

Rejoicing and anxiety

What is the balance?

Introduction

There are two wrong extremes in the Christian's life in this matter. First there are those who fail to appropriate the riches of Christ and fail to be overcomers in this life. Thus they become full of anxieties, fears, worries and become pessimistic. This is clearly wrong. Then there are people who say that a true Christian never fears, never worries, is never depressed, never sad, never grieving, and is always rejoicing in every circumstance. That is perfectionism and also clearly wrong.

However, the balance is not in the middle of these two classes either. There is no fixed place on the scale of behaviour between anxiety and total rejoicing that a believer inhabits. The truth is more logically complex and yet more simple in practice. We need to examine this subject and discuss the Scriptural position from doctrinal teaching, exhortation and personal examples.

The fallacy of perfectionist ideas

The perfectionist avers that Christians must always rejoice, in every possible circumstance, and must never complain, must never be anxious, never distressed, never worried and never downhearted.

Scripture, however, from cover to cover, shows true godly men doing all these things, sometimes when failing but at other times when they are commended for righteousness and faithfulness. Thus the claim that Christians must always rejoice in every possible circumstance is a fallacy. Scripture also affirms that there is a time to weep and to mourn.

However, we must also affirm that the Christian living in the new nature is a person who rejoices in all sorts of circumstances, even during his own suffering. I explained this in a paper a few years ago called, 'Rejoice in the Lord, oh you righteous'. While the believer, in God's strength, can rejoice even during persecution and his own suffering, there are times when rejoicing is not appropriate and he should weep, mourn, and when distress is inevitable as part of God's training.

Mistakes of interpretation

Rejoice always?

There are a few texts which seem to undergird the perfectionist's argument that we must examine. Chief of these are the following:

Rejoice in the Lord. Phil 3:1

Rejoice in Christ Jesus. Phil 3:3

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! Phil 4:4

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing. 1 Thess 5:16-17

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. Jm 1:2-3

Rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. 1 Pt 4:13

There are more references to rejoicing in Paul's letter to the Philippians than any other NT book, and many more than most apostolic letters; yet Paul was in prison when he wrote it! We know that Paul could rejoice in prison because we see an example of this in Acts:

But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Acts 16:25

Paul even celebrated in his sufferings:

I now rejoice in my sufferings for you. Col 1:24

Peter and John also rejoiced when they suffered:

When they had called for the apostles and beaten *them*, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. They departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. Acts 5:40-41

Rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. 1 Pt 4:13

So rejoicing is an appropriate response to persecution; indeed, God gives special grace to those who are persecuted (Lk 12:11-12, 21:15; Acts 6:10, 7:55).

Commands to rejoice

In persecution

Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great *is* your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Matt 5:11-12

In hope

Rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Rm 5:2

Rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation. Rm 12:12

In Christ

Rejoice in the Lord. Phil 3:1

Rejoice in Christ Jesus. Phil 3:3

Rejoice in the preaching of the Gospel

Only *that* in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice. Phil 1:18

Rejoice when a brother or sister is honoured

If one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with *it*. 1 Cor 12:26

We could continue ad infinitum. There are many causes of rejoicing.

The real problem

Clearly, the main texts to consider are Phil 4:4 and 1 Thess 5:16-17, which command us to 'rejoice always'.

'Always' (*pantote*) does not necessarily mean 'every single time', 'absolutely all the time', 'or 'never ceasing'. It means 'a duration of time with reference to a series of occasions'. Thus it can mean, 'always', 'on every occasion' but also 'a duration of time without reference to points or units of time'. Its root word *pan* (all) also does not always mean 'everything' but can mean 'all in some groups' or 'some in all groups'. Thus 'always' can mean 'at every opportunity' (also in English).

For example, Jesus said, 'You have the poor with you always', (Matt 26:11); but people did not have the poor with them absolutely all the time. In fact, Jesus often ate with rich people; in fact at this very moment Jesus had been anointed by a very rich woman.

Jesus also said, 'that men always ought to pray', (Lk 18:1); but it is impossible for a person to always pray or he could not even eat or sleep.

The father of the prodigal son said, 'Son, you are always with me', (Lk 15:31); but there were many times when the elder son was far from his father.

We could multiply examples of this sort of statement. The word 'always' was often used euphemistically or hyperbolically.

How do we understand all this?

Rejoicing in Christ is not like human joy

Firstly, we rejoice in the Lord, in Christ, in the hope of God's glory. The joy is not in ourselves, in our circumstances, in our power, in our strength of character, in our abilities or anything human. This rejoicing may not even be externally expressed. It is an inner joy in the spirit.

