

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.* Hebrews 12:1-2

Dr. Samuel Upham faithfully served as the professor of practical theology at Drew University for a number of years in the late 1800's until he passed away and went home to be with the Lord in 1904 at the age of 70. As he lay dying with his the family gathered around his bed, Samuel was so quiet that someone said, “I believe he's already dead.” Another family member replied: “No, his feet are still warm and nobody ever dies with warm feet.” At that moment Dr. Upham opened one eye and said, "Joan of Arc did." These words regarding the famous martyr who was burned at the stake for her faith in Christ were his last words and Dr. Upham closed his eyes and smiled and quietly passed away.

While there are many who feel such joking on your death bed is inappropriate, there are others who consider it a great virtue to be joyful in the midst of misery. Pastor Glenn Pease tells the story of a man and his wife who were fleeing their home in the Middle East when bombs were landing in around their house, when in the confusion the wife cried out, "I can't find my dentures." To which the husband replied, "What do you think they are dropping on us - sandwiches?" While this husband most likely did not say this with much joy – the truth is, those of us who profess faith in God through Jesus Christ can know joy even our most painful struggles and deepest times of suffering. We see that in the context of our current sermon series on the fruits of the Spirit in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul had written the church because they had been invaded by false teachers who had embraced and taught a gospel contrary to that from the Paul had received from Jesus himself- and it was causing all sorts of conflict and division in the congregation. And so it was in the midst of this struggle Paul wrote:

*But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.* Gal. 5:16-25

God's Word tells us here that we will have nothing but struggles and trouble in life when we live out our lives in the “flesh” but when we “live by the Spirit” and “keep in step with the Spirit” we will be able to bear the “fruit” of “joy” by the power of the Spirit. Remember that “the fruit of the Spirit” in the life of a born-again Christian is the emotional, intellectual, and physical manifestation of that person's spiritual life that has been dramatically and powerfully transformed by the indwelling Spirit of Christ. The “fruit of the Spirit” is not something we can do or achieve, but rather a gift of God's mercy and grace we receive and experience when we humbly surrender our hearts, minds and wills to Holy Spirit - so we might “live by the Spirit” and “keep in step with the Spirit” rather than being pawns “the flesh.” The only power that we have here on earth that can do anything of God and for God is the power of the Holy Spirit. It's been that way from the beginning and will be until the end. In Genesis 1:1-2 we read: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” and in Revelation 22:17 we read, “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.”

The Holy Spirit exists equally as a divine person with God the Father and with Christ the Son in the Trinity (John 14:16). The Holy Spirit's *divinity* is affirmed in that He possesses the attributes and characteristics of God. The Bible tells us the Holy Spirit is *eternal* (Heb 9:14) and the *creator* (Gen 1:2) and the *giver of life* (Rom 8:11), and He *knows all things* (1 Cor. 2:10-11). But just like God the Holy Spirit is also spoken of in *personal* terms, exhibiting *intelligence* (John 14:26) and *a will* (1 Cor. 12:11) and *emotions* (Eph 4:30). The personhood of the Holy Spirit is validated in that He can be *grieved* (Eph 4:30) and *resisted* (Acts 6:9-10) and *lied to* (Acts 5:3-4) – as well as He can *comfort* (John 14:16) and *intercede* on behalf of those who call upon His name (Romans 8:26). Though the Holy Spirit was actively at work throughout the days of the Old Testament (Gen 1:2, Ex 35; 31, Zech 4:6), the prophets spoke of a time when the Holy Spirit's activity would become clearly abundant. In Joel 2:28 God declared: *"And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh."* This promise was fulfilled in Christ and through Christ after Jesus' death and resurrection (Acts 1:5, 8, 2:4).

The Holy Spirit's activities then and today and in the future include *indwelling* and *sealing every follower of Jesus* (Rom 8:9-11, Eph 1:13-14) - as well as *convicting of sin* (John 16:7-11) and *empowering to resist sin* (Malachi 3:8), and *share the Gospel with others* (Acts 1:8; John 16:13). The Holy Spirit ministers by *illuminating* (John 14:26) and *regenerating* (John 3:35) and *sanctifying* (Rom 15:16, 1 Peter 1:2) and *empowering* (Rom 15:19) – and it is by that *empowering* that our hearts and lives can be so powerfully transformed that we can know joy in the midst of pain and struggle. We see this clearly again in Paul words from Romans 5: *"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us"* (Romans 5:1-5).

