

# Alone

## On joy and gratitude

Summary: Even when it feels like we are barely surviving, we can find joy and express gratitude for our God is with us and our community is with us.

Scripture: Philippians 4:4–9; Colossians 3:12–17

Date: Sunday, 23 October 2022 (NarellanCCC)

### Post A Review

About two months ago, I put out a call for those who had not yet done so to post a review of our church on Google. Sadly, no one responded to my call. I am going to assume that is because you are unsure of how to do so. Let's fix that...

When a new family moves into the area, or someone starts to feel a nudge in their life from the Holy Spirit, they are not going to open up a Yellow Pages to find the address of their nearest church—if they even have one of those big phone books. They are certainly not going to walk into a random church for the fun of it either. They are going to open their web browser to Google Maps and do a search for the churches nearest to them.

On Google Maps, starting with a wide view, the first Places Of Interest you see have square pins. These places have paid for ads. As you zoom in, the next places you will see are Places Of Interest, ranked by the interest shown in them.

The algorithms designed by the Google developers make a whole lot of assumptions about what people are interested in, based on their searches and other activity. The more people search for something in an area, then Google Maps will highlight the sources of that something before anything else.

Granted, people are not searching for Places Of Worship as much as they are for automotive service centres or cafés; however, if they were, we want our Place of Worship to feature more prominently and before any others are highlighted. There are only two ways for us to rank higher on Google searches: have an active website and lots of positive reviews.

Once someone finds us on Google Maps or Google Search, he or she will then visit our website. Perusing our website, they will get a glimpse into our community and information that will help them discern whether this faith community would be more likely than others to suit them and their family.

I am doing everything I can to make our website user-friendly and engaging. But I can't do anything to make our location rank higher on Google Maps. That is up to you. Post a review!

Think of it this way: Posting on social media is an easy way to be a witness, to acknowledge our friendship with Jesus. Without being cringey about it, Google, Facebook, Instagram, etc, are channels for simple demonstrations of the joy and gratitude that comes with our faith, to celebrate that we are not alone in this world.

For the past eleven weeks, we have investigated and reflected together on what are the essential beliefs of Christian faith. Those beliefs mean 'diddly squat' or 'stuff all' if they do

not translate into a Christian lifestyle. And a Christian lifestyle is not worth living at all if it is not characterised by joy and gratitude.

I am assuming you have not posted a review on Google because you do not know how to or how valuable it is to us. If you have not posted a review because you do not experience joy and gratitude to God and for each other, then let's fix that...

## Joy

What is joy? It is a quality or attitude of delight and happiness. Joy is experienced naturally in many circumstances of life and in human relationships. It is especially important in the life of the friends of Jesus, who experience joy in response to all God has done for us.

In this sense, we can say that **God** himself **gives joy** to his people. An example is found in the story of the returned exiles:

On that day they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced because God had given them great joy. The women and children also celebrated, and Jerusalem's rejoicing was heard far away. (Nehemiah 12:43)<sup>1 2</sup>

Like moths to a light, humans are drawn to joy because, frankly, moments of joy are few and far between.

At the recommendations of some friends, my family and I are currently watching a television series called *Alone*, an American survival competition series on The History Channel. Each season has taken its participants to remote locations around the world including Patagonia, Mongolia and the Canadian Arctic. The survivalists take only ten items of their own choosing. The last person remaining wins half a million dollars.

The contestants all give their back story and describe their reasons for accepting the survival challenge. With all due respect, some of the contestants are just plain weird, 'hippy dippy' types, but I have to commend those who find any moments for joy in their self-imposed exile to a wilderness.

In contrast, the friends of Jesus have all sorts of reasons for joy. There is **God's deliverance**, like when Hannah was delivered from the torment of an enemy who mocked her for her barrenness:

Hannah prayed: My heart rejoices in the LORD; my horn is lifted up by the LORD. My mouth boasts over my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation. (1 Samuel 2:1)

**God's goodness** is another reason, as attested to when King Solomon prayed before the altar of the Lord:

Now therefore: Arise, LORD God, come to your resting place, you and your powerful ark. May your priests, LORD God, be clothed with salvation, and may your faithful people rejoice in goodness. (2 Chronicles 6:41)

Joy comes with **repentance**, as attested to by one of the friends of Job:

Receive instruction from his mouth, and place his sayings in your heart. If you return to the Almighty, you will be renewed. If you banish injustice from

your tent and consign your gold to the dust, the gold of Ophir to the stones in the wadis, the Almighty will be your gold and your finest silver. Then you will delight in the Almighty and lift up your face to God. (Job 22:22–26)

To the great consternation of our time, even **the rightness of God's commands** lead to joy, as the psalmist declared:

The precepts of the LORD are right, making the heart glad; the command of the LORD is radiant, making the eyes light up. (Psalm 19:8)

We can find joy even in difficult situations because the Almighty is with us, comforting and **consoling us**:

When I am filled with cares, your comfort brings me joy. (Psalm 94:19)

**God's presence** fills the friends of Jesus with joy, according to the psalmist who wrote:

I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let's go to the house of the LORD."  
(Psalm 122:1)

