

Joy, the energy of present redemption

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In the well-known passage at the beginning of Hebrews 12, where the author urges his readers to “run with perseverance the race set before you, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,” there is a curious and somewhat elusive reference to joy. At first blush, it seems oddly out of place in a passage dominated by sin, shame, and suffering. Locked in a desperate “struggle against sin”—most likely, the temptation to abandon their Christian faith because of persecution—the Hebrews are encouraged to

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“consider” the hostility Jesus endured from sinners against himself and to look to him as the paradigm and enabler of faithful discipleship. He is the one “who for the sake of (*anti*) the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of God” (Heb. 12:1–4).¹

The reference to joy is elusive because the force of the Greek prepositional construction *anti*, translated “for the sake of” in the NRSV, is ambiguous. The statement could either mean that Jesus endured the cross “so as to obtain” the joy of heavenly glory, or that he embraced the cross “in place of” or “instead of” the joy he currently experienced in his earthly life. In the former case, the author is suggesting that what gave Jesus the strength to withstand abuse and torment was the anticipation of future joy in heaven. In the latter case, the implication is that Jesus willingly gave up the joy he presently knew in his relationship with God and with others in order to plumb the joylessness of grief and abandonment in the events of crucifixion and death.

The Greek text may be legitimately construed either way, though the second option is perhaps most likely. But the gram-

matical point is entirely academic because both meanings were true of Jesus' actual experience. It is clear that Jesus knew deep joy in his day-to-day relationship with God as his Father (Matt. 11:25–30, cf. Heb. 1:5–6), a joy he freely exchanged for the desolation of the cross, with its climactic cry of dereliction, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34; cf. Heb. 5:7–10). This joy, however, was later restored to him on the far side of the valley of suffering and death, flowing both from the renewed intimacy of “sitting forever at God’s right hand” (Heb. 1:13; 12:1) and from seeing “many children brought to glory” (Heb. 2:10) as a result of his saving work.

The Passion event, in other words, was flanked by Jesus’ experience of joy—his prior experience of relational joy and his subsequent experience of victorious joy—while the deepest suffering of the event itself was not the “hostility he endured from sinners” but the complete deprivation of the divine joy he had hitherto known.

The originality of Christian joy

A few years ago I was invited to speak on the theme of finding joy in difficult circumstances at a conference of the Christian Medical Fellowship in New Zealand. When I began preparing my talks, my mind went back to something I had recently read in a book I had picked up in a secondhand bookshop. The book, entitled *The Originality of the Christian Message*, was written by the Scottish theologian H. R. Mackintosh.² It was based on a series of lectures Mackintosh had delivered in America just after World War I on how Christianity is unique or distinctive or “original” among the religions of the world. It is not the kind of book modern scholars would dare to write, with its bold assertions of the uniqueness and superiority of Christian truth. But that is what made it such an interesting read.

The book focuses primarily on what set earliest Christianity apart from other religious and philosophical movements in the first-century Greco-Roman world. Mackintosh proposes that one of the most distinctive features of the early Christian movement was its message of redemption as a *present experience*. It was not just the assertion of bodily life beyond the grave that made Christianity different; it was also its emphasis on salvation as a

presently available experience of moral, spiritual, and emotional transformation, an experience of what Mackintosh calls “present blessedness,” the blessedness of union with God in Christ, even here and now.

We all know that in accounting for this experience, the New Testament writers place an overriding emphasis on the role of *faith*. It is by faith that believers are united with Christ in his death

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and resurrection, find deliverance from the guilt and power of sin, and are empowered to “walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). Faith is the key. But Mackintosh draws attention, almost in passing, to something else in the New Testament’s descriptions of present redemption—namely, the role of *joy*.

