

BIBLE STUDY | FALL 2024

The Joy of the Lord

CONTENTMENT
IN CHRIST IN ALL
CIRCUMSTANCES



CHRIST
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

We have three recommended ways for engaging with *The Joy of the Lord: Contentment in Christ in All Circumstances* – **dig in**, **go deeper**, and **deeper still**.

DIG IN

- If you are in a study group, join your group weekly to enjoy conversation, discuss the lesson, and talk through the Focus Questions. If you are doing the study individually, work through the Focus Questions at your own pace.
- Listen to or watch the teaching each week. The teaching is available on SoundCloud and YouTube. You can subscribe on those platforms or visit christpres.org/group-resources, where you can find all the Bible study resources. You'll also receive a weekly email with a link to the teaching.

GO DEEPER

- Read the weekly Scripture and go through the Observe and Reflect questions to deepen your dive into God's Word.
- Feel free to complete questions throughout the week or all in one sitting. If you are in a group, your group may discuss some of these questions each week.
- Read the Application Summary.

DEEPER STILL

- We recommend the following resource as a companion to your study:
Surprised by Joy by C.S. Lewis

INTRODUCTION

When the Bible talks about joy, it does not speak of happiness, excitement, or fun. Rather, the joy of the Bible is a gift from the Lord and embodied in the Lord himself. Joy serves as a throughline in Scripture, consistently pointing believers to the forever and overwhelming joy we will experience in heaven. In the Old Testament, joy is given at victory (Psalm 118:15) and in creation (Psalm 96:11–12), it is an emotional high (Psalm 126:2) and something lost by sin (Lamentation 5:14–15). And perhaps most tellingly, it is a promised eschatological reality—“And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (Isaiah 35:10).

This is the joy C.S. Lewis writes about when he says, “All Joy reminds. It is never a possession, always a desire for something longer ago or further away or still ‘about to be.’” We may experience glimpses of this Joy in our lives, but it is always elusive because true Joy is found in the person of Christ, with whom we will one day be united forever.

The New Testament’s theme of joy continues on. With the incarnation, Mary, the shepherds, Simeon, and others experience the “good news of great joy which will be for all people.” Jesus tells parables of rejoicing over lost sheep and declares in John 16 that when he returns, no one will take our joy. Paul’s letters and the general epistles speak of joy in suffering and trials (Romans 5, James 1). Finally, Revelation 21 prophesies a future with no tears and no sorrow, when we will receive everlasting joy at the feet of Jesus.

In this study, we will journey through the stories of faithful people in Scripture, witnesses to the joy of the Lord. Are their circumstances joyful? Most of them would answer that question with a resounding “no.” But do they experience God, the source of all Joy? Yes. Augustine wrote, “There is a joy which is not given to the ungodly, but to those who love Thee for Thine own sake, whose joy Thou Thyself art. And this is the happy life, to rejoice to Thee, of Thee, for Thee; this it is, and there is no other.”

Look in these stories not for joy as happiness, but for the joy that God himself is—“Joy Thou Thyself art,” as Augustine said. And then as you layer your life experiences—of joy and of sorrow—on these stories, start to see them all as signposts toward Jesus and the forever Joy he promises us.

APPLICATION SUMMARY

The locals dragged Paul and Silas into the marketplace before the magistrates. Those who brought them before these rulers insisted that Paul and Silas were preaching a religion not sanctioned by the Roman government. So, in effect, Paul and Silas were being arrested for religious reasons; however, the true motive of the angry citizens was far from spiritual. In Acts 16:16–18, we note that Paul cast out a spirit of a fortune-telling woman who was making money for the locals—and now that Paul cast out the spirit, it disrupted a source of income for these “entrepreneurs.” Nevertheless, this is what got Paul and Silas arrested; they were treated unjustly for freeing a woman of her oppression by a demonic spirit and of the exploitation of those taking advantage of her. Paul and Silas had every reason to be downcast and despondent. Yet in these circumstances—in chains and stocks, far from what most would call joyful—we find them praying and singing hymns. In their distress, the Spirit became more present, causing the earth to quake and rupturing their chains. With a free pass in hand, Paul and Silas remained. Why didn’t they run? It seems they were concerned not for their own well-being but for the well-being of *one of their oppressors*. It was this selfless act that took hold of the heart of the jailer, who believed his only rational response to his failure was to take his own life. Instead, he witnessed a selfless joy that was so compelling it carried him to freedom—he and his whole household. Undoubtedly, Paul, Silas, and presumably the jailer would all still face obstacles and opposition ahead, yet they do so, as we read in Philippians 4, from a place of contentment. Jesus is our joy despite our circumstances.

