

## *Joy in My Heart*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on December 12, 2021.

Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness! You have given me relief when I was in distress. Be gracious to me and hear my prayer! O men, how long shall my honor be turned into shame? How long will you love vain words and seek after lies? But know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself; the LORD hears when I call to him. Be angry, and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent. Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the LORD. There are many who say, “Who will show us some good? Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!” You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound. In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety (Psalm 4).<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes life can feel unbearable. Whether it be the anxiety of a situation, conflict with people, or restless worry over tomorrow, we can easily grow frustrated even cynical, wondering where has the joy of living gone? We have all likely felt this way before, perhaps even today. But sometimes it can be difficult to express what we are feeling, to others, to ourselves, and even to God. But God has neither created nor redeemed us to wallow in the weight of our worries but desires that we cry out to him, giving us not only the privilege but the poetry too.

Among the many blessings of the psalms, this is one of them: God gives us the words. Consider the fourth psalm, an evening hymn, which concludes with the words we all wish to say at the end of a long day: “In peace I will both lie down and sleep” (4:8). It is a statement, not merely a wish, placed at the conclusion of a short psalm that reveals the necessity of trusting God in our daily lives – trusting God with our lives, period.

In what could be summed up as counsel to trust and pray, the psalmist poignantly portrays what a life of trusting God looks like and reveals the joy that results. No, it is not care-free, stress-free, problem-free fiction, but life built on consistently remembering God’s provision. It is a life blessed by divine, righteous relief despite shameful, slandering opposition. And it is a life of holy, quiet trust, God-given, uncircumstantial joy, and safe, restful peace.

### **Divine, Righteous Relief**

The psalmist begins with a petition, “Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness! You have given me relief when I was in distress. Be gracious to me and hear my prayer! (4:1). It is a plea based on evidential provision, relief and righteousness. James says, “You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions” (James 4:2-3). It is a confronting reminder that pure motives matter when praying, but asking and receiving do not presume a prerequisite of perfection on our part but on God’s. Our righteousness comes not from within us but from him.

Because our righteousness is from the Lord, we freely come to our Father as his children boldly petitioning, “Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness! ...Be gracious to me and hear

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

my prayer!” (4:1). Only a child of God knows an alien righteousness given by grace through faith. Only a child of God comes draped in the righteousness of Christ before our Father who hears the voice of his justified child.

It is by God’s grace that he hears us. It is by his grace that he answers. We do not dictate when or how he does, but we can be sure that he does. Yet, sometimes doubt can cloud our confidence. Sometimes our prayers can seem faithless, as the world, our flesh, and the devil bombard us with lies, lies that counter the truth. Though persuasive, they are lies none the less, lies that must be countered, as the psalmist does, pronouncing God’s provision.

Ask yourself: Do you trust your Heavenly Father? Do you believe that he knows what is best for you, even better than you do yourself? In Psalm 139, speaking personal words of encouragement David confesses to the Lord, “You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether” (Ps. 139:2-4). Indeed, he does “know it altogether,” but do you trust what he does with that knowledge? Do you believe that he answers your prayers with what is best for you and his glory? The problem is we often don’t. Because God doesn’t do what we want, when we want it, how we want it, we get frustrated, even get depressed, pray less, and wonder why joy seems illusive.

In contrast, the psalmist prays boldly, imperatively, petitioning for grace with gratitude, for the divine, righteous relief that God has given. He looks back to what God has done to pray for what God will do, trusting that what, how, and when is best left to him who created and sustains all things. And it is this trust that enables us to not only pray rightly but to joyfully endure, even when others do not share our confidence.

### **Shameful, Slandering Opposition**

If you trust in the Lord, don’t expect the world to applaud your faith. More likely, expect to be mocked for trusting God, believing his Word, keeping his sacraments, faithfully praying. In fact, from the world’s perspective, praying to the one, true God through Christ by the Spirit is an absurdity warranting shame. Trusting that God hears and answers our prayers, even personally encouraging and teaching us to pray specifically and only to him, warrants insult.

The psalmist responds to such shame and slander with the boldness of one who trusts the Lord: “O men, how long shall my honor be turned into shame? How long will you love vain words and seek after lies?” (4:2). They are questions less about duration and more about motive: Why do people say the things they say? But for many of us, the problem is not that we are shamed and slandered; the problem is that we listen, even giving credence to the criticism. Think about it: Is your perspective impacted by the opinion of others, what they say about you, how they respond to you? Do you value the opinion of those who treasure the worthless and validate those who deny truth? How easily we are misled away from the Lord’s way simply by listening to the wrong people.

It’s time to turn off the voices of vanity and tune into God’s Word: “know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself” and hears us when we call him (4:3). For he who by his grace has set

you apart as his child will never shame you. He who chose you before the foundation of the world, who predestined you for adoption, who saved you through faith in his Son, will never slander you. He is your Heavenly Father, and he hears you when you call him. Meditate on this truth, because when we do, we develop a holy, quiet trust in the Lord.

