

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 24, 2022**

**THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT #2:
JOY TO YOU AND ME
1 Peter 1:3-9**

Say it with me: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23a).

In our countdown of the Top 9 varieties of the fruit of the Spirit as identified by Paul in Galatians 5, we have arrived at #2 on the list: Joy. The New Testament word for “joy,” *chara*, occurs 58 times in the New Testament. The main verb “to rejoice,” *chairō*, is used 74 times. A similar verb, *agalliao*, which means “to be glad” or “exceedingly glad”, occurs 11 times in the New Testament.

In the NIV Bible, the word “joy” occurs 218 times, including 53 times in the Psalms, 32 times in Isaiah, and 63 times in the New Testament. In its different forms, the verb “to rejoice” is used 191 times in the NIV Bible, 150 of which are in the Old Testament. The verb “to be glad” occurs 77 times, 27 of them coming in the Psalms. The word “gladness” is used 23 times, all in the Old Testament. Even though these words are used more often in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms, the themes of joy, gladness, and rejoicing permeate the Bible as a whole.

God’s Word comes to us today from 1 Peter 1:3-9. I invite you to follow along in your Bible, the pew Bible, or your favorite device as I read. Together, let’s give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word.

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Do these words sound familiar to you?

Joy to the world
All the boys and girls
Joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea
Joy to you and me

Written by country singer and songwriter Hoyt Axton, the song “Joy to the World” was recorded by a group called Three Dog Night (remember them?) and reached the top of the pop music charts way back in the last millennium – in April 1971, when I was in the 10th grade.

Joy to the world! Joy to you and me!

The message of the gospel:
The good news that God loves you and me and the whole world;
That God has a good and gracious plan for your life and that He is able to make it happen;

That God sent His Son Jesus into the world to fix what's wrong with us and to restore us to a right relationship with Him;

That Jesus came to bring us, through His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, the freedom of forgiveness, peace with God, and a power for living;

That God is in the business of changing lives;

That God has the power to bring healing and hope to the hurting, to transform hearts and homes, to bring wholeness and fullness to broken, empty lives;

Is a message of joy to the world. It is an announcement of joy to you and me. And it is far deeper, far richer, and far more lasting than the kind of joy Three Dog Night sang about, which had more to do with women and wine and a bullfrog named Jeremiah than with the wonders of God's amazing grace.

In our Scripture reading, Peter tells us that if you know Jesus as the Savior and Lord of your life; if you have grasped what God the Father has done for you through Him; if you understand what your inheritance is as a child of God; if you know you're headed for heaven; if your life has been changed by His amazing grace; if in His great mercy God has given you a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead; then your life will be "filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy" (1:8). Your life will be marked by a quality of joyfulness that words cannot adequately describe.

The word "joy" itself is hard to define. Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, describes it as an "exuberance about life" (Galatians 5:22). In the Bible, it is a sense of confidence, contentment, and pleasure in God. Unlike happiness, which comes from the same root word as "happening", joy does not depend on what happens to you. It is not dependent on your circumstances in life. Happiness comes and goes because it is based on what happens to us. Joy goes deeper than that, as I hope you will see. True joy can last because it is based not on your circumstances but on the presence and grace and love of God in your life. These are things that do not and will not change. So, if you want to cultivate the fruit of joy in your life, don't base your life on your circumstances. Don't base it on externals. Base it instead on the promises and grace of God.

G. K. Chesterton said that joy is "the gigantic secret of the Christian." I think he meant that the joy of the Lord is something you can't fully understand until you experience it personally. Until God's grace takes hold of your heart and plants the seed of true joy there.

Peter, of course, is not the only New Testament writer to talk about joy. Paul says in Romans 14:17 that joy is one of the distinguishing marks or evidences of God's gracious and sovereign rule in a person's life. And, for that matter, in the life of a church. He says: "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking" [It is not a matter of what you eat and don't eat; it is not a list of rules and regulation and rituals you have to follow] "but of righteousness" [being rightly related to God], "peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

In *The Message*, it says: "God's kingdom isn't a matter of what you put in your stomach, for goodness' sake."

That was the issue with which some of the Christians in the 1st century were wrestling. Was it okay to eat anything and everything? Or were some foods *verboten* for believers? Paul's answer is that what you eat or don't eat is not what the Christian life is about. It is, as we like to say, a "non-essential" in which God has given us freedom, in the same way that we don't all have to dress alike or prefer the same style of music in our worship. Since your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, you *do* have the Christian duty to take good care of your body, which will impact what and how much you eat and drink. But I digress.

