

Rejoice in the Lord (Philippians)

Circumstances can make having joy difficult. But joy in difficult circumstances is produced by the Spirit as the child of God keeps in step with the Spirit. This topic of joy and rejoicing is a thread which Paul weaves throughout his letter to the Philippians. Founded by Paul at the start of his first outreach into Europe, the Philippian church had remained faithful supporters of Paul's gospel ministry. Writing about ten years later from his Roman imprisonment, Paul encourages them through his prayers, exhortations, warnings, and instructions to have joy and to rejoice together with him. Following this thread through the letter we can find at least ten lessons on joy and rejoicing.

1. For joyful prayer, be thankful to God for the good He works in and through others and especially their "participation in the gospel" (1:3–5). We see this after Paul's greeting (1:1–2) in his prayer of thanksgiving for the Philippians believers (1:3–11).
2. Rejoice when Christ is preached, even when circumstances or aspects of others' behavior may be hurtful. We see this in Paul's attitude as he reports on his situation in prison (1:12–18a).
3. Joy, which belongs to the fruit of the Spirit, comes when our primary concern is the exaltation of Christ rather than our own physical well-being. As Paul continues his report on his situation (1:18b–26), he rejoices in the confidence that Christ would be exalted whether by his life or by death.
4. Joy in the faith comes when you stand firm in the faith with other believers. The Philippians' joy (1:25) is conditioned by their conduct, being united together for the gospel, which Paul explains in his first exhortation (1:27–30).
5. Joy can grow (cf. 2:2) as believers grow in spiritual unity through humility and selflessness (2:1–4), having the attitude which was modeled by Christ (2:5–11), obeying Christ (2:12–13), and avoiding grumbling and disputing (2:14–16).
6. Joy and rejoicing is possible, even when facing death, if your life and the lives of others have been dedicated to serving the Lord. Paul indicates this when he brings his exhortations together (2:17–18), telling the Philippians that he rejoices, they should rejoice, and all should rejoice together, because his own death added to the "sacrificial offering of their faith" would be like the additional drink offering poured out on the morning and evening sacrifices.
7. When God makes His mercy more tangible, having joy in Him is made easier. As Paul addresses the situation with his co-workers (2:19–30), he indicates the sorrow he would have had if Epaphroditus had died from his illness. God had shown mercy to Paul, Epaphroditus, and the Philippians who could rejoice at seeing him again (2:28).
8. Rejoice in the Lord, even when there is opposition. That appears to be the reason Paul begins his series of warnings (3:2–21) with the exhortation to rejoice in the Lord. Whether it be the dangers of Judaism, perfectionism, or license, they should stand firm, rejoicing and being Paul's joy and crown (4:1).
9. Joy and continued rejoicing is within your reach as a fruit of the Spirit, but it still requires keeping in step with the Spirit. This was true of two women, fellow-workers for the gospel, who weren't getting along (4:2–3). And it is true for every believer (4:4–9) as they act right toward others, remember the closeness of the Lord, commit everything to the Lord with thanksgiving, think right and live right.
10. Joy is possible in the strength of the Lord and when you learn contentment. Paul could be thankful and joyous for the support of the Philippians, even though there had been a lapse, because he had learned to be content (4:10–20).

In Paul's closing greetings and benediction (4:21–23) he calls believers "saints", recalling his opening greeting "to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are Philippi." A "saint" is not a special class of believer, but is a description of every true believer because every true believer has been "set apart" to God in Christ and in His righteousness. This is the basic requirement to have true, Spirit-given joy, that is, to be born of the Spirit. As you keep in step with the Spirit you will find joy and you will be able to rejoice in the Lord always.

Questions for further thought and discussion:

- In light of the principles which drove Paul's joy, what might keep you at times from having joy? How can you improve?
- How can a person have both sorrow and joy at the same time?
- Explain how the believer should rejoice in the Lord even when there is opposition.