



JOY

IN DARK PLACES

THOMAS PARR

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Thomas Parr



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Joy in Dark Places

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Introduction

Christians often find themselves to be miserable instead of joyful, and deep down they know something is very wrong. They are aware that their loss of joy is tragic, but they think they can't help it, that in the end it doesn't really matter, and that having a joyful life is an unattainable ideal. This book was written to dispel this hopelessness and to kindle joy despite the multitude of things trying to snuff it out.

Gaining biblical joy means you must resolutely confront yourself: you encounter truth in God's Word and believe it to be true in your case, then you align your emotions with it, despite your circumstances. The psalmist does this when he confronts his depressed self: "Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance" (Ps. 42:5). Martyn Lloyd-Jones commented on this verse, saying, "You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself.... Remind yourself of God.... Then having done that...defy yourself...and say with this man: 'I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance.'"¹ "Defy yourself" isn't an overstatement. The psalmist banishes displeasure at circumstances and embraces God's truth decisively, even aggressively. He urges the reasons for joy on himself, regardless of his hardships. This self-defiance presumes that there is something within us that resists biblical joy and must be confronted (Gal. 5:17).

1. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 21.

Maintaining joy requires using Scripture in faith persistently. Since you resist joy yourself, you cannot rely on one experience of victory. You have to reassert truth continually. You keep praying in light of it, using its brilliance to dispel your soul's darkness, which always wants to creep back in. Pouring oil in the lamp keeps the room lit, and stocking a stove keeps it warm. Biblical joy is fueled by the Word: "I will delight myself in Your commandments, which I love" (Ps. 119:47). You must keep your soul well-lit and warm with continual and fresh supplies of biblical truth.

Maintaining joy also requires relying on the Spirit. It is hard to confront your wayward emotions and persistently rejoice in truth rather than groan in hardship. It goes against our fallen natures. It is hard to overcome tiredness and put off sin and "every weight" holding you back (Heb. 12:1). All this requires a Spirit-empowered resolve, setting your face like flint to put to death what is earthly in you. You cannot fight the flesh with the flesh, so you must continually make use of the only antidote to the flesh's withering and enfeebling influence, the Spirit of God.

Maintaining joy requires really banking on the good news about a merciful God. You have to really believe that God loves you forever and provides all your needs. Otherwise, the clamor and din of a fallen world will win out in your soul. But the gospel assures Christians that they have peace with God by faith (Rom. 5:1), that all things work for their good (8:28), that mercy will follow them all their days (Ps. 23:6), and that nothing can separate them from God's love (Rom. 8:35). Christians fail to have joy because they haven't fully or consistently grasped the greatness of these things. Their emotions haven't yet learned to harmonize with the gospel's tones. They haven't fully experienced the sweetness of Christ or fully known the height and depth of God's love, at least not enough that their knowledge affects their emotions when in hardship. They don't feel safe in Christ's arms because they haven't yet realized that the gospel is a flood of light for all dark places.

"Dark places" refers to anything that challenges our joy. Some of this book's chapters address things that are truly dark, like the moral

evil of legalism or results of the fall such as old age, dying, problem people in the church, and societal disintegration. Other chapters address things often misunderstood as dark, like law and conviction of sin. Every chapter shows how the gospel dispels anxiety over circumstances and brings profound joy instead. Whether we're talking moral evil, calamity, or misunderstanding, the gospel is the answer.

The first two chapters of the book define joy and show some basics for experiencing it. Chapters 3–10 show how the gospel sheds light on dark places people often create when they think about God's commands: they avoid conviction, fearfully wonder if the Bible teaches "works-salvation" after all, subtly rely on their performance, and don't grasp the true freedom the gospel gives. Beginning in chapter 11, each chapter stands alone and sheds gospel light on a discrete topic that often challenges joy. Chapter 17 deals with how we can possibly have joy when we know that the last judgment will be according to our works.

This book primarily addresses Christian thinking and experience. It is about the head and the heart. Applications for us to "do" can be found throughout, but the focus is on whether our inner lives are really in accord with our faith and thus whether our "doing" really flows from that inner life. Are we shedding God's light in our dark places and rejoicing there? The gospel is supposed to produce a "soundtrack of the soul," an inner song that is described as rejoicing (e.g., Ps. 97:12; Hab. 3:18; Rom. 12:12).