Proverbs 17:22 tells us that: *"A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones."* Joy is the *"good medicine"* God sovereignly offers us joy in the midst of a life that is often filled with trials and troubles. Being joyful does not mean we are blind to the reality of sorrow and evil, but rather God has given us joy to strengthen our hearts and lift our spirits in a world saturated with sickness and misery. In 586 BC Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian army as God allowed a pagan empire to destroy the city and carry the Hebrew people into exile because they had forsaken God for the idols of men. 140 years later God called a man named Nehemiah to return from Jerusalem and rebuild the walls and as he did many exiles returned - and after a great deal of pain and struggle the walls were rebuilt, and a day was set aside to remember the exile and to celebrate God's faithfulness in spite of their unfaithfulness. And in Nehemiah 8 we read that: *"All the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly . . . And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law"* and *"all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law."* And Nehemiah said to them, *"Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength"* (Neh 8:1-3, 9-10).

The fruit of the Spirit of joy is the joy knowing God has provided for our desperate need for God. *"Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."* This, in many ways, has always been the philosophy of the Hebrew people. The Jews have a saying, "The gladness of the heart is the life of man, and the joyfulness of a man prolongs his life." In other words: *in joy* there is life. Despite the demands and requirements and punishments of the Law, the faith of the Jews was joy-filled with great feasts and festivals, and times of national rejoicing. In the midst of the pain and struggle they suffered because of their habitual idolatry they discovered again that *"the joy of the Lord"* was their *"strength."*

The Bible tells us that God wants His to be people to be a joyful people. The word “joy” and its many derivatives appear almost five hundred times in the whole of Scripture. God’s Word tells us that the Christian life is to be saturated with joy - but we are also warned about dishonoring God through silliness. The danger we face is in defining *joy* in terms of *fun*. Fun and joy are different in nature. Fun is morally indifferent and spiritually empty, while joy is morally intrinsic and spiritually inherent. Fun is easy to describe, joy is more abstract and intangible. Fun is momentary, joy lingers. Fun is affiliated with excitement whereas joy is associated with contentment and peace. Fun tends to be outward, joy inward. Fun is often sought as an end, whereas joy is always a consequence. Fun is momentarily satisfying and affiliated with transitory existence whereas joy is inseparable from all of life and eternity. The Bible repeatedly calls us to be a joyful people who find our greatest joy in God.

God is Joy. Psalm 43:4: *“Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy.”* Psalm 16:11: *“You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”*

Joy is trusting in God. Romans 15:13: *“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing.”*

Joy is being rescued by God and being restored back to God. Isaiah 51:11: *“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.”*

Joy is the kingdom of God. Romans 14:17: *“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”*

Joy is working together for the Kingdom of God. 2 Corinthians 1:24: *“We work with you for your joy.”*

Joy is sacrificing for God. Matthew 13:44: *“The Kingdom of God is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”*

Joy in God is greater than our struggles and suffering. Psalm 126:5: *“Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!”* Psalm 30:5: *“Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.”*

Joy in God overcomes any and all struggles or trials and sufferings of this life. John 16:22: *“You have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”*

Jesus experienced this strange paradox of both suffering on earth and joy in God at the beginning and at the end of his life. We read that when Christ has born, the angels proclaimed: *“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people”* (Luke 2:10). Yet we also know that the background of this angelic rejoicing was filled with the mournful grieving of mothers as King Herod killed all the babies who had been born in Bethlehem in fear of Jesus birth. We also see joy and suffering at the end of his life. While many joyfully embraced his message and his miracles, others were seeking to kill him. Our text for this morning tells us that Jesus *“who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”*

Joy in God, the joy of Jesus that endured in the pain that lead to death, has more than just dramatic implications for those who claim Christ as Lord and Savior, and who then seek to follow him. This is the kind of joy we need for everyday practical living, as every one of our days surely does not go as smooth as we would like. Joy in God reveals to us that we need to accept not just that which is *merry* but also that which is *misery*, and we need learn to do so in such a way that the *misery* does not eliminate the *merry*. In other words circumstances in life should have no bearing on our joy in God.