This sort of rejoicing is not like an ordinary person laughing at a joke or being happy about birthday presents; it is a spiritual gift. This is especially the case when the believer is rejoicing after being physically persecuted. This is a special grace given by God to support his people during the affliction of the enemy. It is nothing like exuberant human joy.

This was seen many times in history during the martyrdoms of faithful believers. We see the results of the grace given to them in their actions; such as preaching the Gospel to onlookers as they burned at the stake; singing praise to God as they were tortured; giving counsel to others standing by as they waited to be thrown to wild beasts in the arena (note Perpetua). The rejoicing they felt for following Christ's testimony to the end was not expressed in laughing, smiling, waving their arms about or any human gesture; it was an inner grace of quiet resignation and happiness to serve God.

This was sometimes expressed in pithy, even humorous confidence that surprised and affected the crowds. When two monks were sentenced to death near the River Thames (London), the mayor gave them the choice of drowning in the river or being burned alive. One of them said, 'Sir, we are going to be with our Lord in the kingdom of heaven; whether we get there by land or sea is of no consequence to us'. They were drowned. Their rejoicing in Christ was demonstrated in their confidence but they were of sombre appearance outwardly (as you would be).

'Always' does not always mean 'always'

Secondly we must understand what is meant by 'constant'.

We are told to 'Rejoice in the Lord always' (Phil 4:4) and to 'Rejoice always' (1 Thess 5:16). In the same way we are often told to 'pray without ceasing' (1 Thess 5:17).

Now the Paul who commanded this did not pray constantly; he spent time eating, drinking, speaking, sleeping and many other things that stopped him praying. Likewise, we see occasions when Paul did not rejoice, but was nervous, anxious and perplexed (as we will examine).

Using such extreme figures of speech was common practice in his time, just as Jesus used severe terms like cutting off a sinning hand or plucking out a sinning eye. These terms were not meant to be taken literally. It means doing an action as often as appropriate, not every single minute of the day, every day.

Paul told Philemon that, 'making mention of you always in my prayers' (Phm 1:4). Now we know that this is not literally true because we have some prayers of Paul on record and they do not mention Philemon. This was just common parlance for saying that '*I pray for you a lot*'. No doubt there was a period when Philemon was in trouble and Paul prayed for him very often for a time; 'however, 'always' here does not actually mean 'always'.

In the same way it was common to use universal terms like 'all men' and 'the world' and yet not mean everybody on earth. Taking such terms literally has led to gross doctrinal errors such as Arminianism. For example, 'world' in John 12:19 does not mean everybody on earth but a small number of people in Judaea. We still do this today. How often have you lost something and said to someone, '*I have looked everywhere but cannot find it*'. You did not look everywhere. You did not search Mars, or China, or the depths of the ocean; you searched a little room in your house. Often someone else finds what you were looking for and it turns out that you did not even look everywhere in the room.

Applying literal interpretations to common figurative speech, meant by readers to be interpreted appropriately, is a bad way to set ethical behaviour.

Our behaviour must be set by Scriptural injunctions and not by superficial application of literal renditions of a cultural figure of speech. Thus Scripture tells us to behave appropriately in every situation, and that may not involve rejoicing. In fact we have commands to weep, to mourn, to grieve, to be angry, to be sad, to be sober, and so on, in the right circumstances.

Appropriate behaviour

There is a time for everything

To everything *there is* a season, a time for every purpose under heaven ... A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance. Eccles 3:1-4

Here we have it in the words that God inspired; there is a time to weep and a time to mourn. If God tells us that there is a proper time to mourn or to weep, then those who claim we must always be rejoicing are mistaken.

Loving fellowship means behaving appropriately with sufferers

Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Rm 12:15

It would literally be sinful for a Christian to rejoice in the presence of someone who was suffering or grieving, or who had been bereaved, or who was sick. The very idea is stupid; even common sense tells you that.

Mourning is the appropriate response to sin

Blessed *are* those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Matt 5:4

Your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner ... Godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted. 2 Cor 7:10

If a person sins then he should confess his sins and mourn for them. Sorrow for sin is the beginning of repentance. To rejoice during or after the act of sinning would make the sin worse. There should be no rejoicing over sin.