What counts in the kingdom of God is not a list of externals that have nothing to do with your heart. As *The Message* says: "It's what God does with your life as He sets it right, puts it together, and completes it with joy" (Romans 14:17, MSG).

This is what it's about. It's about joy to you and me and everyone who will accept the gracious rule of the Lord Jesus Christ in their lives. It is about an attitude of the heart that is not dependent on our circumstances but enables us to live *above* the things that happen to us.

In Philippians 3:1, Paul says: "Whatever happens, dear friends, be glad (rejoice) in the Lord. I never get tired of telling you this, and it is good for you to hear it again and again" (*Living Bible*).

Paul is right: It *is* good for us to hear it again and again. *Whatever* happens, be glad in the Lord! *Whatever* happens, rejoice! Which is why we say there is never a time when it is not time to rejoice in the Lord.

Paul drives this message home in Philippians 4:4, where he says it again. And again. "Rejoice in the Lord (when?) always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"

The question for you and me today is this:

How do you live life that way?

How can you be filled with joy when there is so much trouble, so much wrong, so much evil, so much pain and suffering, so many trials, so many disappointments, so much bad news in the world?

How can you live that way in a world so filled with heartache, trouble, and uncertainty?

Suppose your car breaks down and you discover it needs some extensive and expensive repairs. Is your first reaction to "rejoice in the Lord"? Or is it more like: "Oh no, not this ... not now." If you're like me, it is probably more like the second than the first.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:16, Paul says: "Be joyful always." But wait a minute: Is that really possible? Is it really possible to rejoice – to be joyful – in *every* situation?

The answer Paul gives – the answer the *Bible* gives, the answer *God* gives – is yes. It really is possible. It is imperative for us to see that this idea of rejoicing is not offered simply as a suggestion for us to consider. It is given as an imperative, as a direct command from HQ.

It is also imperative to notice that the Bible doesn't simply tell us to rejoice always. It calls us to "rejoice *in the Lord* always." The key to this "gigantic secret of the Christian" (Chesterton) is not to be found in the circumstances of life that are constantly subject to change but in the Lord our God who is greater than any circumstance, any situation, any challenge, any mountain, any valley, any heartache or hardship you will ever face. Do you believe this?

Where does joy come from? It comes from remembering who God is, what He is like, and what He has done. It comes from recognizing that He is Lord, and He is in control. It comes from resting in His Word, recalling, as David says in Psalm 145:13, that He is faithful to all His promises and loving toward all He has made, and that His love extends to you and me.

That is a reason (or several reasons) to rejoice in the Lord *always*. *These* are reasons to "celebrate God all day, every day" (Philippians 4:4, MSG). *This* is reason enough to be glad in the Lord, whatever happens. *Whatever*.

One theologian has described this kind of joy as a "defiant nevertheless," an attitude of the heart that just flat refuses to give in and give up, but continues to rest in God, to see God's hand, and to trust in His sufficiency in every situation. It is a posture of the heart that makes it possible to live not under but above your circumstances in life.

None of us is immune to sorrow or suffering or trouble. You're not. I'm not. No one is. Nor should we ever be insensitive, unsympathetic, or uncaring about the troubles of others. But God gives us joy in the midst of it -- a defiant sense of confidence, contentment, and pleasure in Him and His goodness that nothing can shake, as Nehemiah suggests when he says that "the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10).

It is not so hard to feel joyful when everything is going well in your life, is it? It is not so hard to feel joy when the road of your life is smooth, with no potholes, icy patches, or dangerous curves.

But when life is hard, when something bad happens to you or someone you love, when you are overwhelmed with stress, when there is friction in your relationships, when your job is hanging by a thread or you've been hurt by a misunderstanding or a personal attack, when your health is on a downward trajectory and pain has moved in to stay, or when your life just seems to be stuck in neutral, it may be that joy doesn't come so easily.

Know what I mean?

Here is where grace comes in and plays an indispensable role. True joy is a matter of appropriating and living in the grace of God. Even the New Testament words for grace and joy are closely related. The word for joy (*chara*) comes from the Greek word for grace (*charis*). Where does joy come from? It comes from God's all-sufficient grace poured out into

your life. When your life is rooted in God's abounding grace, the "happenings" of life – good, bad, or somewhere in between – cannot rob you of your joy.