When we are cast down and have changed the soundtrack, we need to reassert the biblical reasons to rejoice. As we saw above, David did so in Psalm 42. On another occasion, when all his men turned against him and were about to take his life, "David strengthened himself in the LORD his God" (1 Sam. 30:6). On yet another occasion, when people told him that matters were hopeless and that he should "flee as a bird," he replied that the Lord was on His heavenly throne watching all people (see Ps. 11:1–4). David gained spiritual ballast in truth about God. He grounded his soul in theology and gained joy from it.

But many people don't derive joy from theology. They strengthen themselves in films, games, food, or social connections rather than thoughts of God. These things either are or can be blessings, and we ought to rejoice in good things. But if this book is about anything, it is about instilling a spiritual habit of rejoicing in the primary and best thing—God's salvation in Christ through the Spirit. That is the purpose of every chapter, pointing us to the dazzling light of Christ.

For someone outside of Christ, encountering dark places in life should be a profoundly disturbing experience. Dark things such as temporal judgments, an unclean conscience, and aging are foretastes of doom for unbelievers. For them, every unpleasant thing is just a sample of the Great Unpleasant of the afterlife. But Christians are encouraged to "rejoice in the Lord always" (Phil. 4:4) because they have a basis, even a necessity, for it in Christ. The question is whether we will truly appropriate God's promises by faith and bank on eternal, unseen things. It is my prayer that the gospel will always brighten your life, even—especially—when you are in dark places.

Joy and Its Obstacles

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

—1 Thessalonians 5:16–18

It is probably not an overstatement to say that a joyless Christian is, or ought to be, a contradiction. Experiencing Christ's salvation is supposed to have a dramatic impact on us and transform our lives into ones of holy delight. But we may not be experiencing biblical joy because we do not understand what it is. People can even be suspicious of joy, as if it were frivolous merriment. Or they might resist the idea that biblical joy is emotional at all. Others may simply not see why joy is important, and still others are among the host of people who allow difficulties to snuff it out.

In this chapter, let's define biblical joy from Scripture and see why it is absolutely crucial. Then we'll consider more closely the problem of dark places that can quench it, even things we may feel come from the Bible itself.

Biblical Joy

Biblical joy is an emotion of gladness. You might be tempted to think of joy as an ideal, an act of the will, or an objective reality rather than an emotional state. I suspect people think of it in these terms because they either don't have emotional joy in God (and feel bad about their lack) or they are suspicious of emotionalism. It is true that emotionalism—minimizing doctrine and the intellect in favor

of emotion—is a terrible problem in our times. But it doesn't follow that joy itself is a problem. And if our hearts are dead like stones, we should not distort the verses that point out our deficiency.

Joy is clearly an emotional state of gladness in contrast to sorrow or misery. This definition is not just common sense but is reflected in Scripture. Jesus described joy as the opposite of sorrow when He told the disciples, "Your sorrow will be turned into joy" (John 16:20). Paul contrasted joy with sorrow too (2 Cor. 2:3). This fundamental starting point profoundly affects how we live. If we do not see joy as an emotion that is the opposite of misery, then our Christian life will be very different from someone who sees it as such. One person will ensure that their theology leads them to the emotional state of joy and will not be content otherwise, while the other person might tolerate deadness or even hypocritical externalism, outward show without inward reality.

Biblical joy is empowering. It strengthens you to do right in hardship: "The joy of the LORD is your strength" (Neh. 8:10). Jesus warned us that "in the world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33), but Christians are not to give up, be morose, or be outraged at trials. They are to be so joyful that they have the strength to overcome the crushing weight of hardship. Far from being of marginal importance, the emotion of biblical joy is necessary for spiritual power.

Joy comes from meditating on the Word of God. Jesus prayed, "These things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves" (John 17:13). Jesus says that He spoke His words to produce joy in His disciples; His purpose in giving the Word is to foster it. The prophet Jeremiah testified to experiencing that same joy: "Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart" (Jer. 15:16). God does not mean for such an experience to be a momentary sentiment; it is to be an eternal delight: "Your testimonies I have taken as a heritage forever, for they are the rejoicing of my heart" (Ps. 119:111). When Spirit-filled people nourish their souls in the Word, they gain joy. Perhaps we're joyless because we're Word-less. More than ever, our society provides endless opportunities to immerse ourselves in things other

than the Bible, so it is entirely possible that the happiness we experience is not Word-centered and thus not biblical joy.

Biblical joy is supposed to be consistent. “Rejoice in the Lord always,” Paul taught (Phil. 4:4). God’s salvation is boundless, and therefore joy should be too. When we consider what God has done for us in Christ and by faith assert it in dark places, joy results; it is like standing in a dreadful cave and holding aloft a blazing torch. But if we do not meditate on Scripture, we’ll just stand in the shadows, letting it creep into our souls. We fail to have joy because circumstances are real to us and biblical doctrine is not. But fixing our gaze on Christ gives joy by the power of the Spirit.

