

Joy that No Man Can Take

*“Your sorrow shall
be turned to joy. . . .*

*And your joy no
man taketh
from you.”*

—John 16:20,22

THE WORDS OF OUR OPEN-

ing Scripture were spoken by Jesus to his disciples the night before he was put to death. He told them that they would soon experience great sorrow because of his departure from their midst. Yet, he says that this sorrow would soon afterward be turned to joy. This joy came about in two ways. First, his resurrection on the “third day,” and the various appearances he made to the disciples in the forty days following, were “convincing proofs” that he lived again, with even greater power than he had prior to his death. This was a source of great joy to Jesus’ followers, and renewed their dedication to him.—Luke 9:22; 24:45,46; Acts 1:1-3, *New American Standard Bible*

Joy came to the disciples in an even greater degree on the Day of Pentecost when, through the enlightening power of the Holy Spirit, they understood more fully the details of God’s plan. Peter immediately was moved to expound this joyful message to the

multitudes gathered. (Acts 2:1-38) Many believed Peter's words, and were "pricked in their heart." As a result, "about three thousand" were added to their number. (vss. 37-41) The great joy of that day is testified to in the chapter's closing verses, which state that they all continued "daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house," and "did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God." (vss. 46,47) Indeed, the disciples' sorrow, as well as perplexity and uncertainty, had been "turned to joy."

We live in a world today that is likewise full of sorrow, perplexity, uncertainty, and fear. Jesus prophesied of our day that it would be so, saying that men's hearts would fail them for fear, as they look at the things happening on the earth. (Luke 21:25,26) Yet, in spite of the religious, moral, political, and economic turmoil which surrounds us, the Lord's people are counseled in the Scriptures to always "Rejoice in the Lord." (Phil. 4:4) We today, as consecrated believers, must take the many sorrows which encompass our lives, whether personally or in the world around us, and "turn them" into a joy that "no man" can take from us. This is a mighty endeavor, and can only be accomplished by looking to the Scriptures to see what the basis must be for such joy.

JOYOUS CONDITIONS—PRIOR TO SIN

That brief period of time in which Adam and Eve lived in Eden, before the entrance of sin into their lives, must certainly have been joyous. This was so because all of God's intelligent creatures were formed with the capability of experiencing joy, of which their Creator was the source. The various orders of

angelic beings that existed before man was created were not sad, dismayed, depressed, or morose. These expressions were probably not in the vocabulary of God's creatures at that time.

God asked Job, "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?" (Job 38:4) Job, of course, had not been born yet. God continued speaking with Job, describing the great work of preparing the earth for human habitation and telling of the reactions of his angelic creatures, "when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy." (vs. 7) Similar conditions are described in Proverbs, chapter 8. There, Jesus in his prehuman existence is personified as wisdom, accomplishing the Heavenly Father's will. Reference is made in this passage to the creation of this blessed one before the "earth was." (vs. 23) Also described is the work he did in assisting the Father and the joy that the Father had in him. "Then I was beside Him, as a master workman; And I was daily His delight, Rejoicing always before Him, Rejoicing in the world, His earth, And having my delight in the sons of men." (vss. 30,31, *NASB*) We note the words "delight" and "rejoicing" as descriptive of that time.

WHAT IS JOY?

Joy may be defined as a sentiment or thought process brought about by the expectation or experiencing of good. By contrast, sadness can be thought of as a sentiment or thought process resulting from the expectation or experiencing of that which is evil. Thus, prior to sin entering into the picture, sadness was never present among God's creation, and only its opposite, joy, was experienced.

Although joy can be thought of as synonymous with happiness, it should never be happiness at the expense of others. There is also a false and a true happiness. The wicked, as well as the good, can be happy. However, the difference in the happiness of the two is that they rejoice in opposite events and conditions. In Proverbs 6:16-19, there is given a list of things which God hates: "A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren." The wicked may be happy and take joy in doing these things, whereas the righteous would have sorrow in merely seeing such happenings. The prophet confirms this, saying, "Now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered."—Mal. 3:15

We should not conclude from these words that the righteous cannot be happy in this present evil world. There are many ways in which the Scriptures say they can be happy. A few examples taken from the Book of Proverbs are: "**Happy** is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding." "He that hath mercy on the poor, **happy** is he." "Whoso trusteth in the LORD, **happy** is he." "He that keepeth the law, **happy** is he."—Prov. 3:13; 14:21; 16:20; 29:18

All these ways in which the righteous can be happy may be summarized in the words of Jesus spoken at the time when he washed the feet of his disciples. In impressing upon them the lesson of humility, he said, "Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have

washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them." (John 13:13-17) Note the sharp contrast to Malachi's statement, "Now we call the proud happy."—Mal. 3:15