Distress leads to prayer

When the waves of death surrounded me, the floods of ungodliness made me afraid. The sorrows of Sheol surrounded me; the snares of death confronted me. In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried out to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, and my cry *entered* His ears.
2 Sam 22:5-7

The appropriate behaviour response to David's persecution, that could have led to his death and the throne passing to the wrong person, was not rejoicing but distress. David's distress led him to pray to God for assistance and God overcame his enemies. David then writes a psalm explaining his distress and note: 1) this distress becomes affirmed as Scripture; 2) in the psalm David's behaviour is said to be righteous.

Note:

He delighted in me. The LORD rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands He has recompensed me. For I have kept the ways of the LORD, and have not wickedly departed from my God. For all His judgments *were* before me; and *as for* His statutes, I did not depart from them. I was also blameless before Him, and I kept myself from my iniquity. Therefore the LORD has recompensed me according to my righteousness, according to my cleanness in His eyes. 2 Sam 22:20-25

Examples of godly people not rejoicing

Christ in Gethsemane

And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. Lk 22:44

Rejoicing was certainly not appropriate for the Lord Jesus as he faced his ultimate test and as he approached his torture and death. But more than that, Jesus knew that he would be separated from his Father for a time when the weight of sin was upon him and he suffered for it as a man. This really brought great stress upon the manhood of the Lord, so that he needed divine encouragement in the form of an angel (Lk 22:43).

The stress that Jesus suffered in the garden was enough for him to sweat blood; he was in agony. The very idea of any rejoicing in this moment is unacceptable. In fact, even as we read this the idea of rejoicing is entirely inappropriate. This should be read in sombre and silent reverence.

Christ at Lazarus' tomb

The shortest verse in the Bible is found in John 11:35, 'Jesus wept'. Faced with the death of his good friend, and with the distress of the grieving family and friends still continuing days later, Jesus openly cried.

The idea that Jesus should have rejoiced in this situation is preposterous; only the most callous, ungodly person could think that rejoicing in such a circumstance was righteous.

Paul in his suffering

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves. 2 Cor 1:8-9

In this time of suffering, Paul was far from rejoicing but was 'burdened beyond measure', and 'despaired even of life' believing that he was close to death.

Paul's anxiety for the churches

Besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. 2 Cor 11:28

And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. RSV

Besides those things that are without, there is that which presseth upon me daily, anxiety for all the churches. ASV

'Deep concern' is the Greek word *merimna*, which means 'anxious care', 'worry' or 'anxiety' in the sense of apprehension or distress. Anxiety would be the best translation. Why would Paul rejoice over a church that he knew was in trouble, distress, or being attacked by heresy?

Ezekiel

Son of man, eat your bread with quaking, and drink your water with trembling and anxiety. And say to the people of the land, 'Thus says the Lord GOD to the inhabitants of Jerusalem *and* to the land of Israel: They shall eat their bread with anxiety, and drink their water with dread, so that her land may be emptied of all who are in it, because of the violence of all those who dwell in it'. Ezek 12:18-19

Here Ezekiel is to identify with the prophetic word and thus there was no place for rejoicing. He was actually told to tremble and be anxious.

What about the command not to be anxious?

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. Phil 4:6

Firstly, 'anxious' here is the same word that Paul used when he said he was anxious for the churches.

What Paul is forbidding is being anxious for needs and for the future. We are not to worry about what God has in store for us in the future and how we are going to cope. That is actually a type of fear and fear cannot produce faith.

On the other hand, being anxious for a good cause is acceptable, such as Paul's worry for the churches. That anxiety did arouse from a lack of faith but was an expression of his loving care for his people like a nursing mother (1 Thess 2:7).

Is it ever right to complain?

A proper discussion of this would require another paper, but it will be pertinent to our study to mention a few matters here.

Complaining about something is the opposite of rejoicing about something. Those who maintain that we must always rejoice in every circumstance also condemn any sort of complaining whatsoever. They often cite the example of the Israelites in the wilderness who were condemned and killed for their murmuring against God ten times in the Sinai desert. They thus suppose that any complaint of any kind is sinful and worthy of condemnation; instead people should rejoice and not moan. Is this true?

Firstly, to compare genuine believers with the rebels that died in the wilderness is absurd in the extreme. The complaining Israelites were rebels and idolaters. They were the people who worshipped the golden calf. They were the people that lusted after the dainties of Egypt. They were the people that rejected the leadership of Moses. They were the people that complained about God's provision, even when he was feeding them. They were the people that corrupted the commanded forms of tabernacle worship rituals. We could go on.