Biblical joy should be normative in comparison to other emotions. It should not often be superseded by other emotions—and never by sinful ones. Joy isn’t the only emotion we should experience, and it’s a mistake to think that it is. God wants us to abhor evil, be convicted of sin, weep with those who weep, and sorrow over the fate of the wicked. All these emotions are right for us to feel, and sometimes such emotions should even temporarily be prominent in our hearts. After all, Jesus Himself wept when He beheld the effect of His friend’s death on his family (John 11:35) and was grieved at people’s hard hearts (Mark 3:5). Weeping and grieving are akin to sorrow; sorrow’s opposite, joy, cannot take precedence in a heart that is experiencing it. All this leads us to conclude that “rejoice in the Lord always” doesn’t mean “be happy all the time, every second.” That is a shallow understanding that doesn’t grapple with the complexity of living in a fallen world, and it doesn’t square with Scripture either. Being around someone who plasters on a smile all the time, thinking they’re obeying Philippians 4:4, would be unbearable.

“Rejoice in the Lord always” isn’t a simplistic thing. It does mean rejoicing in the Lord consistently, however, and also not allowing other godly emotions to move joy from the normative position. Whatever emotion may temporarily need to take center stage, it shouldn’t override joy’s primary place. It is crucial to see. There are few things Paul explicitly says to do *always*, but rejoicing in the Lord is one of them.

Joy's prominent role should not displace other normative emotions that are to be reflected in the Christian soul: peace, compassion, and reverence, for example. It is wrong to displace reverence to make room for an unrestrained and excessive joy. This is a problem with much Christian worship in our day. Despite the reality of abuses, joy is supposed to be the norm. Not experiencing it is abnormal and unhealthy. Additionally, many emotions are always sinful and are absolute joy-killers—strife, outbursts of rage, grudges (Gal. 5:19–20). Joy in Christ must never give place to these, for the Spirit must overcome the flesh.

Ask yourself if joy is normative in your life or if you are characterized by some other emotion. Has another emotion, perhaps even a good one, displaced joy? That should not be. Serious-minded Christians could be militant against sin yet be so grim that they are joyless. That's not a good advertisement for Christianity. Worse, it seems a betrayal of the gospel that promotes boundless joy, even in the dark places of a sin-cursed world and a crooked generation.

Biblical joy is Spirit-empowered. “The fruit of the Spirit is...joy” (Gal. 5:22). This is good news to those who are troubled by their own gloomy tendencies. When the Spirit is present, He generates joy. If we do not have joy, we either do not have the Spirit (and are therefore not believers) or we are quenching Him. If we are quenching Him, we must confess our rebellion, seek Christ for the Spirit's filling, and stock our souls with the Spirit's kindling, the Word. The answer to any sin problem is the Word of God in a Spirit-filled heart (Ps. 119:11; Gal. 5:16). If you find it difficult to be joyful and even have fallen into arguing against its necessity, turn now from that unbiblical path and begin cultivating a life of joy. How delightful to know that this life of joy is what God wants for you.

Biblical joy is productive. Sometimes people might misunderstand an emphasis on joy as encouragement of complacency. The people who are in the trenches and working hard do not like the idea of people just sitting joyfully at Jesus's feet (Luke 10:40). Looks like laziness! But biblical joy isn't a way to avoid activity; rather, we should view it as an approach to activity, like a spice that seasons all

our actions. “Rejoice before the LORD...in all to which you put your hands” (Deut. 12:18). It must be said that many Christian people ought to be working hard and are not. God’s work often languishes while people happily fiddle in their homes (Hag. 1:9). Yes, such people must repent and start serving God, but we do not want them to do so with a grump and a groan. We should never encourage people to serve the Lord unless they are motivated by joy. Perhaps people don’t want to serve in the church because they’ve seen the repelling way we do it. For Christians, joy and activity must go hand in hand.

Biblical joy seeks expression in public worship on the Lord’s Day. “This is the day the LORD has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 118:24). Let me quickly explain two points from this verse and then draw an application. First, the “day” it speaks of is the day of Christ’s resurrection. We know this because the context mentions a stone being rejected and then exalted to the head of the corner (v. 22). This is the metaphor for Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection that the apostle Peter used (Acts 4:11–12). Second, the day on which Christ rose from the dead was the first day of the week, Sunday, known in Scripture as the Lord’s Day (Mark 16:2; Rev. 1:10). Here is the application for believers today: Psalm 118 pictures us rejoicing and being glad on the day of resurrection, or Sunday. In the New Testament we find that believers make this experience permanent—they make it a norm to gather on Sunday to celebrate Christ’s Supper and hear His Word (Acts 20:7). We see from this that biblical joy isn’t content alone; it must find others who rejoice. The church is the result as believers seek Christ and are glad in Him on the Lord’s Day.