The first-century Greco-Roman world, he explains, was marked by a pervading sense of darkness, pessimism, superstition, and fear. Cruelty and bloodshed were everywhere. By contrast, the New Testament is “the most obviously exultant book that has ever been written.”³ The spirit of this literature is encapsulated in Paul’s thrice-repeated injunction to the Philippians, “Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. . . . Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice (Phil. 3:1; 4:4). Such an emphasis on joy and rejoicing in the Christian community was highly unusual in the religious environment of the time. Mackintosh is worth quoting in full:

Students of first-century literature need not be told that this distinctively Christian gladness, or glad fearlessness, which breaks across life like a flushing dawn, was a strange new thing. Such joy unspeakable and full of glory is not found in other faiths. Jesus somehow was able to give men the courage to believe themselves redeemed . . . not merely by speaking to them about the Father but by revealing in his own life the security and gladness which flow from trustful obedience to the Father’s love. As Matthew Arnold said, “It is the gladness of Christianity which has made its fortune, and not its sorrow.” . . . Alone in the religions of the world, it dared to say, “Rejoice evermore.” This is a fact so distinctive that some

thinkers have actually defined the method of Christianity as “salvation by joy.” . . . The joy in God generated by the fact of Christ was a new phenomenon in religious history, and one charged with boundless significance for the creation of living and victorious morality.⁴

Reasons for joy

If we were to ask where this early Christian experience of irrepressible joy came from, the answer, it seems to me, is to be found in four interrelated places.

The first source of joy was the unshakeable belief the first believers had in the *bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead*, an event that proved beyond all question he had secured a definitive victory over the powers of death and evil. This belief generated immense hope for the future and an intrepid fearlessness in the present. “Death has been swallowed up in victory,” Paul exults: “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:53–56).

A second source of Christian joy was the awareness of having received a *radical forgiveness of sins and deliverance from the compulsions of sin* or the “power of sin” (Rom. 3:9). This is what enabled them to walk in a “newness of life,” a newness characterized by a profound sense of liberty and lightness. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, for the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. . . . To set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace” (Rom. 8:1–4).

The third reason for joy was the experience of *belonging to a new social community*, the body of Christ, a new kind of society in which “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). Membership in this community brought a feeling of mutual solidarity and support (Gal. 6:2), as well as a newfound sense of dignity and equality that cut across all the deepest social divisions of the day.

The fourth and most important source of early Christian joy was the *indwelling and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit* in their

midst. This was not a matter of abstract doctrine; it was a matter of tangible experience, an experience, it seems, of being immersed in liquid love. That is why Paul can say that “God’s love has been *poured* into our hearts”—like molten fire—“through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). Over and over again in the New Testament, the experience of joy is attributed to the Holy Spirit, sent like a flood upon the young community (e.g., Rom. 14:17; 15:13; Gal. 5:22).

It was these four interconnected realities, then, that generated this effervescent, contagious joy that distinguished the early

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Christian movement. That doesn’t mean Christians exercised a monopoly on joy. All people have the capacity to know profound joy, irrespective of religious or philosophical commitment, as a result of being made in God’s image. It is a manifestation of God’s common grace.

But while joy is not unique to Christians, there is still something unique about Christian joy. You might say that *Christian joy is human joy on steroids*, with the steroidal injection comprising the four realities just described—a confidence in Christ’s triumph over death and the forces of evil; the knowledge of personal forgiveness of sins and

freedom from moral defeat; membership in a loving community of worship, equality, and support; and, most importantly, immersion in the pulsating life and power of God’s Spirit.

But wait! There’s more

Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of this steroidal Christian joy was its capacity to coexist with suffering and distress. This is truly remarkable. The New Testament writers repeatedly speak of joy and suffering as simultaneous realities. They are not mutually exclusive. They don’t cancel each other out. Instead they run on a kind of divided highway, existing side by side at the same time.

This coexistence is attested everywhere in the New Testament. “We want you to know, brothers and sisters,” Paul writes to the

Corinthians, “about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy . . . overflowed in a wealth of generosity” (2 Cor. 8:1–2). He reminds the Thessalonians of how “in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:6). The writer of James goes so far as to suggest that “whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy” (James 1:2).

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These texts all speak of joy in the time of trial, joy in the midst of sorrow. The sorrow is still sorrow. The pain is real; it still hurts. It is never denied, or repressed, or trivialized. And yet paradoxically—even miraculously—suffering is accompanied by a tenacious, inextinguishable joy. This distinctively Christian blend of severe suffering and joyful buoyancy is most eloquently described in 2 Corinthians 4.