WEEK TWO

NAOMI AND JOY AFTER SORROW

RUTH 1:8-22, RUTH 4:13-17, JOHN 16:20-24

READ

RUTH 1:8-22

⁸ But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹ The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. ¹⁰ And they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." ¹¹ But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹² Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, ¹³ would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me." ¹⁴ Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵ And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." ¹⁶ But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. ¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." ¹⁸ And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more. ¹⁹ So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, "Is this Naomi?" ²⁰ She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. ²¹ I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" ²² So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

RUTH 4:13-17

¹³ So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the Lord gave her conception, and she bore a son. ¹⁴ Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! ¹⁵ He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him." ¹⁶ Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. ¹⁷ And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

JOHN 16:20-24

²⁰ Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. ²¹ When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. ²² So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. ²³ In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. ²⁴ Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

APPLICATION SUMMARY

Naomi's story unfolds through the book of Ruth. Ruth's story is a critical component of Jesus' genealogy, because the young widow Ruth marries Boaz, and David and then Jesus comes from their line. When we look at Naomi's story, we see tragedy mixed with hope, a blend that only faith in a living God can stir so beautifully.

In Ruth 1, Naomi describes two ways the Lord can deal with his people: kindly (v. 8) and bitterly (v. 20). When Naomi describes the Lord as kind, she indicates the security of his steadfast love and the promise of joy in his presence. Even though she has lost so much, even though she feels the bitter reality of the world's brokenness, she calls him kind.

Naomi's story is the gospel: destitute without a way to change her own future, and a kinsman-redeemer who rescues and restores her to ultimate joy. She experienced, as a signpost of the joy promised to all of us, what Jesus said in John 16, "So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."

APPLICATION SUMMARY

There are several reasons why someone like Jonathan shouldn't be enamored with someone like David. First, Jonathan, son of the sitting king, would presumably be "second in line" in the kingdom. Second, Jonathan was already a well-respected man of faith and courage (1 Samuel 14:1–23), so the sudden appearance of a celebrated young shepherd boy who had just defeated Israel's greatest enemy might cause jealousy or resentment from Jonathan. Yet Jonathan's response was utterly different than what we might otherwise expect—he became "knit to the soul of David." What does a reaction such as this reveal about Jonathan's character? It tells us that Jonathan was most committed to the Lord's advancement over worldly or self-serving priorities. Jonathan was devoted to the well-being of God's people over his own; he was zealous for the defense of Israel and Israel's Lord above all else—this starkly contrasts Saul's emerging jealousy of David (1 Samuel 18:7–9). In the final analysis, what was it that knit the hearts of David and Jonathan together? It was a mutual love and respect—not for each other—but for the God whom each one loved. Christians today can know this type of friendship—a friendship not directly rooted in the qualities we admire in one another but in our love of Christ. When we focus our concern on the glory of Christ, a natural byproduct of this will be a spirit that refuses to oppose the labors of our fellow believers, and instead, a deep, joyful friendship emerges. It is our love of Christ that compels us to have for one another "compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience," that is continually "bearing with one another." It insists upon "forgiving each other" (Colossians 3:12–13). It is the love of Christ which "dwells in you richly" (Colossians 3:16) that knits our souls together and causes us to love each other as our own souls because, in the end, it is the soul of Christ that we love.

2. In the midst of famine, the Lord used Elijah to provide for the widow and her son. When has the Lord provided joy for you during a season of emotional or spiritual famine?
3. Do you believe what David wrote in Psalm 34—that those who fear the Lord will have no lack? What do you think that means for your life today, and your life with God forever?

APPLICATION SUMMARY

We read stories like this one from the Old Testament on two levels. First, we read a true historical narrative about real people experiencing real things, in this case, experiencing a miracle of God worked through the prophet Elijah. Second, we read stories like this as a signpost, pointing us to the arc of God's redemptive plan through all of history. The story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath is also our story of our emptiness being filled forever by the joy and gladness of knowing Christ.

We often experience life with a scarcity mindset, not unlike the widow. Regardless of our varying levels of financial or vocational security, there is never enough. Does that sound familiar? It's why, when we read verses like Psalm 34:10, we wonder what a life without lack looks like.

A life without lack is not a life full of abundant money, time, resources, or things. It's not a lack of illness, relational brokenness, sadness, or fear. In fact, we are guaranteed those things (John 16:33). But what will we never lack? Jesus. And therefore, we lack nothing. So our task is to, like Elijah and like the widow, trust God for the provisions we need for daily life while we look forward to a time in heaven when we will have no needs. True joy is found in the abundance of knowing Christ.