*“For the joy that was set before him (Jesus) endured the cross.”* The cross did not eliminate sin and evil and struggle and trial and disease and violence and terrorism and suffering and death. Yet the joy of Jesus is a joy which rises above all these things. There is no pain or tragedy so dark that it can blot out the light that came forth from the empty tomb of our Savior. The joy of Jesus is a joy that we have in spite of sin, evil and death, *because* Jesus went to the cross to defeat the power of sin, evil and death.

Jesus could have joy even as he endured the cross because he could see beyond the cross to his final and glorious victory over sin, evil, and death. Jesus overcame death, yet we still live under the cloud of death. *Yet death for those in Christ is not the end of life, but rather the beginning!* This is the joy we know today in death that was not there before Jesus rose from the dead. Because of Christ’s resurrection - death is no longer an entrance into darkness and a state of eternal pain, but rather an entrance into light and into the joyful presence of God. In death Jesus brings eternal life to those who truly know him – which means the struggles and sufferings and pains and trials of life no longer have meaning or effect on our lives. The joy we have in Jesus is more powerful than any struggle or suffering or pain or trial we will ever experience or encounter. The reality of all this is - that if it were God’s desire for His chosen people to be joyful before Jesus life, death and resurrection, how much more should we be joyful following the One did live and then die for our sins and rose from the dead?

It has been said that the greatest enemy of the Christian faith is Christians themselves. Though we have been given the joy of Jesus that endures through life and beyond death, we often trade God’s joy for lesser joys, and sometimes even give our joy in Jesus away altogether. One time a Catholic priest said to the comedian Groucho Marx: "Mr. Marx, I want to thank you for bringing so much joy into the world." To which Groucho replied, "I want to thank the church for taking so much out." Brothers and sisters, next to love, the distinguishing mark of our faith should be our joy. Yet Christians are known to be some of the most unhappy, grouchy, gossipy, angry, self-centered folks on this earth.

The one trait that should set us apart from the rest of the world should be our joy: our joy in God, our joy in Jesus, our joy in the Holy Spirit, our joy in one another, our joy in all of life – regardless of, and in the face of pain, struggle, suffering and death. Joy is the mark of a true follower of Jesus Christ. This was the aim of Jesus’ life: to restore a sinful fallen people back into the joyful presence of God. In John 15:11 Jesus said: *“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”* In Matthew 25:23 he told us that in the end - it’s all about joy. For those who have served him well, he will say: *“Well done, good and faithful servant . . . enter into the joy of your master.”*

Joy is the reality of our faith in Christ because the fruit of the Spirit of joy is the joy we have in knowing God has provided for our desperate need for God through Jesus Christ. Our text for this morning says the same. We are to look to Jesus who is *“the founder and perfecter of our FAITH, who for the JOY that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”* Faith in Christ and joy in God are intricately and intimately joined together throughout the Word of God. The apostle Paul speaks of this in 2 Corinthians 1:24: *“We work with you for your JOY, for you stand firm in your FAITH.”* It is more than significant that the joy of Jesus we read of here that is intricately and intimately joined together with *faith* in the first two verses of Hebrews 12 is spoken of in the context of Hebrews 11 - which lists the people of great faith throughout history who preceded the coming of Christ into the world: *“who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth”* (Hebrews 11:33-38).

All these folks endured tremendous depths of pain and struggle and suffering for their faith in God. They did so – *for the joy set before them* – as they were looking for more than just their own personal comfort. They were longing to see and know and enjoy God in all that they were created to be in Him. They were not just hoping to go to heaven when they died. These men and women of faith were looking for *heaven to come to earth* – which it did in Christ - but they died without seeing it come to pass. Yet they endured the hardness of sin and evil and death knowing there was joy in God to come.

