passage, telling the Thessalonians what joy he drew from the thought of them, and from the assurance that they would one day meet "**in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming.**" He's reassuring them of his love for them, even though he was unable to come and see them in person. And the way he expresses his love is by describing the joy he derived from just thinking about them—a joy that ultimately would be fulfilled to perfection when the Lord returned to gather all the saints to Himself in absolute Christlikeness. This was the joy that filled Paul's heart and flavored his ministry.

And then the text is broken in our English Bibles by a chapter division, but Paul actually picks up exactly where he left off in

verse 18 of chapter 3 ("we wanted to come to you . . . but Satan hindered us"). Then chapter 3, verse 1:

Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, 2 and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith . . .

In other words, because Satan had somehow hindered Paul from coming, Paul sent Timothy in his place to minister to them.

This is interesting, because Paul wrote both of his epistles to the Thessalonians from Corinth, during the time he was in the process of founding the Corinthian church. (This epistle of 1 Thessalonians fits into the biblical chronology at the point of Acts 18, where Luke records that Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth.) So these were among the earliest of Paul's epistles. First Corinthians was written later. There came a time in the Corinthian church where Paul wanted to pay *them* a visit but was hindered, and once again, he sent Timothy instead (1 Corinthians 4:17). Paul was the church founder, and the spiritual father of both the Thessalonians and the Corinthians, and Timothy's role, when necessary, was to visit those churches and help establish them in the faith.

How did Satan hinder Paul from going to Thessalonica? We don't know, and Paul doesn't explain here. Luke doesn't talk about it in Acts 18, either. But the word translated "**hindered**" is a military term that is often used in Greek literature to describe the destruction of roads and bridges in order to slow the progress of an invading army. Somehow, Satan was actively hindering Paul, putting roadblocks or obstacles in the way to make it impossible for him to come to the Thessalonians.

Notice: Paul explicitly blames it on Satan.

But even *that* doesn't cause the apostle Paul to despair, because he knows that God is ultimately sovereign even over Satan, and Satan could do nothing unless God allowed him to do

it. That's one of the things we learn from the book of Job, isn't it? God sovereignly circumscribes the devil's activity, so that nothing the evil one does to us ever takes God by surprise or thwarts God's purposes in the least degree. 1 Corinthians 10:13—God will not allow you to be tempted beyond your ability to endure. Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:18: **"The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom."**

Not only was Satan hindering Paul from visiting the Thessalonian believers, but he had the Thessalonians under siege as well. He was attacking them with persecution and trouble. And that is why Paul wanted to come to them, but ultimately had to send Timothy in his place (chapter 3, verse 2): **"to establish and exhort [or encourage] you in your faith."**

How would Timothy establish and encourage them? By teaching them about the sovereignty of God. Notice verse 3: **"That no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this."** "God has a purpose in your suffering and in my delay," Paul says. "We were *appointed*—"destined"—(predestined) to these things." Predestined by whom? By a sovereign God who has good purposes even in the evil things that befall His children.

The most familiar but little-understood promise in all of Scripture is Romans 8:28: **"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."** That promise is all about God's sovereignty. I love to hear Arminians recite that verse! Because every time they do, they are confessing that in their heart of hearts, they *know* God is sovereign, that He is in control of all things, and that He has a good purpose in whatever comes to pass. He plans to use it all for good.

That means there is nothing for the true believer to be afraid of. Nothing can ultimately dampen our joy, if we understand this

truth. Whatever happens—whether Satan hinders us, or unbelievers persecute us, or the powers of darkness try some other means to threaten us—whatever happens, God will use it for good. That takes a lot of pressure and stress out of this earthly life, doesn't it?

Let me try to say this gently, but it needs to be said: Calvinists, of all people, ought to be the most joyful people on earth, because we understand these things. Our lives, and our hearts, and our countenances ought to be filled with pure joy, because we understand and know that God is in charge and can use every circumstance for our good. More than that, he promises that He *will* make all things work together for our good. "**If God be for us, who can be against us?**" What is there, really, to be gloomy about? Nothing!

And yet, I have to say that I don't know a whole lot of Calvinists whose lives and ministries and reputations are colored chiefly by joy. We're not enough like the apostle Paul. Too many Calvinists tend to be argumentative, harsh toward other people, unconcerned and uncaring, wrapped up in their books and their doctrine rather than investing their time in their people—going through life with severe faces and attitudes devoid of any visible joy.

And yet as we have seen from the beginning, God calls us to be joyful. Joy is a duty. Look at Paul's example (verse 7 of chapter 2): "**We were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children**"; kind and patient (Verse 11) "**like a father with his children**"; and above all, full of joy and rejoicing. Can you imagine the result if the entire Calvinist community in America began to reflect those characteristics? That is how we need to be.

Be patient with that stubborn Arminian who just can't seem to embrace these things. Remember, God is sovereign over that guy's mind and heart, too. His Arminianism isn't thwarting God's

sovereignty. His ideas may be wrong, and his theology certainly needs to be corrected, but you can do it patiently, tenderly, like a father. And if you approach life and ministry that way, it will make you more joyful.

There's a beautiful progression in 1 Thessalonians 2. It starts with Paul's example of extreme patience. He was like both mother and father to his flock. That gave him joy; it enabled him to minister joyfully, even in the trials of the hectic here and now; it brought him immense joy as he looked toward their glorification in the sweet bye and bye; and his passion for them was that they should share in that joy together with him.

Back to our text, and I will finish up quickly. I got to chapter 3, verse 3, and I don't want to leave it hanging. Paul writes:

that no one [should] be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this.

4 For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know.

5 For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.

6 But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you—

7 for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith.

8 For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.

9 For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God.

Paul had *told* the Thessalonians that they would suffer persecution. He had *taught* them that God had a purpose in it. And therefore when the persecution came, it only served to strengthen their faith. And that, in turn, increased *his* joy.

My heart resonates with what Paul is saying here, because nothing brings me more joy than the doctrine of God's sovereignty. It eliminates worry; it uplifts me even in the midst of the most severe trials; it strengthens me through every weakness; it helps me endure persecution; and it gives me confidence in the midst of opposition. Knowing that God is in control, and that He intends to use all things for my good, how could I be anything *but* joyful?

And when I see the doctrine I have taught from this pulpit begin to make a difference in how *you* respond to the difficulties of life, that only increases my joy.

So that is the pathway joy ministry: truly love people and you'll find joy in ministering to them. Look to the future, and you'll derive joy from the hope that is set before you. And lean on God's sovereignty, to find joy even in the midst of your trials.

I'm always aware that there may be people who hear this message who are not believers, and to them I have to say: You cannot possibly know true joy until you have a settled confidence that your sins are forgiven and eternity is secure. Only Christ can cleanse you of your guilt and give you life. You can't *earn* it; you certainly don't *deserve* it; but it can be yours by grace if you simply trust Christ as Lord and Savior. Forsake yourself and your sins and turn to Him, and (as Scripture says, Romans 10:13): **"everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."** Christ paid the penalty of sin on behalf of those who believe. As their substitute and proxy He bore the judgment, absorbed the wrath of God on their behalf. And He offers the water of life freely to those who will come.

Come to Him in faith, and you too will find a peace that passes understanding. Then and only then will you know what it is to share in the very joy of heaven.

Let's pray:

Father, "**You have made known to [us] the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.**" May we partake in heaven's joys even now. Cleanse us from the guilt of sin; cure us from our hardness of heart; make us to know the joy of salvation—and may our lives radiate that true joy in a joyless culture, so that we might be more effective witnesses for Christ.