

The Waiting Room

Joy in the Waiting Room

December 14, 2025

Philippians 4:4

Introduction

(TITLE SLIDE) During the Christmas season, some of Christianity's core theological realities bubble up to the surface, and we are talking about four of those this year.

- Eric kicked us off with the virtue of hope from Isaiah 40. It was in the midst of captivity and having lost their identity as a nation that the Israelites heard from God through the prophet Isaiah, who gave them a message of HOPE ... one fulfilled in the coming of Jesus.
- Last week, we looked at the virtue of peace. It was also in Isaiah 9 where the Messiah is prophesied to be called the "Prince of Peace," and we looked at a passage in John 14 where Jesus told his disciples how that peace would be accomplished and provided.
- Today, we're talking about the virtue of JOY ... Next week, LOVE.

There's a sense in which joy may be THE theological virtue that we think about when it comes to the **arrival** of Jesus, but we don't often think about joy when it comes to **WAITING** for Jesus to come. Joy is usually what we associate with the **arrival or the experience** of something, not the waiting for something.

Think about being at an amusement park like Disney World or Six Flags. There's way more joy associated with completing the ride itself than there is waiting in line for it. Theme park executives know this, which is why the newest rides over the last few years do what they can to immerse you in some sort of world or story so that you feel a bit more joyful while you wait. Parents know this because they often have to create joy for themselves and for their children while they wait in line. The real joy is in the experience itself, not in the waiting for the experience.

Not quite so when it comes to the Christian life. A concerted effort to read our Bibles reveals that while our joy will one day be COMPLETED when Jesus returns, even now, while we wait for that day, there is real, substantive joy in the Christian life.

"Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory."

1 Peter 1:8

Body

How? How is it that we can have real joy in the Christian life when our world is the way that it is?

Old Testament Examples

There is much to learn about this from the Old Testament, not just the New. The Old Testament saints who believed in God had joy in their lives even though the Messiah, Jesus, had not yet arrived.

(SLIDE) They had joy because God had spoken. The certainty of God's Word gave those who believed it great joy. So, when God promised Abraham and Sarah a son, they rejoiced in God's Word. When God promised David that his throne would endure forever, David rejoiced in God's Word.

(SLIDE) They had joy because God had already acted in salvation. Every deliverance — Egypt, the wilderness, the judges, the exile — was a foretaste of the greater salvation to come. When God saved Israel, their joy wasn't just about the moment. It was a sign of a bigger, coming redemption.

(SLIDE) They had joy because they believed God was with them even in the waiting. Even before the incarnation, God dwelled with His people. He was with them in the tabernacle. He was with them in the temple. He was with those leaders and prophets on whom His Spirit fell. And God's nearness to them meant that His people could rejoice not in circumstances, but in their relationship with God.

So you see, Old Testament believers had joy in their lives because they trusted God's promises, celebrated His past salvation, hoped in the restoration the Messiah would bring, and rejoiced in God's presence even before Christ arrived. In a word, their joy was **anticipatory** — the joy of people who knew the Messiah was coming and that God's promise was certain.

New Testament Joy

Joy for Christians is different from this, but joy for Christians is also similar to this.

Joy for Christians is different in that our joy is more fulfilled.

(SLIDE) We know that the Messiah has come. OT believers rejoice in the promise of the Messiah, but we rejoice in the **person** of the Messiah who came. The OT folks were looking forward to Christ and had joy, but we are looking back to his birth, life, death, and resurrection.

(SLIDE) Further, we've actually experienced redemption in Jesus. OT believers rejoiced in acts of redemption that pointed to Jesus, but we rejoice because Jesus actually entered history,

defeated sin, crushed death, and opened the way to the Father. What they saw signs of, we experienced in real time.

(SLIDE) We have the indwelling Spirit. OT saints experienced the Spirit's presence temporarily and selectively. Christians experience Him permanently and universally. Joy for the OT believer was the occasional experience of God's presence. Joy for the Christian is the continual experience of His presence.

