**Series: Questions God Asks**

**Sermon: Where Is Your Brother?**

Here’s a great verse of Scripture that gets quoted a lot in churches. It’s upbeat and positive and encouraging, *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again.* Philippians 4:4

Rejoice! This word meaning to feel or express joy is used over 100 times in the Old Testament. For example we’re told to:

* *Rejoice in the Lord!*
* *Rejoice before the Lord!*
* *Rejoice in the presence of God!*

There are also many expressions of rejoicing, especially in the Psalms:

* *I will be glad and rejoice in You!*
* *I will be glad and rejoice in Your love!*
* *In Him our hearts rejoice!*

It’s used similarly about 30 times in the New Testament.

Rejoice is a common theme in our worship songs.

* *Let the heavens rejoice!*
* *There is joy in the Lord!*
* Do you remember this old song from Philippians: *Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice!*

It sounds so easy. *Just rejoice in the Lord! Rejoice and be glad.*

(Pause) But it’s not that easy, is it? Sure, it’s easy when everything is right in your world but honestly, it can be hard to rejoice when your life has been turned upside down.

Who has never had one of those experiences when you can’t rejoice, all you can do is cry? Who has never wanted to scream, *Rejoice? Yeah right! Rejoice? I couldn’t force a smile if I was listening to John Branyan*.

And it’s even worse when we see the people around us enjoying their perfect lives in their perfect families, with their perfect jobs. Everything is great in their world. *Rejoice! Are you kidding?*

In Genesis 4 we meet two brothers. I’m sure you’ve heard of Cain and Abel.

*Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.*

*Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.”*

*Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.*

*Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?”* Genesis 4:2-9

*Where is your brother?* God asked. Think about this with me. Do you think God was looking for information?

Do you think God was wandering about with a panicked look on His face wondering if maybe Abel was hiding like his parents had done when they sinned? Of course not.

He knew exactly where Abel was and He knew what Cain had done. God knew that Cain had been jealous of his brother’s great life. Abel’s life was perfect while Cain struggled in his relationship with God and he let jealousy of his brother affect his own attitude and behavior.

God didn’t ask “*Where is your brother?”* because He didn’t know. He asked because He wanted Cain to think about how he had allowed someone else’s success or failure interfere with his own relationship with God.

It would be a lot easier to “*rejoice in the Lord always*” if we weren’t seeing other people with their perfect lives.

If God asks, *Where is your brother?* He’s not looking for information. He’s wanting us to think about how we might be allowing other people’s success or failure affect our relationship.

*Where is your brother?* is God asking, “*Why are you letting other people’s lives affect your relationship with Me*?”

I mention this because hear this all the time.

I don’t like church because…

* *I see people coming to church who I know are hypocrites.*
* *I’m offended by someone at church.*
* *I have a different political outlook than someone else at church.*
* *I just don’t like some people at church*.

*Where is your brother?* Are you allowing your brother’s life, that isn’t really better than yours, affect your relationship with God?

Don’t you know he’s suffering the same stuff you are?

We should consider that when we’re feeling beaten up. We can be encouraged when we realize our brothers are suffering too, and their strength in the face of adversity can give us a boost.

Your relationship with God is between you and God and shouldn’t be affected by other people.

If you never struggle with the “unfairness” of other people’s perfect lives while you, a faithful church-going Christian go through painful trials and troubles; or if you never struggle with other people at church who aren’t what they’re supposed to be, this sermon isn’t for you. But since I know that most of us have these experiences, I have this message: we choose to rejoice, or not.

I’m going to talk about “how to rejoice” but first let’s remember “why we rejoice”. Here are four reasons:

1. **We have a Father in Heaven who loves us and will never leave us**.

Sometimes we talk about unconditional love. If we experience it nowhere else, we enjoy it in God. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. (Romans 8:35-39)

When I watch our son-in-law holding our grandson, just loving on that little boy, I see the love of God. Keith is a big man. As he holds that little baby I know that Malachi is in the absolute safest place in the world. Keith will protect him and take care of every need.

We have that times a million with God.

1. **We have forgiveness of all our sins**.

Every sin is washed as white as new fallen snow.

*Who is a God like you? Who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of His inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.*

Micah 7:18f

*As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our sins from us*. Psalm 103:12

There is no sin that God can’t forgive. All we have to do is ask.

1. **We have a family that can’t throw us out**. We’re all brothers and sisters in Christ. *Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.* Hebrews 2:11

If God has brought us into the family, and He has, no one can kick us out.

1. **We have a future that no one can take away from us**.