These people were rebels and idolaters whose complaining was a fruit of their lack of faith and their disobedience to God's laws. They were faithless, stiff-necked people. Hebrews tells us that they were rebels (Heb 3:8, 15-16) with corrupt hearts (Heb 3:10, 12), were sinners (Heb 3:16-17), were disobedient (Heb 3:18) and had no faith (Heb 3:12, 19). To equate such people with a true Christian is utterly stupid. The rebels are a warning to not be unbelieving, but the wrathful condemnation that fell on such sinners is not applicable to those no longer under condemnation because they are in Christ.

Complaining may be entirely right and suitable in the right circumstance and done the right way. Many godly people in Scripture are said to have complained.

Hannah

Do not consider your maidservant a wicked woman, for out of the abundance of my complaint and grief I have spoken until now. 1 Sam 1:16

This was a complaint that prompted heartfelt supplication before the Lord to ease her complaint, that of being barren. Her complaint was, in fact, a prayer.

The word 'complaint' here is *siyach* meaning: meditation, complaint or musing.

Job

Job suffered very greatly and was completely unable to rejoice, yet he was a perfectly righteous man. Indeed, Job affirmed that he had a complaint about his afflictions,

When I say, 'My bed will comfort me, my couch will ease my complaint', Job 7:13

My soul loathes my life; I will give free course to my complaint, I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. Job 10:1

Even today my complaint is bitter; my hand is listless because of my groaning. Job 23:2

It is entirely normal that Job was not only complaining because he had not sinned to be so afflicted, but Job, far from rejoicing, said, 'I loathe my life ... Let me alone ... How long? ... let me alone', (Job 7:16-19). [In all cases 'complaint' is *siyach*.]

David

Attend to me, and hear me; I am restless in my complaint [siyach], and moan noisily. Ps 55:2

David complained to the Lord when he was sorely oppressed by his enemies. Far from rejoicing in this situation, David was honest enough to say,

My heart is severely pained within me, and the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fearfulness and trembling have come upon me, and horror has overwhelmed me. Ps 55:4-5

Unknown psalmists

A Prayer of the afflicted when he is overwhelmed and pours out his complaint [siyach] before the LORD. Ps 102:1

I pour out my complaint [siyach] before Him; I declare before Him my trouble. When my spirit was overwhelmed within me. Ps 142:2-3

God

There are many times that God is said to complain when he has issues with men. For example:

Hear, O you mountains, the LORD's complaint, and you strong foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a complaint against His people, and He will contend with Israel. Micah 6:2

Here the words 'complaint' is *riyb* meaning: controversy, dispute, quarrel, and complaint.

'Therefore I will yet bring charges against you', says the LORD, 'And against your children's children I will bring charges'. Jer 2:9

'Charges' (both times) is the word *riyb*, which could be translated as 'complaints'.

The LORD has a controversy with the nations; He will plead His case with all flesh. Jer 25:31

'Controversy' = *riyb*.

Hear the word of the LORD, you children of Israel, for the LORD *brings* a charge against the inhabitants of the land. Hosea 4:1

'Charge' = *riyb*.

The LORD also *brings* a charge against Judah, and will punish Jacob according to his ways. Hosea 12:2

'Charge' = *riyb*.

Church

If anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. Col 3:13

Here we have a situation where a brother has a genuine grievance against another, a complaint. This is a normal part of community life that will arise. The complaint is not a sin; it is merely a statement of fact about a situation. The response to the complaint is to forgive; but this means drawing the complaint to the attention of the erring brother and then forgiving him. Having a complaint is not a sin unless there is no following forgiveness.

Conclusion

A complaint is defined as a statement that a situation is unsatisfactory or unacceptable or that someone has done something wrong. There is nothing sinful in this.

Acceptable complaints

Having a complaint about something is a normal part of life. There is no sin in having a reason to complain. The best thing to do with a complaint is to take it to God as prayer; the complaint becomes the basis of prayer.

Complaining becomes sin when it becomes the basis of rebellion and disobedience.

There are very many valid causes of genuine complaints. For example, when the government enacts measures that increase poverty or legislates evil then that is a good cause for complaining. In fact the complainants are standing for God's law in their complaint against unrighteousness. Faced with evil laws, the correct response is a complaint. Supporting such evil governments would be sinful.

When an elder needs to bring discipline against a sinning brother, then that is having a complaint against that person; it is a statement that his behaviour is unacceptable. The complaint is righteous.

