

## **PHIL 4.4: REJOICE IN THE LORD!**

[Chelmsford New Year's Eve 2010]

What is joy? Is joy the same as happiness?

Listen to the following story and tell me is it about joy – or is it about happiness?

A man goes to a rabbi and complains: 'Life is unbearable. There are nine of us living in one room. What can I do?' The rabbi answers: 'Take the goat into the room with you'. The man is incredulous, but the rabbi insists: 'Do as you are told and come back in a week'. A week later the man comes back, feeling half dead: 'We cannot stand it. The goat is filthy'. The rabbi tells him: 'Go home and let the goat out – and come back in a week's time'. A week later the man visits the rabbi, and he is over the moon. 'Life is beautiful, rabbi. No goat, only the nine of us' (George Mikes)

Is that joy? Or is it happiness? I would suggest that what the man experienced is happiness. For happiness is what happens to us when life goes well, whereas joy is something much deeper. Happiness is dependent upon circumstances – joy is independent of circumstances.

Listen to the words of my text for this evening.

They are found in Phil 4.4. '**Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice**'.

When Paul wrote those words, he was not a happy bunny. Life was not going well for him.

He was in prison (1.13) – no doubt chained to a Roman soldier.

What's more, he was on death row, facing imminent execution

To make things even worse, not all his fellow Christians appear to have been sad about his plight: rather they were happy "to make more trouble" for him while he was in prison (1.17).

Life was not good – and Paul would have had every reason to complain against God: 'God it's not fair. Here I am – I have given my life to you. I have sought to serve you faithfully – and yet what do you do? You allow me to end up in a prison cell'.

But instead of complaining, Paul was full of joy.

**"Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, Rejoice"**.

In fact his whole letter to the Philippians is permeated with joy.

So much so that it has been called '*the Epistle of Joy*'.

Although it is one of his shorter letters, the words joy and rejoice occur fifteen times. E.g.

- 1.4: He speaks of the joy of prayer
- 1.18: He speaks of the joy of seeing the Gospel preached
- 2.17: He speaks of the joy of Christian service
- 2.18 & 3.1; he urges the Philippians to rejoice
- Here in 4.4 he twice more urges the Philippians to rejoice

.Bengel, a great German scholar, summed up the Epistle with the tag ‘*I rejoice – you rejoice*’ (*gaudeo gaudete*) “**Rejoice**”, says Paul. Rejoice not in the fact that you are not having to share your bedroom with a goat; but “**rejoice in the Lord**”.

It is those three words which makes all the difference. “**In the Lord**”

In Jesus we have so much reason to rejoice.

Tonight I want to give you four reasons for joy

## **1. REJOICE IN THE COMING OF JESUS – HE CAME FOR YOU**

Yes, the coming of Jesus into our world was cause for great joy. As the angel said to the shepherds, “**I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people. This very day in David’s town your Saviour was born – Christ the Lord**” (Luke 2.10)

To their amazement the shepherds discovered that Jesus came for them.

Socially and religiously, they were at the bottom of the heap. Cold-shouldered by all god-fearing people because of their life-style, they were no nobody’s guest list.

But suddenly they discovered that they were on God’s guest list. The doors of the synagogue may have been closed to them, but not the doors of the Kingdom of God.

To them a Saviour was born. Here indeed was “**good news of great joy**”.

This is why we sing the carol ‘*Joy to the world! The Lord has come*’

Nobody is beyond the pale, as far as God is concerned.

The ordinary as well as the important, the non-churchgoing as well as the church-going – all are encompassed by the love of God. It doesn’t matter who we are, or what we have done. Nobody is too far gone for God. He has provided a Saviour for us all.

Here is cause for joy. Jesus came for you – he came for me

As the Dutch Jesuit, Henri Nouwen once put it: “*Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved*”.

So “**rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice**” – together.

## **2. REJOICE IN THE DYING OF JESUS – HE DIED FOR YOU**

For people who do not share our Christian faith, the thought of rejoicing in the dying of Jesus must sound very strange. Death is normally a cause of sorrow, not a cause of joy.

