



December 2017

Greetings in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. I pray that this Christmas season you find yourself in His Presence as that's where the Joy is!

Now, imagine the most horrible prison you can. Now put yourself in its blackest, slimiest cell. Are you there?

You have no hope of release. None. You have long since given up scratch marks on the wall to record the passing of the days and years. So you sit in a dark, damp corner waiting for death. And then.....

The cell door swings open. Blinding light floods the cell. Sweet, fresh air rushes in. And someone gives you the message. PARDON! A complete, unexpected, bona fide pardon. You are free! Your entire past record has been erased. One by one, the locks click open and the gates open wide. Before you lies the open, fenceless countryside. A fragrant summer breeze touches your hair. You are free!

Cautiously at first you repeat those impossible words. "I am free."

Climbing higher past lush meadows and rocky outcrops that top out at a vast mountain range, you breathe out that cool, clean, crisp air and begin to shout out again until you have no breath at all, "I am free!" Later on, you stretch out on your back in the sun, watching a great hawk soar lazily high in the afternoon sky. And you say it again! You sing it, you whisper it, you laugh it, you weep it. You can't stop. You tell it to everyone you meet even though you know they cannot really understand.

Yet, Christian, this is what has happened to us - and so much more. "*Because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death*" (Romans 8:2).

Now, let's think again. This time our imagination sinks us down among huge, cold, dark, cresting waves with nothing but a soggy lifejacket in the midst of a terrible lonely, endless sea. You are sure that it will only be a matter of time. There is no reason to swim for you are as good as dead. Instinctively you curl your toes and pull your feet up as close as you can - you can't just let them hang straight down into those dark fathoms below. And then, out of nowhere, a ship! And moments later you are safe on board! You were dead and now you are alive. You are SAFE.

Yet Christian, you and I are eternally alive and safe! "*But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us*" (Titus 3:4-5).

Let's use our imaginations one more time. And for some of you, this exercise will be especially easy to do. Picture yourself for years, perhaps for all of your years, as being totally unloved, ignored, rejected, avoided, alone. Even when in a crowd, you are alone. You find that you cannot even love yourself. And why should you? Then one day, the most loving and lovable individual you could ever imagine - even in your most private fantasies - singles you out and says "I love you! You mean more to me than I can put into words. You are important to me. I choose you as my friend from this moment on." And then this person backs up every word he says with uncontestable evidence. He even goes so far as to bring out and attractiveness, a loveableness about yourself. Even as one might gradually remove crude paint from a canvas in order to reveal an artist's priceless masterpiece underneath.

Just how would you respond to someone like that? Yes, you would be very cautious at first. But finally, at last, you believe. Barriers fall and you begin to rest in the presence of loving and being loved.

But Christian, we were loved while we were yet sinners, and not only that, we are loved by the One who invented love - dreamed up every type of pure love anyone has ever experienced! In fact, He is love! (1 John 4:8). *"To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made us to be a kingdom, and priests to serve His God and Father - to Him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen"* (Revelation 1:5-6).

Free. Alive. Eternally safe. Eternally loved with an infinite love. All this. And yet.....

Have you ever stop to wonder why there seem to be so few shouts of joy from God's children? Where are they? Where are those spontaneous shouts of sheer delight in God?

And what must God think about this strange silence? Or if not actual silence, what does He think of those carefully timed, sometimes even pleasant sounds that drift from churches full of unfeeling hearts and wandering minds? Do we really know what those unrestrained shouts of joy sound like? Would we recognize them if we heard them?

*"You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lifted up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, 'Here is your God'". "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!". "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord." (Isaiah 40:9; Philippians 4:4; Ephesians 5:19)*

Spend a few minutes reading Exodus 15:1-21. Then try painting a mental and emotional picture of the children of Israel when, after 400 years of slavery, they found themselves on the safe side of the Red Sea. Can you visualize that glorious day? Moses and the sons of Israel singing to God. Miriam and all the women dancing with timbrels in their hands. Can you see them? Can you hear their song as it ascends towards heaven?

What do joyful Christians sound like? (Read Romans 11:33-36 and Revelation 4, 5, and 19.) Have you heard them - those spontaneous yet most appropriate sounds? No, not some emotional noise stirred up by external stimulus or electronic gadgetry, but the joy that rises out of one's innermost being - stirred by the Spirit of God. Even as Elizabeth, filled with the Spirit, *"cried out with a loud voice"* as the unborn John the Baptist leaped in her womb for joy! Even as Paul, who said, *"we cry out 'Abba! Father!'"* Or Peter, who could not even find words but said, *"you are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy."*

Have you heard it? Have you heard it?

Not the sounds or music which try to make us joyful, but the sounds which rise from our spirits because we are joyful!

We do know what God thinks about the absence of such sounds among His people. And what we know should jolt us. Remember what Jesus said to the Pharisees who took offense at the joyful singing of His disciples as He rode into Jerusalem on that little donkey?

*"I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out!" (Luke 19:40).* We all agree that Jesus came to bring us life. We teach it; we talk about it. We may even think we know about it, but what is that life actually like? I've seen guys more excited about the cowboys or Texans or about their last shot or spike on the volleyball court than they are about expressing praise to the one who 'supposedly' has save them! "Ewww, ouch, Chief."

