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CHRISTIAN JOY

by

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

Joy is a characteristic of Christianity. You will remember that the message that the angel announced to the shepherds of Bethlehem was "I bring you tidings of great joy". Jesus constantly enjoined His disciples to rejoice, and so did St. Paul, for example in Philippians 4:4 "Rejoice in the Lord always". If we turn to the Old Testament we find the same note of joy, especially in the Psalms.

Joy is a characteristic of Christianity; but yet it is an attitude and emotion which cannot just be turned on at will. It is based on a Christian's world view, that is on a Christian understanding of life, its source and its object. Joy is based on knowledge. There are many facets of Christian knowledge on which Christian joy is based. Perhaps the most characteristic is the joy that comes from the knowledge that God has forgiven us all our sins. There is nothing so

nagging as a guilty conscience and sense of our sinfulness; but a Christian knows that his sins have been forgiven for Christ's sake. God has said that He has put them behind His back (Is. 38:17), that He has blotted them out as though with a thick cloud (Is.44:22), so that He no longer sees them. They are no longer present to Him and so they do not mar our fellowship with Him. In another passage (Ps. 103:12) God has said that He puts our sins away from us as far as the east is from the west. These are all word pictures to indicate that our sins are forgiven when we confess our sins to God in faith that Jesus has died to atone for them. Thus St. John writes in I John 1 "If we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" and again "the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin". When we realise that God forgives us completely for Christ's sake

when we ask Him for this forgiveness, there comes a peace to our conscience and joy to our hearts.

Another source of Christian joy is the joy of fellowship with God. It is one of the remarkable privileges of a Christian that he is able to commune with his Creator. God's Spirit dwells in our hearts and we have personal fellowship with Him. This fellowship is a real experience and it leads to joy. It could not be otherwise, for this fellowship means that we are at one with the ground of our being, and such perfect adjustment of our nature must, of course, be accompanied by joy. As St. John puts it in I John 1, "our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" and in the next verse he goes on to speak of our joy being filled to the full.

There is a third ground for Christian joy which is frequently referred to in the New Testament and that is the

sure knowledge about our future which God's word gives us. This future is independent of the uncertainty about the adequacy of our own efforts because it is based on God's promised and clearly revealed intentions towards us, intentions full of salvation and blessing. Thus Jesus in Luke 10:27 told His disciples (who were rejoicing in the successful results of their preaching not to rejoice in this, for the real ground of their rejoicing should be in the fact that God had for them a sure blessing. He said "Rejoice that your names are written in Heaven". As we reflect on our future which God has promised to all who have put their trust in Christ our hearts inevitably fill with joy. This is what St. Paul meant when he said "Rejoice in the Lord always". Christ is Lord and has promised that we will share in His coming Kingdom so that it is in the Lord that we rejoice. There are numerous references in the New Testament to this

joy that Christians have as they contemplate God's glorious provision for all who put their faith in Christ.

Forgiveness, present fellowship with God, and future glory are three closely related grounds for Christian joy and they are often referred to together in the New Testament as in Romans 5:1 where St. Paul, after speaking about the forgiveness that God extends to all who put their faith in Christ says "Being then justified by faith we have peace with God through Whom we have had our access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God".

Christian joy is based on the knowledge of God's goodness in present forgiveness and fellowship with Him and in His future purposes for us. It is based then on Christian knowledge. But if this knowledge is defective it is not surprising that the joy evaporates. For example, one

of the most important doctrines is that Christ is Lord over everything. If we do not realise that God controls everything in our life and that He controls everything for good, we may very well become overwhelmed in spirit by events. So true New Testament doctrine is the ground for Christian joy. On the other hand inadequate doctrine, or wrong doctrine, will destroy that joy. I may illustrate this from three doctrines currently taught in the Roman Catholic Church. For example, the Roman Church teaches that our salvation depends very largely on our own good works, and of course on that theory we never know assurance, because we never know whether our works are sufficient or whether or not we will die in a state of grace as they put it. Thus a well instructed Roman Catholic does not know for sure that he is going to Heaven, and in fact the Council of Trent anathematized those who were sure of their salvation. Quite obviously there-

fore one of the most important springs of joy is excluded. For example, our Lord's words "Rejoice because your names are written in Heaven" cannot be applied by a Roman Catholic to his own life.