Biblical joy is Christ-centered. The joy God wants us to experience is not just happiness in general but rather joy in Christ. The phrase “in the Lord” (Phil. 4:4) means two things: Christ is the subject in which we take joy and the basis for being joyful. Let’s look more closely at these two ideas.

Christ is the *subject* in which we take joy. Biblical joy is centered on Christ, not on things that a person who doesn’t know Him can experience. Many today have accepted that we should learn to enjoy Christ in nature, sports, or travel, and I would agree that we should

do so. But if you find no joy in the revelation of Christ found in the Bible, I wonder about your enjoyment of these other things, and you should too. Christians love Christ (1 Cor. 16:22). They take great delight at thoughts of Him (Mal. 3:16). They keep their eyes fixed on Him (Heb. 12:2). Their heart is with Him in heaven (Col. 3:1–4). We instinctively understand what “I love this person” means when it refers to a friend, but somehow I fear that people can fool themselves into thinking they love God when they demonstrate little interest in Him at all. Ask yourself if you cherish thoughts of Jesus Christ and if you wish to think and speak and hear of Him as much as you can.

Christ provides the *basis for experiencing joy*. The joy that God wants you to have is justifiable because it is rooted in biblical doctrine—God chose us in Christ from eternity, sent Him into the world to live and die for us, and raised Him from the dead to intercede for us always and continue His good work in us till He returns for us. Without these truths there is no basis for having joy in this sin-cursed world full of lies and cruelty and death. But when you see what Christ has done, is doing, and will do, there is reason to rejoice. In fact, choosing gloom belittles Him and says, “My problems outweigh Your salvation,” or to put it more theologically, “The misery of the fall is greater than Your redemption.”

Joy's Importance

Understanding Christ as the basis for our joy shows why it is so important. Choosing joy asserts that its basis is real—indeed, overwhelming—to all miseries that challenge it. Joy says Christ really is greater than all negatives. Choosing joy in Christ honors God's work of redemption as something so glorious that it ought to impart sweetness to our souls always, no matter how bad things get. The tones of my soul must absolutely be harmonizing with the gospel. Nothing must ever displace Christ or override His salvation—nothing. The soul is like a music center in which a soundtrack always plays, and we must be sure that the music we play corresponds to the events that really deserve attention. That way our soul becomes a

place of worship where the glory of Christ is always savored and its influence felt. What spiritual sounds are emanating from your heart?

Joy is a confession of faith that is not merely intellectual but tangibly emotional and experiential. A large part of the Christian life is getting to the point where our emotions reflect objective truth, and joy does this powerfully. Choosing joy is like placing a magnifying glass over beautiful things rather than ugly things and insisting not only on looking at the good but getting excited about it. Joy says God's gospel is the Big Thing and deserves our attention, and this is true even if the earth falls apart (Ps. 46:2). A person who seeks biblical joy is indignant at attempts to take the magnifying glass off of Christ and place it somewhere else.

All of our dark places are opportunities for shining the joyous truths of the gospel. Disorder in society, harsh home lives, weak and tottering churches—all are places in which to shine light. This means hardship and setbacks are actually opportunities to assert His greatness. It may be hard to orient yourself to the thought, but what better way to glorify Him than to lift up your head in the valley where shadows lurk and say, "Praise God for Jesus Christ. I am not afraid. Look what God has done for me."

You may feel the need to rejoice in the dark valley but feel intimidated about doing so. If you want to fuel biblical joy so that it shines more in the dark, remember that joy is Word-centered. Read Scripture and sound theology, looking for reasons to be and remain joyful. Make it your goal to have redemptive truth in the forefront of your heart and mind—truth you can quickly brandish like a torch in a cave, when joy must transcend a fallen world. Our Bible study and reading should be expeditions into God's sacred country that bring back dazzling fires from heaven to illumine the shadowlands.

Dark Things Even in the Word

Once we seek to kindle our joy with the Word, we encounter a difficulty that is found in Scripture itself, though the problem is not the Bible's but our own. We discover that much of the Bible hardly seems

joyful at all. It is full of judgment, death, enigmas, and moral failures, and it can even seem to foster guilt and fear.