We know joy because **we have been saved** by God:

On that day it will be said, "Look, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he has saved us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him. Let's rejoice and be glad in his salvation." (Isaiah 25:9)

The practices of our faith seem strange to our friends and neighbours, but setting aside **a day to rest and gather** with our faith community brings joy:

"If you keep from desecrating the Sabbath, from doing whatever you want on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight, and the holy day of the LORD honourable; if you honour it, not going your own ways, seeking your own pleasure, or talking business; then you will delight in the LORD... (Isaiah 58:13–14)

Whether providing wisdom or consolation, **the words of God** bring joy, as the prophet wrote:

Your words were found, and I ate them. Your words became a delight to me and the joy of my heart, for I bear your name, LORD God of Armies.  
(Jeremiah 15:16)

**The generosity of God** is a joy, for he provides all we need and, sometimes, even some of our wants:

They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion; they will be radiant with joy because of the LORD's goodness, because of the grain, the new wine, the fresh oil, and because of the young of the flocks and herds. Their life will be like an irrigated garden, and they will no longer grow weak from hunger.  
(Jeremiah 31:12)

To be acknowledged by others feels good, but **recognition from God** brings joy, according to the mother of Jesus:

And Mary said: My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, because he has looked with favour on the humble condition of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed, because the Mighty One has done great things for me, and his name is holy. (Luke 1:46–49)

All of which gives us reasons for **trusting God**, which in turn fills us with even more joy, according to the apostle:

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you believe so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)

So, we understand what he means when Paul encourages us with these further words,

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your graciousness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4–7)

The friends of Jesus, clearly, have plentiful reasons for joy. So, let the joy of your faith be evident to all!

People might smirk or scoff at your joyfulness initially, but joy is infectious! No one can remain grumpy long in the presence of a joyful person. And they cannot help but be curious as to the reason for your joy because everyone wants more joy in their life, am I right?

Which then begs the question: what if we do not experience joy? Whether a person of faith or not, joy arises spontaneously for a number of reasons: when in creation,<sup>3</sup> from the birth of children,<sup>4</sup> because of victory and deliverance,<sup>5</sup> the behaviour of others,<sup>6</sup> from our relationships,<sup>7</sup> or in everyday life.<sup>8</sup>

The problem is these are random moments; we have little to no control over such catalysts of joy. Yet, the friends of Jesus can **cultivate joy** by seeking it in our Creator, for as it is written:

You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and new wine abound. (Psalm 4:7)

You reveal the path of life to me; in your presence is abundant joy; at your right hand are eternal pleasures. (Psalm 16:11)

Though the fig tree does not bud and there is no fruit on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though the flocks disappear from the pen and there are no herds in the stalls, yet I will celebrate in the LORD; I will rejoice in the God of my salvation! (Habakkuk 3:17–18)

In addition, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write to you again about this is no trouble for me and is a safeguard for you. (Philippians 3:1)<sup>9</sup>

I am not suggesting the friends of Jesus should be bubbly idiots, like some of the *Alone* contestants, bouncing around without a care in the world even though they have manifold

pressures on them. Nevertheless, **joy is a safeguard** against our troubles, which can threaten to overwhelm us.

With joy you can face any challenge, or at least the challenges won't seem quite so insurmountable. Hold on to the joy found in our Lord and what he has done for us! Life then won't feel quite so gloomy and unbearable.

## Gratitude

Along with their joy, the *Alone* weirdo-contestants also expressed gratitude for any provision they found. Be it a portion of seal carcass washed ashored, after a killer whale's hunt, or retrieving their arrow or lost cooking pot from the frigid water, some contestants were able to find a bright spark in their otherwise gloomily days.

I believe something like this experience is what the apostle meant when he wrote,

And let the peace of Christ, to which you were also called in one body, rule your hearts. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell richly among you, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:15–17)

Gratitude is a heartfelt thankfulness to God, expressed in response to his love and mercy. Even so, to express gratitude in “whatever you do”, is a tall order.

Oh, it's easy to be grateful when times are good and the food is fresh, but what about when you're late, at no fault of your own, or the milk is on the edge of turning off? In such circumstances, we have what we need but it is hard to be grateful for it.

The fact is the sun shines and the rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous (Mt 5:45b). Everyone finds themselves in good times and bad times. The world's resources are not distributed evenly nor even fairly.

Despite our circumstances, the friends of Jesus always have a heartfelt gratitude to God and respond to his love and mercy accordingly.