God’s promises are such that no one and no thing can take them away. Not cancer, not car accidents, not war, not Alzheimer’s, not murder. God’s promises are ours to keep.

Jesus said, *In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. John 14:2f*

We know this stuff. We don’t need reminders of why we should rejoice in the Lord. The problem isn’t knowing. If we have a problem it’s in the doing.

* How do we rejoice in the Lord when life is upside down?
* How do we rejoice when people who don’t deserve blessings enjoy that perfect life, while we struggle?
* How do we rejoice when we know that some of the people who go to church aren’t really living for Christ?
1. The first thing we need to do is this, ***Choose to rejoice in the Lord***. Note the emphasis.

We’re never encouraged to rejoice because of our troubles. There’s nothing to gain by pretending that I’m not having a hard time. Sometimes life is almost too much to bear. *No, I don’t have a perfect life*.

* *Like you I mourn the loss of dear family and friends.*
* *Like you I get hurt by people at church.*
* *Like you I see “Christians” aren’t living the life.*
* *Like you I have financial troubles and health issues.*
* *Like you I get frustrated when people who don’t honor God in their lives seem to have such prosperity and ease, while I struggle to keep up with bills*.

I’m often drawn to Acts 16, when Paul and Silas were arrested, beaten, and locked in jail with their feet immobilized in stocks. All because a young girl followed them around the city of Philippi as they were preaching the Gospel shouting that they were servants of God announcing the way of salvation.

Imagine if someone shouted as I was preaching, *This man is a servant of the most high God*! While I would appreciate the support, it would be a huge distraction.

They tried to ignore her but she kept at it for many days. When Paul finally had enough, in exasperation he turned to her and addressed the demon that possessed her, *In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her?* Acts 16:18 (It looked just like that, Paul pointing his finger at her.)

It worked! Immediately the demon left her. But there was a down side because now the men who “owned her” were losing money. Who would pay for a fortune teller who couldn’t tell fortunes?

These guys created an uproar and had Paul and Silas arrested. That’s how they ended up in jail. Bloodied and in terrible pain they were in no condition to rejoice, but rejoice they did. *About midnight they were praying and singing praises*. Acts 16:2 The verb is, they were “hymning”.

Now, is that what you would have done? Honestly, when life stinks is your first thought to rejoice and sing praise?

I think most people, Christians included, would have cried ourselves to sleep, we would have whined and complained, we would have shouted our innocence and threatened to sue for false arrest. Few would be heard cheerily singing, *There is sunshine in my soul today. More glorious and bright…*

Paul and Silas chose to rejoice in the Lord. Not, rejoice in their situation. Rejoice in the Lord. Their situation was still horrible, but they made a choice. John Maxwell wrote,

*Trying times are not the time to stop trying*.

Let’s re-work that – *Trying times are not the time to stop rejoicing*.

I read that according to surveys people will share their gripes eight times to only one time sharing their good news. Maybe they don’t want to sound like they’re bragging about their great lives, so they don’t say anything, but the result is that they become gripers. What if we reversed that? What if we share our joy eight times and our gripes only once?

Choose to be a “rejoicer.” You know God and you know that He is faithful. Choose that you will rejoice in what you know. That’s the first step in rejoicing.

1. The second step is to ***ask God to help you***.

You can’t force joy. But neither is joy determined by circumstances. Joy is a gift from God and if you want it you have to ask for it. Rather than allow what other people are doing or what they have, keep you from joy, think about what God has already given you and ask Him to give you joy.

After Paul wrote, *Rejoice he Lord always. Again I say rejoice*, he wrote this, *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God*. Philippians 4:6

People often misinterpret this. This isn’t about asking God for the stuff I need to make me happy. It’s about asking God to help me respond to the gifts I have already. This is about getting our focus off of our problems and onto our good good Father.

We sang in a song today, *All of you is more than enough for all of me. For every thirst and every need, you satisfy me with your love. All I have in you is more than enough*. Really? If we sang that honestly then we ought to be able to rejoice in God regardless of other people or circumstances.

You can replace bitterness or jealousy or frustration or negativity with rejoicing. Ask God to give you a positive caring attitude. Ask Him to help you tune into the good things in life.

Can you imagine what a wonderful world it would be if we all started our days with that?

As long as you continue to see how good everybody else has it without seeing your own blessings, you’ll never be able to rejoice always.

1. Then the third step to rejoicing is to ***focus on the positive***. As the old Christian hymn says, *Count your blessings. Name them one by one*.

Think about the blessings you have rather than the wishes that aren’t fulfilled. That’s Paul’s teaching. Think about what is true and noble and right. If you do, the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:8f)

Instead of meditating on past injustices and present irritations, think about all the good gifts you have.