For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. (2 Cor. 4:1–11, cf. Rom 8:36–39)

No wonder, then, that just as the New Testament speaks of the Christian experience of peace as something that “surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7), so it speaks of the Christian experience of joy as beyond description and full of glory (1 Peter 1:18).

Jesus on joy

When we turn to the Gospel accounts, we find that joy was a recurring theme in the teaching, activity, and experience of Jesus as well. He was frequently found at the table of tax collectors and

sinners, celebrating with them their inclusion in God's renewing and restoring work (Mark 2:15–17; Matt. 11:18–19; Luke 7:31–33; 19:5–10).

The disciples were beneficiaries of this reality too. Luke reports that when the seventy returned from their preaching mission, they “returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!’” Jesus responded by explaining that they had been given access to his own unique authority over spiritual evil, but he told them not to rejoice in their power but rather to “rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” Then, addressing God in prayer, Jesus himself “rejoiced in the Holy Spirit,” marveling at

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how the Father had drawn such marginal and insignificant people into the orbit of his saving revelation. Turning to the disciples, he pronounced the beatitude “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see” and “hear what you hear” (Luke 10:17–25).

In the earlier list of beatitudes in Luke addressed to the disciples there is a further reference to joy, in this case the paradoxical joy in suffering just described. “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets” (Luke 6:22–23; cf. Matt. 5:12–13).

In both cases, the disciples' joy comes from being caught up in the “present blessedness” of God's saving rule, a joy that persists in the face of pain, persecution, and social exclusion. It is the same joy that fuels the social radicalism of God's rule. In the parable of the buried treasure, Jesus likens encountering the kingdom of God to discovering “treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid, then *in his joy* he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Matt. 13:44). Discovering God's saving activity in Jesus elicits great joy, and this joy impels a radical change of lifestyle. The man *sold* all he possessed and he *bought* the pearl of great price. He disinvested in the world as he knew it and reinvested his entire life in the agenda of God's new order.

The energy of God's kingdom

In his proclamation and instruction on the kingdom of God, Jesus consistently called for an ethical response from his hearers. In a word, he called for repentance and faith (Mark 1:14–15), and repentance in the biblical tradition entails a conscious refocusing of one's values, priorities, allegiances, and patterns of conduct.

The repentance Jesus demanded was far-reaching in nature. In his ethical teaching, he targeted four fundamental areas of human existence—the area of wealth and possessions (the realm of

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economic power); the area of status, privilege, and prejudice (the sphere of social power); the issue of violence and attitude toward enemies (the arena of coercive power); and the area of religious and ritual performance (the domain of spiritual power). Responding to God's kingdom requires major transformations in each of these areas.

Jesus' demands were nothing if not radical. But the moral and personal transformation he called for is not the product of heroic self-discipline, or cold moralism, or doctrinaire legalism, or ideological purism—all of which are common in society and equally prevalent in the church. It is the product of joy—the joy of discovery, the joy of grace, the joy of finding something extraordinary and receiving

it as a gift. *Joy is the energy of God's kingdom.* The motivation for commitment to the transformational agenda of God's kingdom is the joy of being connected to Jesus and filled with his Spirit.

Of course joy does not do the whole job. It must be complemented by self-discipline, courage, and hard work. Discipleship is difficult, as Anabaptists are fond of stressing, and rightly so. Jesus constantly warned his hearers that following him would involve hardship, persecution, and suffering. There is a cost to discipleship, just as there was a cost to messiahship for Jesus, and it is a cost we must freely and repeatedly choose to embrace.

But when we do—when we sell our investment in the world as it is and buy property in God's new order—we get a free promotional gift along with our purchase. We get joy, the joy of being

joined with Jesus and his people and filled with his Spirit. It is a joy capable of sustaining us through the darkest of times because it is constantly replenished by the love of God “poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5).

Notes

¹ Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

² H. R. Mackintosh, *The Originality of the Christian Message*, Studies in Theology (London: Duckworth & Co., 1920).

³ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁴ *Ibid.*

About the author

Chris Marshall was recently appointed as the inaugural Professor of Restorative Justice in the School of Government at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. His most recent book, *Compassionate Justice: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*, was published in 2012. This article is based on an address he gave to a chapel service at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana, on March 12, 2013.