WEEK FIVE

JOB AND THE JOY THROUGH TRIALS

JOB 1:1–22; 42:1–17, JAMES 1:2–8

READ

JOB 1:1–22

¹ There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. ² There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. ³ He possessed 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 female donkeys, and very many servants, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. ⁴ His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. ⁵ And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually.

⁶ Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. ⁷ The Lord said to Satan, "From where have you come?" Satan answered the Lord and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." ⁸ And the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" ⁹ Then Satan answered the Lord and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason? ¹⁰ Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. ¹¹ But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." ¹² And the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand." So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

¹³ Now there was a day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, ¹⁴ and there came a messenger to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them, ¹⁵ and the Sabeans fell upon them and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you."

¹⁶ While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them, and I alone have escaped to tell you." ¹⁷ While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "The Chaldeans formed three groups and made a raid on the camels and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you." ¹⁸ While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, ¹⁹ and behold, a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead, and I alone have escaped to tell you."

²⁰ Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. ²¹ And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

²² In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.

JOB 42:1–17

¹ Then Job answered the Lord and said: ² "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

³ 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ⁴ 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me.' ⁵ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; ⁶ therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

⁷ After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: "My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. ⁸ Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves. And my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly. For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has." ⁹ So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the Lord had told them, and the Lord accepted Job's prayer.

WEEK SIX

MARY, THE MOTHER OF JESUS, AND THE JOY OF FAITH

LUKE 1:26–56, ROMANS 15:5–13

READ

LUKE 1:26–56

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. ³⁶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

³⁹ In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, ⁴⁰ and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴² and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³ And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

⁴⁶ And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰ And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; ⁵² he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵ as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

ROMANS 15:5–13

⁵ May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, ⁶ so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. ⁸ For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed ⁹ and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written: "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name." ¹⁰ Again, it says, "Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people." ¹¹ And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all the peoples extol him." ¹² And again, Isaiah says, "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope." ¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

FOCUS

1. Ask the Lord to draw your heart and mind to the words he has for you in this text.
2. Retell the story in your own words.
3. What questions come to mind when you read this text?

OBSERVE

1. Describe the reactions of Mary and Elizabeth to the news about Mary's pregnancy.
2. Compare Mary's prayer (particularly verses 50–55) and Paul's words in Romans 15:7–12. How are both rejoicing based on the fulfillment of God's promises?

REFLECT

1. How does Mary's response embody Paul's prayer in Romans 15:13?

“The Bible shows us that joy is tied ultimately to God’s character—who God is and what he has said—instead of simply our circumstances. Our circumstances change, they go up and down; however, God’s character is fixed—he does not change, and he is always trustworthy. This is one reason why this joy is so precious: it does not depend simply upon things going well for you but upon God being faithful. This is a reason to be joyful!”—Erik Raymond

2. Reflect on the quotation from Erik Raymond above. How does understanding God’s unchanging character help give you joy?

APPLICATION SUMMARY

The angel proclaims Jesus’ birth as “good news of great joy for all people,” and yet, Mary’s initial reaction to her pregnancy was not one of great joy. As we move through Luke 1, though, we see her rejoicing (rejoicing means feeling joy and is used throughout Scripture to express biblical joy). Mary’s joy is not based on her circumstance, but rather on her faith, her knowledge of God’s promises, and her belief that God is using her for his ultimate redemptive purposes. It is this faith—which is a gift of the Holy Spirit—that can give us joy as well. Paul writes in Romans 15, after rooting his prayer in the fulfilled promises of God to the patriarchs, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

WEEK SEVEN

SIMEON, ANNA, AND THE JOY IN WAITING

LUKE 2:21-38, ISAIAH 40:1-5; 30-31

READ

LUKE 2:21-38

²¹ And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. ²² And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." ²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷ And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, ²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

²⁹ "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation ³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."

³³ And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed ³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." ³⁶ And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, ³⁷ and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

ISAIAH 40:1-5

¹ Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

ISAIAH 40:30-31

³⁰ Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; ³¹ but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

"We see, in the case of Simeon, how God has a believing people even in the worst of places, and in the darkest times. Religion was at a very low ebb in Israel when Christ was born. The faith of Abraham was spoiled by the doctrines of Pharisees and Sadducees. The fine gold had become deplorably dim. Yet even then we find in the midst of Jerusalem a man 'just and devout,'—a man 'upon whom is the Holy Ghost.'"
—J.C. Ryle

2. Consider the quote above from J.C. Ryle; is there a part of Simeon's story to which you can relate in your present circumstances? What lessons do we learn from Simeon's story as it relates to our joy in the Lord?

