

# ALWAYS REJOICING

Series: The “Re” Words

Ecclesiastes 3: 9-15, Philippians 4: 4-8

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I began our series on the “re” words with the word *rebuild*. It felt just right that week. We are in the process of refreshing/remodeling our sanctuary. It was Labor Day weekend and we were honoring those in the trades. Our VIM team was leaving that afternoon to help rebuild following Hurricane Matthew last fall. Rebuilding was in the air and the timing felt just right.

Today our word is *rejoice* and the timing feels terrible. Within the last few weeks Hurricane Harvey has devastated Houston and surrounding areas, and Hurricane Irma has brought mass destruction to the Caribbean and Florida. The pictures and stories from each keep coming. Mexico experienced a terrible earthquake. North Korea seems intent on provoking conflict, if not all-out war. We have news of a terrible murder near our community, bringing heartache and directly touching members of our congregation. Locally, nationally, internationally, it is crisis overload. It seems that each direction we turn, it is bad news and it is emotionally overwhelming. Now I am called upon to stand up to say, “Rejoice in the Lord, always, again I say, rejoice.” I don’t know. It feels like a terrible time to do that.

On the other hand, it may be the perfect time. It is easy, maybe even superficial, to say rejoice when everything is going well. The real question is: are we able to rejoice when things are not going well, or when things are going terribly? It is like the person who enjoys excellent health, has a close and loving family, fulfilling employment, a circle of friends, and sufficient money saying, “I really do not worry much.” I guess not. Show me someone who has a boat load of challenges who says, “I really do not worry much,” and I will be impressed. Rejoice in the happy times? Fine. Rejoice in the hard times? That’s saying something.

Well, right time or not, let’s give this a try.

Paul writes, “Rejoice in the Lord always.” On the surface this seems like an impossible directive. I would go so far as to add an inappropriate directive. Oh, if he had just said, “Rejoice in the Lord,” there would be no problem. Hopefully, all believers can agree that rejoicing is part of Christian living. It is the word *always* that makes this a bugaboo. There are decidedly times in life when rejoicing is not only difficult but actually wrong. We read from Ecclesiastes this morning. Earlier in that chapter we read that there is a time to weep, and a time to laugh. The Bible is full of passages of lament, heartache, complaint, anger, and even despair. There are also many passages of rejoicing. One

passage does not trump the other. None say “always rejoice” or “always lament.” There are times for each. They are all part of the human experience.

This makes me think that what it may appear on the surface that Paul is saying, is not what he means at all. For one thing, as noted, it makes no sense. For another, Paul was no Pollyanna drawing happy faces on every situation. He personally often suffered and knew what it is to hurt. Clearly he is talking about something deeper.

This is not a smiley-face teaching. At the heart of his teaching is this: in all circumstances, Christ is with us. Christ has won our salvation, our eternal life. This cannot be taken from us. No amount of struggle can rob us of this, unless we give it away. This is God’s promise and our reality. So, we do rejoice in the Lord – always. Some translations say be glad in the Lord. In other words, be glad we have Christ. That’s the difference. We do not rejoice at the rain waters flooding our homes and communities. We do not rejoice in the earth shaking and collapsing our towns. We do not rejoice that belligerent nations stir up war. We do not rejoice at death, or violence, or economic struggle, or broken relationships or anything else that causes us to weep and our hearts to break. We can, however, always rejoice that Jesus is our savior. This rejoicing is not a false cheerfulness. It is a deep joy rooted in what God has done.

Claiming this deep joy has tangible benefits for us. Paul tells us one. Knowing that the Lord is near reduces our worry and inspires us to take everything to God in prayer. The result? Paul tells us. “The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” It brings calm to our souls, keeping us from being constantly stirred up and in turmoil. Ecclesiastes says this in a less elegant way. “Look,” he says, “you will never understand it all or figure it out. The best you can do is be happy and enjoy yourself as long as you live.” Paul is not exactly of that eat, drink, and be merry school, but he is all about peace of heart and mind.

The other tangible benefit is that the more we rejoice in the Lord, the closer we become to the Lord, and the more we see the activity of God in our lives.

I experienced this on the Volunteer-in-Mission trip last week. In addition to some other work, we had the chance to work, helping a delightful couple. These retired folks, one nearly blind and the other being treated for cancer, had just recently been able to get back into their home after ten months. They had the resources to get their home repaired much earlier, except a contractor took their money up-front and skipped out. Another took the rest of their money and did shoddy work and skipped out. This did not cause me to rejoice. It caused my blood to boil. At the same time I was reading news stories of robo calls being made to hurricane victims in Houston, asking for money up-front to do repair work. These were scams, of course, victimizing victims. It truly soured my attitude.

But I listened to the couple in Virginia Beach tell about the church making sure they were housed and strangers coming to help them get back on their feet. I read stories

about the thousands who poured into Houston to provide help for those they had never met. Rejoicing in the Lord helped me to hear and read those stories instead of just the stories of exploitation. These disasters brought out the evil ones, for sure, but they also, and mostly, brought out the best in a far larger majority. That caused me to rejoice.

How does rejoicing in the Lord always help us to see, think, and feel differently? A story is told of a woman who was essentially in poverty. Still, she was always joyful and always praising God. This annoyed her atheist neighbor to no end. Not only was he not religious, he was against religion in general. One day he overheard the woman praying for food. He decided he would show her. He went and bought several bags of groceries and secretly put them on her porch. When she discovered them, she nearly danced with joy praising God. Her neighbor said, "Aha! I brought you those groceries, not some nonexistent God. You are always praising God when God has nothing to do with it." He was sure he had told her, but she just got all the more excited with praise. "Why do you keep praising God," he asked? "I told you God had nothing to do with this." She just looked at him and answered, "God is so amazing. I never fail to be surprised at what God will do. I knew God would see that I would have some groceries, but I never in my wildest dreams thought that he would get the devil to deliver them."

In life things are rarely all good or all bad. There tends to be a mix in every day. Which do we tend to see? Do we notice the God moments, the small acts of kindness, the things that did go right, something beautiful or special, or the glimmer of hope? Or do we pick out what is wrong and irritating and maddening, or truly bad or wrong? I am not saying that it is wrong to notice the negative. The negative often has to be addressed, so we need to notice it. I am saying that if our main focus is the negative and we fail to see the numerous ways God is at work all around us, then we will not have peace of heart and soul and mind. We will be out of touch with all that God has done through Christ Jesus, and we will forfeit the deep peace that comes from rejoicing in the Lord always.

Some of the folks at Philippi were starting to grumble, getting caught up in the irritations of life and community. Stop it, Paul said. You are only hurting yourselves. Rejoice in the Lord, always. The Lord is near. Don't worry about anything. Offer your supplications to God. Be filled with peace.

This is not a bad time to be reminded of that message. God has done an amazing thing for us through Jesus Christ. None of what has happened in these last weeks changes that. Through it all God is God and our salvation is secure. That doesn't mean we have to be happy about what has gone on. That doesn't mean it is not all right to weep and hurt. It does mean, even in our weeping, we can rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice.

The peace of God be with you.

Amen.