The lesson of humility is of great importance when considering this subject, for the closer we come to attaining true humility, the more likely we are to be truly happy. Closely related to humility, and a further requirement for true happiness, is the recognition of the Heavenly Father as the supreme being of the universe. Jesus said, "My Father is greater than I," and is "greater than all." (John 14:28; 10:29) Satan refused to recognize this all-important fact of God's supremacy, and as a consequence of his rebellion against God he caused sin and death to enter the world. Thus it happened that the joy which was everywhere in heaven and in earth became scarce in the earth. The earth became a place of sorrow, suffering, sighing, and dying, instead of being the joyous place God intended it to be. (Gen. 3:14-19) It became a place of weeping, as described by the psalmist: "Weeping may endure for a night." (Ps. 30:5) The night pictures the time of this present evil world, during which joy has been as difficult to find as have other fruits of the spirit—love, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance. (Gal. 5:22,23) These holy qualities are scarce and can be developed by God's people only with the help of his Holy Spirit. However, man was originally formed in the moral image of God, and

we are glad that these elements of character will, in God's coming kingdom, be reestablished in man's heart. Indeed, as the psalmist continues in the above verse, "Joy cometh in the morning."

JESUS ENTERED INTO MAN'S SORROW

As members of the Adamic family, we were born "in sin." (Ps. 51:5) As such, we have learned to accept grief and sorrow as a part of our lot. This was not so with Jesus. In his prehuman existence, he was daily the Father's delight. God rejoiced in his wonderful Son, and he, in turn, rejoiced in his glorious and loving Father.

Hence, when Jesus came to earth, it meant entering into mankind's experiences, and thus it was that he became "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." (Isa. 53:3) Isaiah's prophecy was intended to highlight a contrast. Previous to the above statement, Jesus is called "the arm of the LORD"—figuratively "the arm," or force, of Jehovah. (vs. 1) Israel looked for a great, powerful, and mighty king who would come to reestablish their kingdom in great glory. That was their expectation of God's mighty "arm." Instead, Jesus came to them as a "man of sorrows," healing the sick, sympathizing with their infirmities, and becoming "acquainted with" their grief, to the extent of finally dying on the cross. Thus, in becoming man's Redeemer, Jesus, who had never experienced grief in his prehuman existence, became familiar with these conditions, and went through them personally.

THE JOY SET BEFORE JESUS

Why was Jesus willing to do this? The answer involves "joy," as we are told by the Apostle Paul.

He urges us to look “unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.” (Heb. 12:2) Some may think that the “joy” set before Jesus was the divine nature. Yet Jesus was not thinking of this when, before he was to be crucified, he prayed to the Father, asking only that, if faithful, he be glorified to the same position as he had in his prehuman existence.—John 17:5

Rather, the “joy that was set before” Jesus was the knowledge of the eternal good that would come to God’s creatures if he were faithful. Joy is the emotion excited by the expectation of good, and it was this ultimate prospect for mankind which brought such joy to God’s faithful Son. We also rejoice in Jesus’ faithfulness, because we have been called to be his footstep followers and to live according to his example. This means that while we live in an environment of sickness, pain, and sorrow, we are to be joyful because of the prospects of the great good that will come to all in God’s coming kingdom, which is “near, even at the doors.”—Matt. 24:33

PROPER VIEW OF JOY AND SUFFERING

The Scriptures make clear the necessity that footstep followers of Christ must “suffer for righteousness’ sake.” (I Pet. 3:14) One way in which we do this is in feeling sorrow because of all the unrighteousness around us. Such suffering is the direct result of our espousal of the cause of Christ and righteousness. Jesus suffered in this way, too, except that he was far more keenly aware of unrighteousness than we are. He could see where sin was being hidden, as in the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees.

We also experience suffering as we, with great difficulty perhaps, fight against our own imperfections and the resulting tendency to be callous about unrighteousness. Whereas Jesus was perfect from the beginning, we have never known the complete absence of aches, pains, infirmities, and imperfection in general. For us, normalcy has consisted of existing in the presence of unrighteousness, both in ourselves and in others, as well as living with pain and suffering because of the death penalty.

In our Christian life, we must expect experiences of suffering and tribulation. (Acts 14:22) However, these do not exist constantly, and neither did our Lord suffer continuously. The mental picture that some may have of him as a “man of sorrows,” constantly in grief, is incorrect. Some even believe that Jesus never smiled. He plainly told us, however: “Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.” (Matt. 6:16) Notice that a feigned sad countenance is the mark of a hypocrite. Furthermore, we should not allow our burdens to be reflected in a sorrowful countenance. Jesus clearly indicated on this occasion that the reverse was to be the case. Continuing, he said, “But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.”—Matt. 6:17,18

The erroneous idea concerning a sad countenance was carried forward into medieval times, when the Adversary suppressed truth and in its stead superstition and ignorance prevailed. Religious monks

believed a sad countenance was a necessary form of piety. Thus, to counteract their disposition to be joyful on some occasions, some wore clothing made of coarse, prickly material which irritated their flesh. This truly produced a sad countenance. In this case, their sadness was not a case of hypocrisy. Rather, it stemmed from the erroneous belief in eternal torment that became dominant in Christendom. This doctrinal error took such hold upon professed believers that sincere men considered self-affliction and physical pain a means of greater assurance that they would get to heaven.

