

October 18, 2020

## Real Joy Is Not Based on Outward Circumstances

“Finally, my brethren, **rejoice in the Lord...**” (Phil. 3:1). “**Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say rejoice**” (Phil. 4:4). These are but two among many Scriptures which stress the fact that God’s people should “rejoice in the Lord.” In fact, in Gal. 5:22-23, “joy,” along with “love,” “peace,” “longsuffering,” “kindness,” “goodness,” “faithfulness,” “gentleness,” and “self-control,” is described as “the fruit of the Spirit.” It is evident that Christians should be a joy-ful people; they are commanded to “rejoice.”

However, we all live in the “real world,” and conditions in the “real world” leave a lot to be desired! On the one hand, there are many natural calamities which can be both dangerous and very stressful. The current “pandemic” has put fear into the hearts of millions of people (including many Christians) throughout the world. We hear and read of those victimized by hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods. Then, too, we think of the horrific fires which have especially jeopardized the lives and safety of those who live in some of our western states. And if that were not enough we hear and read of hundreds of thousands of people demonstrating (some “peaceably,” but many with malice) in many of the streets and cities in our country. It is a fact that a number of our cities are crime-infested, property is destroyed, people are injured and often killed. We can also turn on the daily, or nightly, news and it seems that most of the news being reported is bad news. And what ought to be one of the more disturbing elements of the “bad news” is the number of babies being aborted (murdered!) each day, while anti-abortionists are viciously labeled and libeled by much of today’s media.

Yes, a lot is going on that is not good! Yet we are supposed to “rejoice??” That is right! We are! And there are good reasons why we should “rejoice,” but first we want to consider an Old Testament example of one who rejoiced, even though his external circumstances were far from desirable.

We now call your attention to Habakkuk 3:17-19: “*Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no food; Though the flock may be cut off from the field. And there be no herd in the stalls — Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength; He will make my feet like deer’s feet, and He will make me walk on my high hills.*”

For a Jew living in the land of Canaan at that time period, it would be difficult to contemplate more dreadful circumstances. Think of it! They depended greatly on the produce from the “fig tree,” “the vines,” the “olive,” and the milk and meat from the “flock” and “herd.” Yet even if all of this were missing, Habakkuk said “*I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.*” In fact, he was so confident that he could say “*The Lord is my strength,*” that “*He will make my feet like deer’s feet, And He will make me walk on my high hills.*” These are words of confidence, of joy, and happiness! However, the outward circumstances left so much to be desired.

But even for Habakkuk that kind of comfort and joy did not take place all at once. In fact, Habakkuk has been called “the prophet of Israel’s doubt.” And perhaps rightly so, for the book begins with Habakkuk voicing to the Lord his own frustrations! Note these words he spoke to the Lord as they are recorded in Hab. 1:2-4: “*O Lord, how long shall I cry, and You will not hear? Even cry out to You, ‘Violence!’ And You will not save. Why do You show me iniquity, and cause me to see trouble? For plundering and violence are before me, There is strife, and contention arises. Therefore the law is powerless, and justice never goes forth. Therefore perverse judgment proceeds.*”

Please re-read those verses! Could any outward situation be more discouraging than the then-present circumstances? Habakkuk was commenting on the deplorable and sinful state of his own people, and was wondering why God did “not hear,” why He did not “save.” Yes, he was voicing his own doubts to God! Other Old Testament prophets carried God’s message to the people, whereas Habakkuk voiced his

own doubts to God!

And you can be sure that he was not prepared for God's answer! Instead of dealing directly with those guilty of the "plundering and violence," the "strife and contention" mentioned in Hab. 1:2-4, God told Habakkuk to "Look out among the nations and watch—Be utterly astonished! For I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you" (Hab. 1:5). God then said "I am raising up the Chaldeans, A bitter and hasty nation which marches through the breath of the earth, to possess dwelling places that are not theirs. They are terrible and dreadful; their judgment and their dignity proceed from themselves" (Hab. 1:6-7). God then described the fierceness of the Chaldean attacks by stating "their horses also are swifter than leopards, And more fierce than evening wolves. Their chargers charge ahead; Their calvary comes from afar; They fly as the eagle that hastens to eat. They all come for violence; their faces are set like the east wind. They gather captives like sand" (Hab. 1:8-9).

Can you imagine a more dreadful situation than that described in these verses? Yes, Israel was evil. Yes, Israel deserved to be punished. And Habakkuk initially wondered why God had allowed such sinful conduct to continue, without directly interfering. But then God informed him that He was going to use a people more wicked than the Jews (the Chaldeans) to bring them into subjection and teach them a much needed lesson!