Here are just a few of the challenges: God tells Adam and Eve, “The day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” The man and woman fail and transgress God’s law. An angel with a flaming sword cuts off the way to eternal life. Lot chooses to live in Sodom, where his children are corrupted. Dinah is raped, and her brothers go on a revenge-spree and wipe out the Shechemites. Babies are thrown into the Nile River. God’s people desert Him en masse on many occasions. The ground opens up to swallow people. God commands Israel to wipe out a whole nation for its sins. Moses is barred from the Promised Land. Saul loses the Spirit and gets an evil spirit instead. David’s family is judged because he committed the terrible sins of adultery and murder. In the Prophets God writes chapter after chapter explaining all the ways He plans to destroy various nations. We’re told that there is a fiery Gehenna where the worm never dies.

There are a lot of things in the Bible that many people find hard to reconcile with joy. If we don’t find the good news about Christ in our Bible, it could drive us to despair. Even many Christians who read it stick to the Psalms and parts of the New Testament. But avoiding any part of Scripture is like leaving a letter from a friend unopened and unread. It won’t do to turn a deaf ear to what God has said. Besides, the Bible contains sobering things because it is telling the truth about the world. Dark things appear in the Word because there are dark things in the world. But that doesn’t make it any easier to rejoice when reading them.

The question before us is this: Once I finally realize that biblical joy is Word-centered, how do I find joy by reading a book that frankly seems just as dark as the world in which we live, particularly when I keep struggling against the darkness in my own soul? How can I kindle happiness in God when I read so many stories about Him being offended by evil and bringing judgment? I think more people are bothered by these questions than we, and perhaps even they, realize. We’ll begin exploring the gospel answers to these questions in the following chapters.

Study Questions

1. The chapter defines biblical joy by explaining several of its qualities; list these qualities and support each with Scripture.
2. Have you resisted the idea that biblical joy is an emotion God commands us to have? Why? What are some reasons the chapter gives for why a person might resist it? Are there some Scripture passages that help us see that it is in fact an emotion?
3. How can we “rejoice in the Lord always” when there are other valid and necessary emotions?
4. How would you answer someone who says, “I rejoice in Christ when I see creation’s beauty. I don’t need to read about Him in the Bible”?
5. Why is Christ an adequate basis for rejoicing in a sin-cursed world?
6. List some reasons why joy is so important for Christians to experience.
7. Explain what choosing joy has to do with a magnifying glass. What sorts of things do you tend to put the magnifying glass over in your life?
8. Have you ever felt discouraged by uncomfortable things in the Bible?
9. What are some things you can do to promote biblical joy in your life?

The world is full of dark places that present obstacles to our joy. While people may instinctually turn to films, games, or social connections to brighten their day, Christians know they have a greater source of comfort and joy. In *Joy in Dark Places*, Thomas Parr reminds us that the Bible speaks of glorious realities that the darkest days cannot destroy. Readers will see how moral evil, calamity, and even bad theology steal our happiness. More importantly, they will see how the light of the gospel dispels disquiet and brings profound joy instead.

"Some people tell us to rejoice always because they think that our choice to rejoice will make us healthy and wealthy. Other people talk about joy as if it were heavenly escapism performed by ignoring pain and stoically pressing on. But Thomas Parr shows us that true joy—biblical, emotional, doxological joy—can be found in the hard realities of a sin-cursed world because Christ died a sin-cursed death, rose again, and is working all things for the glory of God. This is an important book that can transform for good our entire concept of joy and, by implication, how we respond to the hard times of life."

Joel R. Beeke, *president, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan*

"The Bible speaks of joy as one of the fruits of the Spirit, and thus all Christians should know something of it. Yet many struggle to find and experience joy. Thomas Parr has written an admirably simple yet instructive book about joy, which has its fount in the redemption of our triune God. He also provides sage counsel on how to find and hold on to joy even in dark places and times. With the help of this book, readers will have a better understanding of how to find joy in our faithful covenant Lord in times of plenty and in want."

J. V. Fesko, *Harriet Barbour Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi*

"Many of us have known, if only briefly and seasonally, the 'dark places' of which this book speaks and can testify to the difficulty of finding joy there. But armed with the biblical truth of God's steadfast love and a robust doctrine of providence, we can find joy in the darkest of places. Thomas Parr has given us a parachute that will equip us well for the darkest periods of life. Short and to the point, each chapter examines different situations including, I surmise, ones all too familiar to the reader. A gem."

Derek W. H. Thomas, *senior minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia South Carolina; chancellor's professor, Reformed Theological Seminary; and teaching fellow, Ligonier Ministries*

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