APPLICATION SUMMARY

Part of the Christian journey—a significant part—is all about waiting. When we consider people like Simeon and Anna, we discover the Lord often asks his people to wait on him, sometimes for an *extraordinary* amount of time. The people of God had received a promise that one day, a Messiah would bring consolation to their suffering (Isaiah 40). Furthermore, the people of the Lord had not received a word from one of his prophets in over 400 years, and by this point, many had turned their backs on the Lord, and still others, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, had made practice of distorting the law of God. Nonetheless, there remained a faithful remnant, such as Simeon and Anna. The Spirit of God was pleased to tell Simeon, presumably an elderly man, that he would not die until he laid eyes on the promised, long-awaited Messiah. Like Simeon, Anna had been in the same temple for decades, waiting for Israel's consolation. She was there daily with prayers, waiting for the arrival of the Lord's promised seed. Finally, she would join Simeon, Mary, and Joseph, rejoicing as the promised Messiah who would redeem God's people was now made flesh. Not many of us would describe waiting as a joyful endeavor, and we might even question God as to why he would make us wait for something so wonderful as a redeemer who would save us from our sin. Perhaps the answer lies in Simeon's response as he set his gaze upon the Messiah; he used words like *peace, salvation, light, revelation, and glory*. Would Simeon have had this sort of response absent the waiting? Or maybe it was the *waiting itself* that amplified his joy? There's an important lesson for Christians of all ages to learn here—the Lord uses waiting to strengthen us and even renew our faith. Perhaps Isaiah said it best (Isaiah 40:30–31):

³⁰ Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; ³¹ but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

OBSERVE

1. What is the concept repeated about joy in John 3:29, John 15:9–11, and Psalm 16:11?

“John’s life is a joyful tragedy. My joy is now complete. In just a few months, a sword will sever his glorious head at the whim of a dancing girl. For John, joy resided precisely in going down while Jesus went up. Decreasing while Jesus increased.”—John Piper

2. John describes his joy as complete. What do you think he means by that? Look up the following verses to help formulate your answer.

a. John 16:22

b. Philippians 2:1–2

c. Romans 14:17

d. Philippians 4:4

REFLECT

1. What does it mean to abide in the presence of Jesus? What does that look like in your life? How does it bring joy?

2. John writes that his joy comes from Jesus becoming more and himself becoming less. How can you cultivate that in your own life: more Jesus, less you?

APPLICATION SUMMARY

As John Piper said, John the Baptist lived a life of “joyful tragedy.” John knew Jesus was the Messiah even before they were born; Luke 1 records John “leaping for joy” in Elizabeth’s womb in the presence of the pregnant Mary. John prepared the way for the Lord, had the gift of baptizing Jesus, and ultimately was beheaded. In John 3, John describes himself as a friend and groomsman waiting for a groom on his wedding day, full of nothing but focus on and joy for the groom. John experienced the fullness of joy in the presence of Jesus.

When Jesus describes a life of abiding in him, he uses the phrase “your joy will be full.” Joy isn’t an elusive target, but rather it is the steadfast mark of the Christian life. Abiding with Jesus, knowing him, is joy. Like the psalmist writes, “in your presence is fullness of joy.” Let us seek to be always present with the Lord, and in that presence experience the true joy of knowing him.

WEEK NINE

STEPHEN: THE JOY OF THE LORD IN LIFE AND DEATH

ACTS 7:51–60, PSALM 91:1–16, MATTHEW 16:24–27, PHILIPPIANS 1:20B–26

READ

ACTS 7:51–60

⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.” ⁵⁴ Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” ⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

PSALM 91:1–16

¹ He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. ² I will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.” ³ For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence. ⁴ He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. ⁵ You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, ⁶ nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday. ⁷ A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. ⁸ You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked. ⁹ Because you have made the Lord your dwelling place—the Most High, who is my refuge—¹⁰ no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent. ¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. ¹² On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone. ¹³ You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot. ¹⁴ “Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name. ¹⁵ When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. ¹⁶ With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.”

MATTHEW 16:24–27

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.

