

# JOY IS A CHOICE

*By John Gagliardi*



Abraham Lincoln is quoted as saying that most people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be. And except for those unfortunate souls suffering from various forms of clinical depression, I have found in my own life that this is very true.

Like most things in life, happiness and joy are a choice – you can't choose what happens around you, but you can most certainly choose how you will react.

And that is where God and His Word come in – because without God, there isn't too much in this world to be joyful about. Open up the newspaper, and it screams tragedy and depression – if it isn't terrorism, it is civil war; if it isn't mass starvation, it is global warming.

For business people, the scene is no prettier - it is recession or stagflation, skyrocketing interest rates or crashing currencies. And if you listen to the real pessimists, we are all facing the collapse of the entire world economy as we know it.

But for Christians, whether in business or any other walk of life, we don't have to worry even if the world economy does crash. We know that God is ultimately in control, and He has a good plan for His children that will bring us peace, joy and prosperity (Jeremiah 29:11). In Romans 28:8, He tells us that everything works out fine for us in the end, as long as we love Him and don't reject His call on our lives.

We can choose whether to look up and see God and His goodness, or we can look down and see the devil and his horrors. Clichés become clichés because they are mostly true – so we can look out and see either stars or mud, a half-full glass or a half-empty glass. It is a *choice*.

The key? "Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith; who for the JOY that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12: 2) It is where we *choose* to look – "looking unto Jesus"!

Choosing joy over depression is not always easy – there are those times when sinking into self-pity and dejection feels just right, and the last thing you want is some Pollyanna coming and telling you “God loves you” and to “choose life”! Sometimes it just feels better to wallow in despair like a pig in mud, pulling hopelessness and despondency around us like a comfortable old overcoat.

But - just when we are feeling at our weakest and bleakest, God tells us that the joy of the Lord is our strength (Nehemiah 8: 10). He tells us that His grace is sufficient for us, and that His strength is made perfect in weakness. That when we feel at our weakest in our own human strength, then we are actually strong in God’s strength (2 Corinthians 12: 9 and 10).

One man who has plumbed the depths of despair and hopelessness, and climbed the heights of joy and exultation, is the “Sweet Psalmist”, King David. And David makes the point that choosing joy over despair can actually be a sacrifice – not necessarily an easy choice, but one that is pleasing to God.

He says in Psalm 27:6, “...Therefore will I offer in His tabernacle *sacrifices of joy*; I will sing, yea, I will sing praises unto the Lord.” Elsewhere in the same Psalm, David talks about wicked foes coming upon him, being forsaken by his father and mother, false witnesses rising up against him breathing out cruelty. But he *chooses* joy and to seek God’s face – he makes a conscious decision, under great pressure, to make the joy of the Lord his strength.

The Apostle Paul is another excellent example of a man of God who battles through a life of hardship, pain and rejection to *choose* joy and thanksgiving. Paul’s letter to the Philippians is often called the “epistle of joy”, yet it was written from the gloomy filth of a first century Roman prison cell.

Paul tells stories throughout his letters of his trials and tribulations – beaten with rods, whipped to within an inch of his life, shipwrecked, imprisoned, rejected and betrayed, tortured, wracked by hunger, thirst and cold (2 Corinthians 11: 23-28). Yet this is the same man who can cry from the filthy depths of a prison cell, “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, **REJOICE!**” (Philippians 4: 4).

He says, knowing full well what his likely end will be at the hand of the Romans: “Yea, and if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of faith, I JOY AND REJOICE with you all ... Finally, my brethren, **REJOICE IN THE LORD...**” (Philippians 2: 17 and 3: 1).

King Solomon in Proverbs 15: 23 says that a man has joy by the words of his mouth – in other words, you can choose to open you mouth and speak out words of joy and light, or you can choose to speak out words of despair and darkness.

The essence of Christianity is that God gives us a choice in all areas of our life. We can choose to accept Him or reject Him. Free will is a cornerstone of our faith.

Which of course gives us the opportunity to make wrong choices – and most of us have made many wrong choices in our life, and are where we are today only because of the mercy and grace of God through the redeeming blood of Jesus Christ.

Every day, as Joshua says in Joshua 24: 15, we have the opportunity to choose whom we will serve – God or the devil. Joshua makes a good choice – he says, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” The choice doesn’t go away, no matter how “mature” we think we are in God.

The devil is always there with ever-new and more enticing temptations, and every day of our lives, we get to make choices over and over again.

Moses makes the point very clearly in Deuteronomy 30: 10 – “I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; **THEREFORE CHOOSE LIFE ...**” By choosing life, we choose joy and gladness, and choose to thank God in every circumstance for what He is doing in our lives.

Even when we are “going through it”, God knows – He never leaves us or forsakes us, and even if the pain is intense, it is invariably for our own good. Even Job, who underwent unspeakable tragedies, losing his family, his wealth and even his reputation, by choosing to reject the advice of his wife to “curse God and die”, ended up with twice as much as he had before.

It is a matter of seeing through the trials and tribulation with eyes of faith, and reaching forward for the “prize” that is laid before us. Paul says he does “this one thing ... reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3: 13 and 14).

Next time your world comes tumbling down around you, your business partner has lied to you and betrayed you, your stock portfolio has just passed the basement level and is still heading south, and your dog has bitten you – make the choice the Apostle Paul suggests in 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18.

*“Rejoice Evermore.*

*“Pray without ceasing.*

*“In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” (1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18).*