For the joy set before them they persisted in faith until the joy of Jesus came into the world. Had they given up, we would never have heard of them. But still they *did not see* the great promise of God come to pass. Friends, in being chosen of God we are cut of the same cloth. Though we may experience circumstances and situations which are painful and hard, which may tear at our hearts and rip up our feelings and plant seeds of suffering deep in our spirits - we are to hold fast to our faith in God in knowing that someday we will see Jesus face to face and it is then we will fully know his joy.

*“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.”* In all that we go through in life there is a huge crowd of saints of great faith pressing in all around us. These are those described in Hebrews 11, along with others who claim Christ who have gone before us who persevered through the sin, evil and death they experienced in this world. Abel who was murdered, Enoch who walked with God in the most evil of times, Noah who survived the worst world disaster in all of history. Abraham who by faith offered his own son to God as a sacrifice; Joseph who was sold into slavery by his brothers for God’s greater purpose; Moses who led God’s people out of 400 years of bondage into 40 years of wandering. They surround us with others such as John the Baptist who lost his head for his heart for Jesus, and Stephen who was hated and stoned, and all the apostles and the thousands and thousands of men, women and children who followed them, who were tortured and put to death for their faith in Christ; Martin Luther and John Calvin and William Cary and Adoniram Judson and David Brainerd, Jim Elliot and his four fellow missionaries and Amy Carmichael and the endless number of those who for the joy set before them endured untold pain, suffering, evil and death for their faith in the risen. Because he had been through it too, the apostle Paul was able to write: *“Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and JOY in the FAITH”* (Philippians 1:25).

*“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.”* In our fallen state of depravity, we cannot choose nor conjure up neither joy nor faith – and so we must look to Jesus *“the founder and perfecter of our faith.”* In the battle of life when it seems faith and joy are waning or distant – look to Jesus. Fix your eyes on Jesus. The battle is a battle of faith for joy. There is joy in Jesus when there is faith in Jesus. For the joy set before him Jesus endured. He calls us to follow him, when we do he will be with us, and we can joyfully endure.

In Matthew 5:3 Jesus said: *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* In other words: “Joyful are those who know how spiritually poor they are *because* they know God will provide for their desperate need.” The fruit of the Spirit of joy is the joy we have in knowing God has provided for our desperate need for God through Jesus Christ. The reality of our walk of faith is that we are each called by God to endure our share of trials and tribulations in this marathon of life, knowing that there will be a joyful triumph at the end. The reward of seeing God and being free from all sin and evil and death will cause us to shout for joy! Brothers and sisters, when you are truly following Jesus you never truly experience *loss*. When we follow Christ it’s always about the *gain of everlasting joy*. For the joy that was set before him Jesus endured the cross. This is why the apostle Paul could write: *“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal”* (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

As we close we need to remember that the “*fruit of the Spirit*” Paul lists in Galatians 5 has to do with *humble character* that produces the *fruit of unity and service*. What does humble character that produces the joyful fruit of unity and service look like in our lives and in our church? Again, as I did last week, I am going to let the apostle Paul’s words from scripture speak to us in this regard – first *personally* and then *corporately*. Paul speaks of the “*fruit of the Spirit*” in *personal* sense in Colossians 1:9-12 when he wrote: “*We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with JOY, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.*” And then the apostle speaks of the “*fruit of the Spirit*” in *corporate* sense in 2 Corinthians 6:3-10: “*We put no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.*”

As Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before him, we also are able by the power of the Holy Spirit to endure the hardships that we face in life through our faith in him. We are able because even though we are sinful creatures who live in a fallen world, we are surrounded by a joy-saturated cloud of all the faithful saints who will someday be raised and glorified with us in one great consummation of the Kingdom of God. Though we live in the midst of sin and evil and death - the joy of the Lord is our strength! The cross is our perpetual reminder of the high cost of joy. Without the suffering of the cross there would be no joy. If Jesus had not died on the cross we would have no hope of life beyond this life. Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was before him. That joy was worth the price of what he suffered. Because he died for us and rose again, when we trust in who he is and put our faith in him, we will have everlasting life and ever-increasing joy. The fruit of the Spirit of joy is the joy we have in knowing God has provided our desperate need for God through Jesus Christ. Amen? Amen!

*The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. Zephaniah 3:17*

*Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart! Psalm 32:11*

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