Habakkuk was not ready for the reply he received from God. So at this point he voiced (to God!) his doubts and frustration even further. With this in mind, please note Hab. 1:12-15: "Are You not from everlasting to everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? **We shall not die, O Lord, You have appointed them for judgment; O Rock, You have marked them for correction. You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, And cannot look on wickedness. Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, And hold Your tongue when the wicked devours A person **more righteous** than he."**

Yes, Habakkuk had great difficulty — difficulty wondering how a "holy" God could tolerate the immorality of His people, and he was even more surprised to learn that God was going to use "the wicked" (Chaldeans) to devour a people (the Jews) "more righteous than he." But God did not reprimand Habakkuk for honestly voicing his doubts. In chapter two of this three-chapter book, God explained a few things to Habakkuk. First, He informed Habakkuk that "the just shall live by **his faith**" (Hab. 2:4). There are times when we humans don't have all the answers; God knows what He is doing. We need patience; we must learn to "wait on the Lord," to "be of good courage," knowing that "He shall strengthen your faith..." (Psalm 27:14). Then, in Hab. 2:6-19 God announced a series of five woes upon wicked people, revealing that they will inevitably suffer the consequences of their evil ways. And God concluded this message to Habakkuk, saying "the Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him." In other words, God is in control; He sees what is going on; He will respond accordingly, so "let all the earth keep silence before Him," for who is mere man to question **God**!!

By now, Habakkuk has gotten the message! Chapter three contains his response, it being "a prayer," a prayer consisting of three parts: (1) a prayer beseeching God to revive His work of deliverance, v. 1-2, (b) Remembering God's deliverance and manifest power in the past, v. 3-15), and © its positive effect upon Habakkuk, v. 17-19. In these verses, instead of voicing his doubts and frustrations, Habakkuk let it be known that, notwithstanding how critical things could come in the way of a food shortage, that "I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation," v. 18). Earthly things at that point did not seem so significant; now the prophet is able to joyfully exclaim that "the Lord God is my strength, He will make my feet like deer's feet, and He will make me walk on my high hills," v. 19). Habakkuk had learned his lesson; it was not a time to doubt; properly understood, it was a time to "rejoice in the Lord," to "joy in the God" of his "salvation."

The Old Testament was "written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). Even as Habakkuk learned that real joy is "is in the Lord," and not in outward, material circumstances, we should learn the same lesson. This is especially so in view of the fact that **Jesus** (not Moses) is "the Mediator" of the "covenant" under which we live (Heb. 9:15-17), and that the "covenant" of which He is "the mediator" is "a better covenant, which was established on better promises," Heb. 8:6.

At the beginning of this article, we cited Phil. 3:1 and Phil. 4:4 wherein the apostle Paul exhorted the saints at Philippi to “*rejoice in the Lord.*” Not only did Paul urge them to “*rejoice in the Lord,*” he also said “*I rejoiced in the Lord greatly,*” Phil. 4:10. Yes, Paul “*rejoiced,*” but keep in mind that he was a prisoner in Rome at the time he wrote this book; he was a prisoner — not because he had done evil, but because he preached the saving gospel of Jesus Christ!

Perhaps “the bottom line” of what I am trying to say is this: Christians are commanded to “*rejoice in the Lord;*” even though their this world circumstances might be exceedingly dreadful.

### **Why Should Christians Rejoice?**

**1. They should rejoice because their alien sins have been forgiven (Acts 2:38; 8:39).**

**2. They should rejoice because they are “in the Lord,”** having been “*baptized into Christ*” (Gal. 3:27), and “*in*” Whom is “*salvation*” (2 Tim. 2:10).

**3. They should “rejoice” because of their “hope”** (Rom. 12:12), it being the “*hope of eternal life*” (Tit. 1:2).

**4. They should “rejoice” because their “names are written in heaven”** (Luke 10:20),.

**5. They should “rejoice:” because “great” is their “reward in heaven”** (Matt. 5:12).

**Conclusion:** More reasons could be cited as to why Christians should “*rejoice in the Lord.*” Let us remember that such rejoicing is not based on outward circumstances; rather it is based upon having the right relationship with the Lord.

Yes, we live in a very sinful world, a world filled with danger, disease, discouragement, and death. But “this world is not our home!” If we are Christians, we have so much for which to be thankful — we have been forgiven, redeemed, added to the church, adopted as children in the family of God. I could go on and on, but you get the message. Regardless of outward circumstances, let us truly “*rejoice in the Lord.*”

\*\*\*\* —B. Witherington