Secondly, the joy of present fellowship with God through the Holy Spirit communing directly with our own hearts is excluded by the teaching that a priest is necessary as an intermediary between ourselves and God. The Roman Catholics are taught that it is impossible for a Christian to obtain forgiveness from God except by confessing sins to a priest. The priest stands in the place of Christ. Thus Archbishop Sheehan, a former Roman Catholic coadjutor archbishop of Sydney, wrote in his book "Catholic Doctrine" on page 243 "The priest is another Christ, a living representative of the Redeemer whose work he continues". Such a doctrine of a human intermediary minimises the possibility of the joy that

comes from direct fellowship with God.

Then again the doctrine of purgatory neutralises the joy and comfort that comes from realising that after death we enter into the joy of our Lord. Purgatory is the normal anticipation of Roman Catholics after death and it is taught that purgatory is a place of awful agony. Thus Archbishop Sheehan says on page 273, of purgatory, that it is "a most severe punishment involving "dreadful suffering" and "agony". The Archbishop quotes St. Bonaventura: "The severest pain of purgatory exceeds the most violent known on earth" and also St. Thomas Aquinas: "Even the slightest torture of purgatory is worse than all the sufferings one can endure in this world". Consequently if a person really believes this, it is impossible to contemplate the future with any joy. Fortunately the Bible knows nothing of the doctrine of purgatory. There is not a word about it in

either the Old or the New Testaments. This would be extraordinarily strange if God had really prepared such a place for us to go to after death for if it existed it would be most important to know about it. But God has made no mention of it in the Bible. Indeed the language of the New Testament excludes the possibility of purgatory. In Revelation 13 we read "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from henceforth, for they rest from their labours". The writer could not have spoken of rest if he thought that the dead were plunged into suffering and agony and torment, to use Archbishop Sheehan's words. Nor could St. Paul have written as he did that to depart from the body is to be present with the Lord and is very far better. Nor would Jesus have told the dying thief that that very day he would be in paradise with Him, if purgatory existed. We do well to remember that purgatory has no place in the teaching of Scripture. Therefore it does

not exist, and so it must not be allowed to rise as an ogre to take away our joy which the Scriptures tell us we should have as we contemplate God's purposes for us for the future. Only two days ago my four year old son quite spontaneously asked me if I would like to die. When I replied that I was not anxious to, he said "I would because I would go to Jesus". How terrible it would be if I had had to tell him about purgatory! But God has perfect bliss in store for us. That is why we ought to rejoice in the Lord.

There is another aspect of Roman Catholic teaching which goes a long way to diminish Christian joy and that is the teaching that God wishes us to inflict pain on ourselves. The teaching of the Bible is, of course, to the contrary, that God gives us all things richly to enjoy. Self inflicted asceticism is no part of God's purposes for humanity, nevertheless it is widely practiced in the Church of

Rome. For example, Amand de Mendieta in his recently published autobiography "Rome or Canterbury" speaking of his life in a Roman Catholic monastery in France during the two world wars, says that the monks of this monastery flagellated and lashed themselves every Friday during the ringing of the chapel bell. The prospect of this regular, weekly, self inflicted pain and similar ascetic practices must have a very dampening effect on joy.

If then we are to follow the Bible's call to rejoice in the Lord so that our Christian life is characterised by joy, it is very important that our knowledge of God should be true; for wrong doctrine banishes joy. But if our doctrines are to be true they must be Scriptural, because the source of Christian joy is not the events of life so much as the underlying attitude which springs from a knowledge of God's purposes for ourselves and for the world; a knowledge

which we obtain from God's word in the Bible and from nowhere else. So we all need to correct and fill out our knowledge of God from the Bible, if we are to fulfil His command "Rejoice in the Lord always".

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