Certainly, the women who watched Jesus die must have wept many a tear.

But from the vantage point of faith that saddest of days is also the gladdest of days.

Let me quote to you the words of an old Good Friday hymn written by JM Neale where he speaks of that day when Jesus died:

*The saddest – for our Saviour bore  
His death, that man might die no more;  
The agony, the scourge, the fear,  
The crown of thorns, the cross, the spear;*

*And yet the gladdest – for today  
Our load of sin was born away;  
And hopes of joy that never dies  
Hang on our Saviour's sacrifice*

Yes, the death of Jesus is cause for joy. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans: “**We rejoice because of what God has done through our Lord Jesus Christ (5.11) – “We were God’s enemies, but he made us his friends through the death of his Son” (5.10).**

Here is cause for joy. Jesus died for you – Jesus died for me. Jesus died that our sin might be forgiven – he died to open up a way to God. Because of Jesus we can call God ‘Abba Father’. “**Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say rejoice!**” – together!

### **3. REJOICE IN THE RISING OF JESUS – HE ROSE FOR YOU**

Yes, there was joy on that first Easter Day. Matthew tells us that the women returned from the empty tomb – “**afraid and yet filled with joy**” (28.8).

They could scarcely believe the good news that Jesus was risen from the dead (see Lk 24.41). John tells us that when the risen Lord Jesus came to his disciples that first Easter Sunday evening “**the disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord**” (20.20).

At that stage they rejoiced that their Lord was back with them.

But as time passed, their joy deepened, because they came to realise that in rising from the dead Jesus had broken the power of death over your life and mine. Here was cause for even greater joy. As Peter wrote in his first Letter: “**God gave us new life by raising Jesus Christ from death. This fills us with a living hope**” (1.3). He goes on: “**So you rejoice with a great and glorious joy which words cannot express**” (1.8).

Yes, the resurrection of Jesus is cause for great joy. Jesus rose for you and for me. Death no longer has the last word – Jesus does.

So, “**Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice**” - together

#### 4. REJOICE IN THE COMING OF JESUS – HE WILL COME TO BLESS YOU

Yes, there will be great joy when the Lord Jesus returns – for on that day he will award to you and to me and to all who love him a crown of righteousness.

Listen to the Apostle Paul: **“Now there is waiting for me the victory prize of being put right with God, which the Lord, the righteous Judge will give me on that Day – and not only me but to all those who wait with love for him to appear”** (2 Tim 4.8)

Significantly here in Phil 4 Paul seems to link joy with the coming of the Lord.

For almost immediately after saying: **“Rejoice in the Lord; and again I say rejoice”**, he says **“The Lord is coming soon”** (Phil 4.5).

And of course on that day, not only will the salvation of those who love him be complete – but all the suffering and all the injustice of this world will be over. In the words of the Psalmist: **“Tears may flow in the night, but joy comes in the morning”** (Ps 30.5)

Yes, the coming again of Jesus is cause for great joy. Jesus will come again.

On that day not only will evil have its come-uppance, but God’s people will receive their reward. So, **“Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice”** - together

Let me end with two quotations:

- One from Gordon Fee, an American Pentecostal, who wrote a splendid commentary on this letter: *“Joy, unmitigated, untrammelled joy is – or at least should be – the distinctive mark of the believer in Christ Jesus. The wearing of black and the long face, which so often come to typify some later expressions of Christian piety, are totally foreign to Paul’s version; Paul the theologian of grace is equally the theologian of joy. Christian joy does not come and go with one’s circumstances; rather it is predicated altogether on one’s relationship with the Lord and is thus an abiding, deeply spiritual quality of life”*
- My second quotation comes from the 16<sup>th</sup> century English Bible translator William Tyndale, who described the Gospel as *“good, merry, glad and joyful tidings that makes a man’s heart glad and makes him sing, dance and leap for joy”*

**“Rejoice in the Lord always; and again, I say, rejoice”**