In every way, our joy is deeper, clearer, and more grounded because we celebrate what God has already done in Christ. Christians have more joy than Old Testament believers because we know the Messiah personally, enjoy the indwelling Spirit, and live in the fullness of the gospel.

But our joy is also like theirs, because we too are waiting—not for Christ's first arrival, but His final return—and so we rejoice in hope just as they did.

(SLIDE) We wait for God to finish what He has started. Old Testament believers waited for the Messiah's first coming. Christians wait for His *second* coming. Both joys are rooted in expectation and hope.

(SLIDE) Our joy is anchored in God's promises, not our circumstances. OT believers rejoiced even in exile and hardship. Christians rejoice even in suffering. Joy flows from what God has promised, not from what we feel in the moment.

(SLIDE) Our joy is both now and not yet. OT saints saw glimpses and foretastes (a rescue here, a prophet there) and rejoiced. We experience real joy because Christ has come, but we also long for greater joy when He returns and makes all things new.

So this is how Christians can have real joy in the Christian life when our world is the way that it is. We've seen God fulfill His promise in the person of Jesus and in giving the Holy Spirit. He's not finished yet. Our joy is not yet complete. Life has its share of heartache and challenges that we don't water down or ignore. But we have real joy.

Joy in Philippians

It's with this in mind that we can now grasp how in the world Paul could command the Philippians in verse 4 to rejoice in the Lord.

(SLIDE) Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

And this particularly fascinating when you think about this being a letter from Paul, which means there were circumstances into which he was writing this command, and there were circumstances from which he was writing this command. There was something going on with Philippians that compelled him to issue the command, but the circumstances from which he wrote shed even further light on just how powerful gospel joy really is.

(SLIDE) Why Paul Had Joy

Most conservative evangelical scholars agree that when Paul wrote Philippians he was living under Roman house arrest in Rome, confined but not completely cut off from ministry. He likely occupied a small, rented room, chained day and night to a rotating member of the Roman Army, which meant his every movement, conversation, prayer, and moment of rest occurred under constant surveillance and with significant physical discomfort. Though he was free to receive visitors like Timothy, Luke, and Epaphroditus, and though he could write letters and teach those who came to him, he also lived with the uncertainty of an impending trial before Caesar, unsure whether he would be released or executed. He was financially dependent on the generosity of churches, emotionally pressured by opponents both outside and inside the Christian community, and physically hampered by chains. Still, Paul interpreted his confinement through the lens of Christ. He saw his imprisonment as a strategic assignment, a gospel beachhead inside the imperial household, where guards heard the message of Christ and believers outside grew bolder because of his suffering.

Paul was uncomfortable but uncrushed, confined to a room but free in Christ, uncertain about his earthly future, yet overflowing with joy because he was convinced that even in chains the risen Christ is advancing His gospel and sustaining His servant.

Illustration – the Bristlecone Pine

There are types of trees, like this bristlecone pine pictured on the screen, that grow on the edge of cliffs in high mountains—gnarled roots gripping gray stone, branches bent by wind, snow, and exposure. You would think it would be the most miserable tree on earth, but scientists have discovered something surprising: those trees are often the healthiest, because the constant pressure forces their roots deeper and their fibers stronger. Their environment doesn't weaken them as much as it develops them.

Paul's joy worked the same way. Hardship didn't hollow him out; it drove his roots into Christ. Pressure didn't fracture him; it shaped him. The chains that looked like obstacles to everyone else became the very things God used to strengthen his faith and spread the gospel. Joy doesn't grow best in ideal conditions. Joy grows best in Christ—*especially* in less-than-ideal conditions.

Paul shows us that joy isn't the product of perfect conditions—it's the product of a perfect Savior. So the question for us is simple but searching: What's chaining you right now? A diagnosis? A relationship that's strained? A job that feels limiting or draining? A future that feels uncertain? A season of life you didn't choose?