Joy really does have a "defiant" quality about it. The remarkable thing about joy is that it can be yours despite and in the midst of the headaches, heartaches, and troubles of life.

One of the most confounding verses in the whole Bible is James 1:2. Do you know what it says? "Consider it all joy (*pasan charan*), my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds."

Who does that? Who enjoys going through trials? Most of us will try to do everything we can to avoid trials or suffering. But James says: "Count it all joy."

And he doesn't say *if* you face trials. He says *when* you face them. It is a given that sooner or later we all face trials of one kind or another. But James understands that it is possible to profit spiritually from them.

The point is not to feign happiness when you're dealing with difficulties or disappointment or problems or pain, but to have a positive, hopeful, joyful outlook because of the sufficiency of God's grace and what those trials can produce in your life. God can use hard times for good. For your good and for His glory. Through our times of testing, He can make us strong. Your perspective can make all the difference.

In her book *A Closer Walk*, Catherine Marshall noted that Jesus drew men and women into the kingdom of God by promising them two things: first, trouble, hardship, danger; and second, joy. It is a curious combination. But they are not mutually exclusive. Jesus promises joy to His followers – to you and me – in the midst of the inevitable difficulties of life, which may include opposition and even persecution. Think about what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, in the last of the Beatitudes: "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" (Matthew 5:11-12). *Rejoice and be glad.*

Peter, writing to Christians facing opposition for their faith, said: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:12-13). *Don't be surprised. Rejoice.*

Nothing can rob you of the spiritual fruit of joy unless you let it. If you keep your eyes on Jesus, your circumstances cannot rob you of joy. But there are ways you can lose your joy.

A young woman came to Jill Briscoe and said: "Jill, I've lost my joy. I've lost my peace. And I want it back."

Jill asked: "Where did you lose it?"

"That has nothing to do with it," the young woman said. "Help me get it back."

“But where did you lose it?”

This young woman knew where she had lost it, but she didn't want to talk about it. Eventually she did. She lost her joy when she moved in with her boyfriend.

Sin will rob you of the joy of the Lord. Circumstances alone can't do it, but the choices you make can, if you choose to turn away from God and His way in some area of your life. Sin may give you pleasure. It may bring you pleasure for a season. The pleasures of sin can exert a powerful pull on your life. But unrepentant sin will always douse the fire of joy in your heart. Choosing to go against God's way will never bring you true joy, because true and lasting joy is found in willing surrender and obedience to Him.

If you've lost your joy and you wonder what happened to it, take a good look at your life and see if there isn't some sin that has cut you off from the joy of the Lord. Make David's prayer in Psalm 139 your own:

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive (sinful) way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting.
(Psalm 139:23-24)

Renounce your sin, whatever it is. Confess it to God. Turn away from it. Then you will know again the incredible gift of the joy of the Lord in your life.

We have barely touched the surface regarding what the Bible says about joy and gladness. I hope you will pay close attention to it in your own Bible reading.

I want to close with one more passage of Scripture and a story. The Scripture is Habakkuk 3:17-18. Habakkuk was a prophet who served God around 600 BC, at a time when the kingdom of Judah was falling apart. Facing an uncertain and unhappy future for the nation, Habakkuk sang this joy-filled song:

Even though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
if the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.
(Habakkuk 3:17-18)

The joy of the Lord was Habakkuk's strength. It can be yours, too.

The story: An American went to Ireland to celebrate the 80th birthday of his favorite uncle. On the morning of his birthday, the two men got up early and went for a walk along the shores of Lake Killarney. At sunrise, the uncle turned and just stared at the sun rising in the east. The two men stood together for 20 minutes without saying a single word. Then the elderly uncle began to skip along the shoreline, with a huge smile on his face.

When he caught up with him, his nephew said: “Uncle Seamus, you seem very happy. Do you want to tell me why?”

“Yes, lad,” he said, tears streaming down his face. “You see, the Father is fond of me. Ah, me Father is so very fond of me.” (Brennan Manning, *The Wisdom of Tenderness*, 25-26).

Your Father is so very fond of you, too. He is so fond of all His children. And that will never change.

Rest in the assurance of His fondness for you. Rejoice in the Lord. Always.

Joy to the world! Joy to you and me! The fruit of the Spirit is joy.

Lord, let it be so in us, even when we go through trials and tests. And may we share this joy with others, to the glory of Your name. Amen.