Here’s a thought for those of you who like to think in a scientific way. According to research done by neuroscientists as reported by neuroscience researcher Alex Korb of UCLA:

*Gratitude boosts dopamine. The benefits of gratitude start with the dopamine system, because feeling grateful activates the brain stem region that produces dopamine.*

*Trying to think of things you are grateful for forces you to focus on the positive aspects of your life. This simple act increases serotonin production in the anterior cingulate cortex (of the brain).*

*It’s not finding gratitude that matters. It’s remembering to look in the first place.*

I’m happy to read that science is supporting what the Bible says and I understand it enough of that to say with certainty, focusing on the positives in your life will increase your ability to rejoice.

Try this exercise: Take two sheets of paper. On one list all of your gripes and complaints. The things that take away your joy. On the other list your blessings.

* Take the sheet with your gripes and complaints, fold it several times and put it in your pocket. Don’t worry. You won’t forget it.
* Take the other list and memorize it. Talk about it. Tell your friends. Soon you’ll be thinking about such things easily and often.

I know this sounds almost foolish but I guarantee, if you try it, you will discover that rejoicing is easier. In all my years of counseling I’ve suggested this many times but few have every followed through. That’s their loss.

Remember, this idea doesn’t come from Dr. Phil, although he would probably suggest the same thing. This comes from a guy who while spending a night in jail after a day in hell, led a worship service at midnight.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Not because life is always good. Not because no one has a better life than you. Rejoice in the Lord because you have a saving relationship with the one and only true God.

Joy is a choice. Some people choose to rejoice while some choose to gripe. The difference is demonstrated by this piece by Max Lucado:

Excerpts from the diary of a dog:

* 8:00 am *Oh boy, dog food - my favorite*.
* 9:30 am *Oh boy, a car ride - my favorite*.
* 9:40 am *Oh boy, a walk - my favorite*.
* 10:30 am *Oh boy, another car ride - my favorite*.
* 11:30 am *Oh boy, more dog food - my favorite*.
* 12:00 pm *Oh boy, the kids - my favorite*.
* 1:00 pm *Oh boy, the yard - my favorite*.
* 4:00 pm *Oh boy, the kids again - my favorite*.
* 5:00 pm *Oh boy, dog food again - my favorite*.
* 6:00 pm *Oh boy, playing ball - my favorite*.
* 8:30 pm *Oh boy, sleeping in my master’s bed - my favorite*.

In contrast to dogs, cats choose to focus on the negative. Excerpts from the diary of a cat:

* *Day 283 of my captivity. My captors continue to taunt me with bizarre little dangling objects. They dine lavishly on fresh meat while I am forced to eat dry cereal.*
* *I’m sustained by the hope of escape and the mild satisfaction I derive from ruining a few pieces of furniture.*
* *Tomorrow, I may eat another house plant.*
* *I attempted to kill my captors this morning by weaving through their walking feet. Nearly succeeded. Must try this strategy at the top of the stairs.*
* *Seeking to disgust and repulse these vile oppressors, I once again induced myself to vomit on their favorite chair. Must try this on their bed.*
* *To display my diabolical disposition, I decapitated a mouse and deposited the headless body on their kitchen floor. They only cooed and condescended, patting my head and calling me a “strong little kitty.” Hmm - not working according to plan.*
* *During a gathering of their accomplices, they placed me in solitary confinement. I overheard that my confinement was due to my power of allergies. Must learn what this means and how to use it to my advantage.*
* *I am convinced the other household captives are flunkies, perhaps even snitches. The dog is routinely released and seems naively happy to return. He is, no doubt, a half-wit.*
* *The bird speaks with the humans regularly. Must be an informant. I am certain he reports my every move. Due to his current placement in the metal cage, his safety is assured, but I can’t wait. It is only a matter of time.*

*Where is your brother*? You know what? The status of my brother doesn’t determine my relationship with God. Instead of worrying about the people around me as if they control my destiny I choose to rejoice in the Lord because He is my Savior.

We’re going to invite you to make a decision for Christ…

Today, for our invitation song, I’ve asked Mike and Wilma to sing this song by Mercy Me. It talks of the struggle to rejoice when life is upside down. The message is that we know God is good and He does good things for us. But even if He chooses not to, we still rejoice in Him.

As they sing the song think about the last time you were beaten up by life. Did you choose to rejoice?

Don’t think about someone else’s perfect life. Choose to rejoice in the Lord. I say it again, choose to rejoice in the Lord.