You may feel confined, hemmed in, limited. But Paul reminds us that Christ doesn't need your circumstances to be ideal in order to fill you with joy or use you for His glory. In fact, the very place you feel stuck may be the very place where Christ intends to show His strength, His nearness, and His sufficiency. That's why Paul had joy. Paul rejoiced because he believed this:

“If Christ is with me, nothing is wasted—not even prison.” And that’s how joy often manifests itself in the Christian life.

(SLIDE) Why Paul Commanded Joy

When Paul commands the Philippians to “Rejoice in the Lord always,” he isn’t tossing out a refrigerator-magnet verse or urging them to fake a smile. He is speaking into a real situation that was quietly draining the life of the church. As you can see in Philippians 4, two prominent women in the church had fallen into a conflict significant enough that Paul names them publicly. Their disagreement wasn’t just a personal spat—it was starting to ripple through the whole congregation, creating tension, anxiety, and discouragement. And all of this was happening in a church already facing pressure from the outside and uncertainty about Paul’s own imprisonment. Their joy, which had once fueled their partnership in the gospel, was leaking. So Paul commands them to step back to the deeper, steadier source of joy that circumstances can’t touch. He says, ‘Rejoice—but not in how things are going, not in whether everyone is getting along, not in whether the future feels secure. Rejoice in the Lord.’ Only a shared joy in Christ has the power to heal what conflict has broken.

Paul knows that when a church loses its joy, unity becomes fragile and gentleness evaporates. But when a church rejoices in the Lord—truly rejoices—something supernatural happens: hearts soften, perspectives widen, and the gospel becomes bigger than the disagreement. Joy in the Lord steadies anxious people. Joy in the Lord makes room for reconciliation. Joy in the Lord anchors a church in the middle of relational storms. This is why Paul tells them to rejoice—not as a denial of their problems, but as the pathway through them. He knows that if the Philippians can recover their joy in Christ, they can recover each other. And the same is true for us. In the waiting rooms of life, when relationships strain or uncertainty rises, joy in the Lord is not optional; ***it is God’s appointed way of holding His people together in love.***

Conclusion

(SLIDE) Joy Grows Where Christ is Treasured

Church, if Paul could rejoice in the Lord while chained to a Roman guard and unsure whether he would live or die, and if the Philippians could rejoice even as their relationships frayed and their future felt fragile, then we can rejoice in the waiting rooms of our own lives today. Joy does not wait for everything to be resolved. It grows where Christ is treasured. Joy is not the product of easy circumstances. It is the fruit of a Savior who has already come, who has already redeemed, who has already poured out His Spirit, and who promises to finish what He started in us.

So Christian, don’t wait for joy to find you. Fix your eyes again on Jesus, the One who has kept every promise so far and who will keep every promise still to come. Rejoice in the Lord—not because life is light, but because Christ is near; not because the world is stable, but because

His kingdom cannot be shaken. Let joy be the place where your heart returns, the posture that steadies you, the witness that distinguishes you, and the strength that carries you while you wait for the day when your joy will finally be complete.

(SLIDE) Joy Begins When Christ is Treasured

And if you are here today and you would not call yourself a Christian, this passage offers you an invitation too. You know what it is to wait in life—waiting for things to get better, waiting for the next season to bring relief, waiting for someone or something to finally make you whole. But deep down, you also know that every joy the world offers eventually ends. The ride stops. The season changes. The moment fades. The Bible tells us that true, lasting joy isn't something we manufacture—it's someone we meet. Joy is found in Christ, the One who came into the world to save sinners, to reconcile us to God, to carry our sorrows, to heal what is broken in us, and to make us new. The joy Paul describes is not self-help, and it is not positive thinking. It is the joy of being forgiven, loved, known, and secured by the God who made you. If you have never turned to Jesus, today can be the day you step out of the endless waiting for joy and step into the arms of the One who brings joy that cannot be taken from you. He came for you. He died for you. He rose for you. And He invites you to enter a joy that begins now and will last forever.

So whether you are a follower of Jesus or someone still searching, the call of this passage is the same: look to Christ. Fix your eyes on Him. Trust Him in the waiting. And discover that in Him—only in Him—there is a joy strong enough to hold you steady until the day He comes again.

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