### **Holy, Quiet Trust**

Trusting the Lord has a maturing effect upon us. Trust breeds trust. Though the world's contempt may agitate you, "Be angry, and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent" (4:4). Trusting the Lord enables a calm amidst the storm, a peaceful quietude in a noisy world.

Far from passive, trusting the Lord is an active part of our faith, encouraged through meditating on the Lord's provision. For example, in psalm 127 the psalmist describes the Lord's sovereign provision set against our typical anxiety-ridden toil:

Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep (Ps. 127:1-2).

In contrast to a holy, quiet trust, the sins of worry and anxiety are loud, raucous lies that rob us of joyful contentment and quiet rest.

Sadly, many of us are so bent on carrying burdens we were never intended to carry that we justify worry and anxiety as necessary consequences of care and concern, seemingly sanctifying our sin. Yet, God's Word confronts such noisy falsehood, directing us to cast our anxieties on the Lord, who cares for us (1 Pet. 5:7), bringing everything to the Lord in "prayer and supplication with thanksgiving" (Phil 4:6). We are never encouraged to carry but to cast our burdens, not upon our shoulders but on the Lord (Ps. 55:22).

And it is not merely our anxieties and our burdens that the Lord calls us to cast but ourselves as well, presenting our bodies as living sacrifices, right sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God" (Rom. 12:1). Trusting the Lord ultimately calls for complete dedication, not a hyphenated existence between our spiritual and physical life but a life of living worship. And part of this living worship includes consistently confronting the falsehoods that we say to ourselves, the unspoken repetitive self-talk that erodes our confidence in the Lord's provision.

It is very easy for us to fall into a victim mentality, thinking that everyone is against us, that all is evil, and wondering if there is anyone who can show us anything good? Of course, perceiving the world through presumption rather than providence, ignoring God's common grace to elevate the reality of evil, helps no one, and worse it takes our eyes off the Lord, whose smile rests upon his children, the light of his countenance upon us (4:6). And it is the truth of God's favor that reinforces our trust in him and encourages our faith to petition. Trust becomes worship and prayer becomes praise, resulting in God-given, uncircumstantial joy.

## **God-given, Uncircumstantial Joy**

“There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil” (Eccles. 2:24), the preacher of Ecclesiastes observes, commending, “Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart” (Eccles. 9:7). We who pray for our daily bread and know our Heavenly Father’s provision rightly delight in the simple pleasures received from the bounty of the field and the blessing of the vineyard. We pray before our meals with thanksgiving for what God has given, enjoying the bounty and blessing of what he gives as an expression of that gratitude. I think Michael Pollan is right when he says, “Food is not just fuel. Food is about family, food is about community, food is about identity. And we nourish all those things when we eat well” (Pollan).<sup>2</sup> The temporal blessings of bread and wine are not just fuel but gifts from God and opportunities for us to be grateful. We teach our children well when we pray before our meals, not for miraculous transformation but in gratitude for the blessing of a meal. But as much as we may enjoy the bounty and blessings of the field and vineyard, consider the joy that God puts in our heart.

Think about it: Joy is a gift from God, wrought and delivered to our heart by grace. Our well-being may flourish, our circumstances may crumble, or vice versa or neither, yet we may know unexplainable joy. It comes as a fruit not of the vineyard but of the Spirit, and its fullness is enjoyed not outside of but in his presence (Ps. 16:11), a reality for every, single Christian. Indeed, we may all have joy in our hearts.

Such joy, as the psalmist reveals, is directly connected to the Lord’s provision and our receipt of it. Consider the ultimate example of this truth in the loving gift of God’s only Son. Not by our request but God’s design, he sent his Son into the world, taking human flesh upon himself, yet without sin. He lived a righteous life, died a sacrificial death, and resurrected to life that we might have eternal life in him. As sinners by nature, thought, word, and deed, yet saved by God’s grace through faith in Christ, we can look back to the Lord’s provision in Christ, as more than just relief from our distress but relief from sin and its deadly curse, and in its place we are guaranteed eternal life, and never-ending fellowship with our Lord. As this is the case for all who trust in the gift of the Lord Jesus Christ, our joy can never be circumstantial, because its source is eternal life himself, who has secured for us safe, restful peace, today and forever.

## **Safe, Restful Peace**

And so like the end of the day, we come to the end of this sermon, where I want to remind you that God has given, gives, and will give us peaceful rest. The psalmist confesses, “In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety” (4:8). We rest securely in the sovereign arms of our Heavenly Father, knowing and perhaps needing to repeat to ourselves, “The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?” (Ps. 118:6). The question is rhetorical as is the yes and amen of his provision (2 Cor. 1:20), leading to confidence in his blessing and keeping, and a rest that knows no end. So, let us pray, let us trust, let us rejoice, and let us rest. For, he who relieves your distress also puts joy in your heart.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Pollan, *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2008), 1, Amazon Kindle.