*"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men."*

*"' However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.' At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children'." (Romans 14:17; Luke 10:20-21)*

Why then is joy so often the missing ingredient in our lives? Even as I write these words I can remember those times when I could hear within my own mind those terse, tense words: “Stop it! Don’t manipulate me. Don’t get too close. If I want to be unhappy, that’s my right. If I want to feel lonely, don’t interfere. That’s just the way I am and don’t you change me. I have my inhibitions. When I want to be happy, I’ll do it. Just don’t meddle.” But as I think on those times, I realize, I knew about God intellectually, but I didn’t know God spiritually. Perhaps that’s why it’s so recognizable to me now within the church.

To think such words and thoughts, were coming either from my fleshly mind or from the devil himself. They simply are unfit for a Christian to say. Why? Because, first of all, they reflect the false concept that I belong to myself. I do not! I am God’s property and it is His right to do as He pleases with His property. And He wishes His children to be joyful. I have no right to say no.

Second, to say that “that’s just the way I am” is displaying a remarkable lack of insight. Even though through various psychological tests I may be able to discover my fleshly makeup, I have no right to limit God to that shallow level. God took a cowardly Gideon who “from weakness was made strong.” If Jesus could make “even the stones” to cry out, dare you or I limit the workings of our God by such shallow “personality” classifications?

And finally, inhibitions. What right does a perfume bottle have to keep its lid on? What right does a flute or a trumpet have to be silent on the lips of their owners?

“But what will people think?”

Paul answers that. *“If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God” (2 Corinthians 5:13).*

Why then is God’s joy so often missing among His children? To answer this, we find ourselves looking one final time at the implications of the new birth and the nature of sin. Out of our struggle with meaning and our fleshly capacity to search for it independently, we have gone about creating our own shallow identities, securities, and love objects. So also, we have taken it upon ourselves to create our own joys. Over and over we discover that on the far side of our expensive, emotionally-draining efforts there is only more emptiness. Yet somehow, we find renewed strength to set out once more in our elusive search for happiness. (Note Isaiah 57:10 and especially 2 Corinthians 11:2-3)

Listen to God: *And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’* <sup>v20</sup>*And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.* <sup>v23</sup>*And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.* <sup>v24</sup>*For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:6, 20, 23-24 ESV)*

Oh, how far God has gone to bring us back! Out of that initial joy that was His when He laid the foundations of the earth, *when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy (Job 38:7 ESV)* which was tragically interrupted by both angelic and human sin, there came at last that expectant message above Bethlehem, And the angel said to them, *“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people (Luke 2:10 ESV) The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. (Zephaniah 3:17 ESV).* God never intended His truth to remain merely academic. Let Him speak to you.

The next time you are singing in church, take note of how many overwhelming facts about God and life you are required to focus on in the space of 2 or 3 minutes. In some songs there’s a dozen divine works of art, each one worthy of a clear focus. Most of us are simply not equipped to do that. Therefore, although we may sing well enough and pronounce all of the words correctly, we might as well have not sung them at all. Thoughtlessly mouthing deep dramatic truths of God does more harm than good. It makes us immune or calloused toward truth that demands a heart response.

Jesus said, *“Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.”* But to His disciples He also said, *“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (Luke 14:33; John 15:11).*

We can say the words. Memorize them. Repeat them. But to embrace them - face up to their meaning in the real flesh and blood world in which we live - that is something else.

To actually experience joy while grieving for someone you love who is floundering. To experience joy when someone with more talent steps into the very spot that would have been the climax of all that you had worked to complete. To experience joy after you have fallen flat on your face. To experience joy when you realize that something which could have been and maybe even should have been, will never be - that's reality. Reality that bites into the flesh and numbs the heart.

In those agonizing moments of crisis, we have several choices as to how we may respond. But only one fully harmonizes with the joy of the Lord - the kind of joy Jesus knew.

First, we can simply lock out all other thoughts and with a cold, fatalistic commitment say, "give thanks in all circumstances" through our clenched teeth.

Or we may move to the opposite extreme and waste away in our grief. Or we can charge straight ahead, empowered by our growing bitterness. Or we can approach those crisis times the only way God ever intended: as indeed "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing." God would have us to face reality, to honestly admit to grief and pain and pity; to sorrow in what others have suffered or in what might have been. But God would have us know beyond that the higher reality of who He is and who we are.

He would have us know that we are our Father's son or daughter, committed to do our Father's will. He would have us know that our highest joy is His "well done."

"But Lord, I have failed You so often!"

Oh my brother - face up to it. You know what to do so DO IT!

There is a world that needs to see the invisible God through the prism called "YOU". Don't waste another minute missing life. There is a God who has chosen you to be the object of His love - the displayer of His person. Why waste another second frustrating the very reason Jesus came?

Look up into His face. Remember, He is Lord! Right now....what do you see? An angry God? No, you do not see an angry God. Yes, He may have been grieved because you temporarily lost perspective and missed living for a while. But now, right now, you are looking into His face and saying "Abba! Father!" What do you see?

Be tough on those fleshly imaginations that so easily distort your sight of God. He is there on His throne in all His majesty.....exalted, holy, and loving. And you.....you are destined to grace His holy heaven forever.

Oh my brother, rejoice! Live! Do you know who you are?

Remember, the joy of the Lord is our strength and in His presence is fullness of joy.

Merry Christmas..... You are loved.....

## **Chief**

*If you want to know more about CHIEF Ministries or would like to be a part of this, please go to [www.chiefministries.com](http://www.chiefministries.com) and [www.chiefshouse.org](http://www.chiefshouse.org)*

*Christ's*

*Heart*

*In*

*Every*

*Felon*