They believed in a god of eternal torment, a teaching authored by Satan, even as Jesus told the scribes and Pharisees of his day that they were of their “father the devil.” (John 8:44) We rejoice, however, and are glad that our God and Heavenly Father is the loving and wise author of a great plan of the ages and, furthermore, that suffering, pain, sorrow, and grief are a part of a temporary experience, which is to be replaced by joy. (Rev. 21:3-5) We are glad that God, through his Word, makes it plain that it is good to be happy, even as an earthly father would tell his children in response to their expressions of happiness.

JOYS EVEN NOW

If joy is to be the predominating experience of the next age, as it most certainly will be, then it should be ours in this age. The hopes and prospects of the kingdom are a real and abundant joy to the Lord’s people. No matter how difficult the road ahead might be, or how many trials must yet be experienced, our attitude must be the same as the Apostle Paul

said of Jesus, “Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross.” (Heb. 12:2) The emphasis in this verse is on joy. We know that it permeated the life of our Lord, so that his appearance was radiant and joyful. With him a typical expression of greeting was, “Be of good cheer.” (Matt. 9:2; 14:27; John 16:33) We cannot imagine Jesus saying these words with a sad face. Furthermore, whenever Jesus said, “Be of good cheer,” he had something in the way of a blessing to give, by word or deed. It was not an idle expression.

In Matthew 9:9-15, an incident is described wherein Matthew, the publican, was invited to follow Jesus. He then prepared a dinner for Jesus and his disciples and also invited his friends. In another instance, Jesus attended a wedding feast in Cana, performing a miracle while he was there. (John 2:1-11) No one should suppose that on these and other similar occasions Jesus merely graced the event by his presence, or that he sat with a sad countenance while others were happy. If this were so, Jesus would not have been criticized as he pointed out in Matthew 11:16-19: “Now, to what can I compare the people of this day? They are like children sitting in the marketplace. One group shouts to the other, ‘We played wedding music for you, but you wouldn’t dance! We sang funeral songs, but you wouldn’t cry!’ When John came, he fasted and drank no wine, and everyone said, ‘He has a demon in him!’ When the Son of Man came, he ate and drank, and everyone said, ‘Look at this man! He is a glutton and wine drinker, a friend of tax collectors and other outcasts!’ God’s wisdom, however, is shown to be true by its results.”—*Good News Bible*

Jesus, we believe, had many happy occasions. He had great compassion for the poor and afflicted and was very happy to bring them some joy. He was happy to lay down his life in service for mankind. It made him glad to know that sin and death would be vanquished through God's kingdom, and he taught his disciples to pray for that kingdom. (Matt. 6:10) All the joys that Jesus had—of service to men, of making others happy, of sacrifice to make possible the kingdom blessings—could be summarized as the joy of knowing that he was doing the Father's will.

Possibly the most joyful experience Jesus had on earth occurred at Jordan. After he was immersed by John the Baptist, the heavens were opened unto him, and a voice was heard saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matt. 3:17) Jesus was joyful because he knew he was carrying out his Father's will. Once, when Jesus was being urged to eat, he said, "My meat [food] is to do the will of him that sent me." (John 4:34) He did not say this because the literal food was distasteful. When a person eats good food, he eats it joyfully, because it has a good taste. The Father's will for Jesus was as good-tasting food, which he ate joyfully.

If we have the joy of Jesus, we will be glad to suffer and to die with him. Peter said, "If ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye." (I Pet. 3:14) Jesus was even more emphatic, saying, "Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake. Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in heaven." (Luke 6:22,23) The world cannot understand the source

of our happiness, and no one can truly enter into this joy if he has not been begotten of God's Holy Spirit. Hence, any and every experience leads to joy, as we see God working in us and around us to accomplish his grand purpose.

JOY IN THE MORNING

The Lord's disciples are to learn these lessons well. The joy of their Lord must become their joy. Only this can permit them to endure all kinds of trials with rejoicing. Soon the difficult and trying experiences are to end for the consecrated followers of Christ. Shortly thereafter, they will end for the world also. The nighttime of sin and weeping will end, and joy will come for all in the morning of God's blessed kingdom.—Ps. 30:5

The Bible could be a sad manuscript if we did not know of God's plan. Instead, its words are most joyful and pleasant to our eyes and ears. The Old Testament opens with the account of God's great work of creation, to provide a happy home for all mankind. It closes with the prophecy of the "Sun of righteousness" arising with healing in his wings, to heal the world of all its misery and woe, after tragedy had struck on account of sin. (Gen. 1:1-31; Mal. 4:2) The New Testament begins with the birth of Jesus as man's Savior and the angelic cry—"glad tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." It ends with a description of the realities of God's wonderful kingdom, when there shall be "no more curse," and the earth is restored as a happy place again. (Luke 2:7-11; Rev. 22:1-3) Praise be to God, the Father, and to his Son, who will cause joy to last forevermore! ■