PHILIPPIANS 1:20b–26

²⁰ . . . Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. ²³ I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. ²⁴ But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

3. What does it mean for the Christian to believe, “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 16:25)?

APPLICATION SUMMARY

In Psalm 91, we read promises of comfort and protection from our foes. However, when coming across the account of Stephen in the book of Acts, we read about someone who stood for the truth of the gospel yet lost his life. How can we find comfort, let alone joy, in these apparent inconsistencies? How can we say the Lord protected Stephen from his enemies yet read of him suffering a martyr’s death? Our passages reveal to us that, for the Christian, there exists a thin veil between life and death. While death is a deplorable, mournful product of the fall, we can be assured comfort and protection all through our lives up to and even through death. While death is not something we should try to accelerate—quite the contrary, the Lord has us here for a reason—in death, we gain Christ (Philippians 1:23). At the same time, we may face hardship, persecution, and trials, we also have the assurance of ultimate protection, especially so for those who suffer for the sake of Christ.

All through the New Testament, the imagery of the ascended Christ is that of him taking his place of authority *seated* at the right hand of God. Paul tells us in the first chapter of Ephesians that God “raised him from the dead and *seated* him at his right hand in the heavenly places.” Similarly, the author of Hebrews (1:3) tells us of Jesus, who “after making purification for sins, he *sat down* at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” As a king, being seated on a throne is a symbolic gesture of majesty, glory, dominion, and power. This picture is what makes the account of Stephen’s execution so arresting. After trying to reason with the Sanhedrin, they resolved to stone him. As the stoning commenced, the text tells us Stephen maintained a posture of joy in forgiveness and then saw Jesus *standing* at the right hand of God—not seated. We have a Savior who brings us joy through comfort in life *and* in death.

WEEK TEN

PHILEMON AND THE JOY OF FORGIVENESS

PHILEMON 1, PHILIPPIANS 2:5–11

READ

PHILEMON 1

¹ Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our beloved fellow worker ² and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, ⁶ and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. ⁷ For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

⁸ Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹ yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— ¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. ¹¹ (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) ¹² I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. ¹³ I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, ¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. ¹⁵ For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²² At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

PHILIPPIANS 2:5–11

⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

2. How can forgiveness become an act of joy?

APPLICATION SUMMARY

Philemon was a wealthy Christian of the Colossian community who had opened his home to a group of Christians to meet and worship there regularly. At some point, Onesimus, one of Philemon's bondservants, left Philemon's home without permission; in all likelihood, Onesimus had stolen money, property, or both from Philemon as he fled. Subsequently, Onesimus came into contact with the apostle Paul and became a Christian. After his conversion, Onesimus made great efforts to help Paul, who, at the time, was in prison. These circumstances form the basis for Paul's letter to Philemon—a plea to consider Onesimus—not as a bondservant—but as a brother in Christ.

As an apostle, Paul could have unapologetically informed Philemon that Onesimus would remain with him. Instead, as Paul explains to Philemon, he made no decision "without your consent." Paul set aside his position of authority, hoping (perhaps knowing) that Philemon would respond "not by compulsion" but because he wanted to oblige Paul. Why would Philemon wish to release a servant who likely stole from him? Because Onesimus, once a slave, is a new creation in Jesus Christ. If the Holy Spirit now marks Onesimus, Paul notes, he is no longer a bondservant but a "beloved brother." And if Onesimus is a brother in Christ, Philemon should see Onesimus as he sees Paul—a sinner, saved by grace, and a co-heir with Christ. The Lord is conforming every *Christian* to the image of Christ, and Paul's request of Philemon is nothing more than the echo of the very thing Christ did for us. Jesus "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped," instead, he "humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:5-8).

For the Christian, forgiveness is not an act of compulsion but one of joy. Why? Because it is Christ *in us* reenacting the very grace he has extended to each of us, thanks be to God!

2. What have you learned about joy from this study? Write a short summary or statement describing biblical joy based on what you have read and learned.

APPLICATION SUMMARY

As we conclude our study on biblical joy, spending time in the promises of Isaiah 35 and Revelation 21 remind us of the joy that awaits us. The longing of our hearts, to know and be known by Jesus, will be fulfilled in the everlasting joy of heaven. That joy, while available to us in promises and glimpses, will be unshakeable. Jon Bloom writes, “For this Spirit-empowered joy can’t be destroyed by persecution (Colossians 1:24), suffering (Romans 5:3–4), various trials (1 Peter 1:6–7), sorrow (2 Corinthians 6:10), or a sentence of death (Philippians 1:21). In fact, it is the hope of this joy set before us that helps us, like Jesus, endure all manner of adversity, suffering, and death (Hebrews 12:2). And that is because this Joy of God is an eternal joy—it will outlast death and only increase in us forever (Psalm 16:11; Mark 10:21). Indeed, it is the hope of this eternal joy set before us, which we lay hold of by faith, that makes us “more than conquerors” over any would-be obstacle to the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:35–39).”

May you find strength and hope in the joy set before you, the joy of knowing Jesus.

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