Unacceptable complaints

A complaint becomes wrong when it is part of a general, negative complaining attitude. There are people who just moan about their situation all the time. This is actually a form of selfishness where the complaining is seeking to bring attention and sympathy to their lot. This is wrong, as it is faithless and negative behaviour.

Now this is not to be confused with someone who complains a lot in declaring righteousness. A prophet will be a complainer but to establish the law of God and draw attention to wrongdoing. Jeremiah and Amos were massive complainers, but their complaining was the voice of the Lord denouncing sin.

As in many cases, what comes from selfishness is sin, but what comes from passion for God's law is righteous. Thus there is righteous anger against iniquity, but selfish sinful anger when it is a burst of temper and self-centredness.

The complaint of a Christian in the new nature is righteous; the complaint of a Christian in the old nature is sin.

Now a righteous believer complaining about evil cannot do so with rejoicing at the same time. Jeremiah denouncing the sins of Judah could not do so with joy. Joy is not appropriate when drawing attention to evil. Thus when a Christian complains (makes a statement of fact about something wrong) they do not do so with rejoicing but with a serious, sad or even stern disposition. That is righteous.

Ever present praise and thanksgiving

Now praise is very different to rejoicing. Praise is something that can and should be done in every circumstance, as is thanksgiving. In fact, praise and thanksgiving are very closely connected.

Let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of *our* lips, giving thanks to His name. Heb 13:15

In the worst situation a saint can still give thanks and praise, even if he cannot rejoice.
Giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Eph 5:20

In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 1 Thess 5:18

And he said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD'. Job 1:21

I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise *shall* continually *be* in my mouth. Ps 34:1

There are times when we simply cannot rejoice and valid times when we are anxious; however, there is no time when we cannot praise or give thanks. Indeed, we are to give thanks in all circumstances and praise God in whatever situation we find ourselves in.

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only *that*, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Rm 5:1-4

Notice that we glory, or exult, in tribulations. We may be able to rejoice in a tribulation but we may not, depending upon the character of the suffering (bereavement, for example, is not suitable for rejoicing). However, we can always glory, or praise God in every circumstance, even if sorrowful.

Now here is where some translations (such as the ASV) make a mistake; instead of 'glory', some versions have 'rejoice'. The word *kauchaomai* means 'to glory', or even 'to boast' (as Young's Literal). This is the same word translated as 'rejoice' in verse 2, which should be 'boast' here.

We may not always rejoice, but we can always praise God, glory in God and boast about God's salvation.

Conclusion

Only by glib reading and lack of Bible study can you come up with the idea that Christians must always, in every situation, rejoice and never be anxious. All bad teaching comes from people who do not study God's word sufficiently, but superficially.

This problem also reveals the dangers of translations. We must always remember that our version is only someone's approximation of what the original language manuscripts state. Often a Greek word could have twenty nuances of meaning and a translator has to choose one. This is when literal translation methods are used. When dynamic equivalence or paraphrase translation methods are employed the situation is much worse.

Christians are people not robots and must act appropriately in the face of human suffering. They should have empathy with those who are in affliction; thus rejoicing is hardly proper at this juncture.

Also we must not deny that God can put his people into times of great distress. We see this commonly in the Psalms, in the prophets, in Job and even in the historical narratives. Yes this suffering is divine training for good but it is still suffering. Denying the truth and pretending to be joyful when you are in deep affliction is not only lying but is contrary to what God is doing in your life at that time.

God is good; goodness is a divine attribute. Yet God sends rain as well as sunshine; daylight as well as night-time darkness; summer as well as winter; storms as well as placid conditions; floods as well as droughts, gales as well as calm, and so on. Goodness is doing

the perfectly appropriate thing, not always doing what man thinks is nice. The farmer may pray for rain while the tourist prays for sunshine; but God will simply do what is right.

The Christian is the same; his job is to be righteous; to do what is right. This means doing good all the time. Doing good when comforting a bereaved person will not involve rejoicing but being sombre, respectful, sad and possibly weeping. Doing good when invited to a friend's Golden Anniversary will not involve tears but great joy and celebration.

Christians are neither puritanical, dour, down-in-the-mouth miseries; but neither are they happy-clappy, jubilant, over-enthusiastic, fixed-smile parodies. Christians do what is right; they weep with those who weep, mourn with those who mourn and rejoice with those who rejoice. Regarding their personal circumstances they constantly praise God, whatever their situation; but they behave appropriately under the sovereignty of God. This may involve rejoicing, but it may not.

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