We are thankful for **God's goodness**, so follow the psalmist's instructions:

Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him and bless his name. For the LORD is good, and his faithful love endures forever; his faithfulness, through all generations. (Psalm 100:4–5)<sup>10</sup>

And like the psalmist, we are thankful for **deliverance** from adversity:

Then I will rejoice in the LORD; I will delight in his deliverance. All my bones will say, “LORD, who is like you, rescuing the poor from one too strong for him, the poor or the needy from one who robs him?” (Psalm 35:9–10)<sup>11</sup>

We are thankful for **answered prayer**, for as the psalmist wrote:

The LORD is near all who call out to him, all who call out to him with integrity. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry for help and saves them. (Psalm 145:18–19)

Moses and Aaron were among his priests; Samuel also was among those calling on his name. They called to the LORD and he answered them. (Psalm 99:6)<sup>12</sup>

Like the apostle, we are thankful for **others**:

I always thank my God when I mention you in my prayers (Philemon 4)<sup>13</sup>

We are, of course, thankful for **Jesus Christ**:

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (2 Corinthians 9:15)<sup>14</sup>

And we are thankful for God's **provision**:

Then he commanded the crowds to sit down on the grass. He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he blessed them. He broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. (Matthew 14:19)<sup>15</sup>

Acknowledging and enjoying all these reasons to be thankful, for the friends of Jesus, there are many ways we express our thankfulness to God. We do so in song,<sup>16</sup> in music,<sup>17</sup> in dance<sup>18</sup> and in worship.<sup>19</sup> But, really, we should just do like the survivalist-contestants of *Alone* and give voice to our gratitude.

The contestants may thank the land, the water and the sunshine; they may thank the squirrels and the grouse and any source of food they can find. But they are voicing their gratitude to the air. Their mind space is laudable and healthy but, ultimately, they are thankful merely for random, chance occurrences.

But the friends of Jesus know from whom our help comes. Our help comes from the Lord!<sup>20</sup> In him we trust<sup>21</sup> and live and move and have our being.<sup>22</sup> For all we have, we are grateful to our Creator.

## **We Are Not Alone**

I've not finished watching the *Alone* series, but I am impressed at the difference joy and gratitude makes for some of the contestants. There is a marked positivity in those seeking for and finding any reason at all to find joy and express gratitude—all while being completely alone and in a survival situation!

Unlike the survivalist contestants, the friends of Jesus are not alone! Even when it feels like we are barely surviving, we can find reasons for joy and express gratitude that our God is with us and our community is with us.

We can make sense of our seemingly desperate circumstances because the Bible and collected wisdom of the Church explains the confusion, chaos, violence and desperate need all around us.

We can find our way in the wilderness because God will provide a way out of our trails and temptations (1 Cor 10:13), and if we lean not on our own understanding but instead trust in the Lord, then he will make our paths straight (Prov 3:5-6).

## Conclusion

Remember, you are not alone! Life is hard and rarely goes the way you expect or want, but the friend of Jesus always has ample reasons for joy and gratitude. In your dark hours, centre yourself, trust in the Lord, remember your community is with you, and always be prepared to explain the reasons for your joy and gratitude —and a good place to start is with a Google review!

## Endnotes

- 1 See also Job 8:21; Ecc 2:26; Isa 9:3; Ac 13:52; 14:15-17.
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 3 Ps 96:11-13 pp 1Ch 16:31-33 See also Job 39:13; Ps 65:12-13; 89:12; 97:1; 100:1; Isa 35:1-2; 49:13.
- 4 Lk 1:13-15 See also Ge 30:12-13; Lk 1:58.
- 5 Ex 18:9; 1Sa 18:6; Jer 41:13; Zec 10:7.
- 6 Pr 15:30 See also Pr 23:24-25; Mt 14:6-7; Heb 13:17.
- 7 Php 4:1 See also Pr 5:18; SS 1:4; 3:11; Ro 12:15; 15:26-27; 1Co 12:26; Php 1:4-6; Phm 7.
- 8 Ecc 5:19-20.
- 9 See also 1Ch 16:10; Ps 43:4; Php 1:23-26 knowing Jesus Christ; Php 4:4.
- 10 See also 1Ch 16:8,34-35; 2Ch 7:3-6; Ezr 3:10-11; Ps 68:19; 106:1; 116:12-14; 136:1-3,26; Isa 63:7; 1Th 5:18; Heb 12:28.
- 11 See also Ps 31:7-8,21-23; 44:6-8; 66:8-9,16-20; 103:1-5.
- 12 See also Ps 30:1-12; 66:16-20; 138:1-5; Jn 11:40.
- 13 See also Ne 11:17; Ro 1:8; Php 4:6; Col 1:10; 4:2; 1Ti 2:1; 2Ti 1:3.
- 14 See also Lk 2:25-32,36-38; Col 2:6; 3:15-17.
- 15 Pp Mk 6:41 pp Lk 9:16 pp Jn 6:11 See also Ps 147:7-9; Mt 15:36 pp Mk 8:6; Mt 26:26-27 pp Mk 14:22-23 pp Lk 22:17-19; Lk 24:30; Ac 27:35; Ro 14:6; 1Ti 4:3.
- 16 Eph 5:19-20 See also Ps 69:30; 95:2; 96:1; Isa 55:12.
- 17 Ps 27:6; 92:1-3.
- 18 Ps 149:3.
- 19 Ps 95:2; 100:4; Heb 12:28.
- 20 Ps 121:1; 123:1.
- 21 Ex 14:31; 2Ti 1:12 See also 2Sa 22:1-3 pp Ps 18:2-3; Ps 9:9-10; 115:9-11; 144:1-2.

22 Ac 17:28.