
Joy: A Scriptural and Patristic Understanding

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ONE OF THE FUNDAMENTAL EXPERIENCES AS WELL AS EXPRESSIONS of the Christian life is that of joy, which is a state of well-being and happiness springing from one's living relationship with God. It will be the purpose of this paper to examine the various types and characteristics of joy as they are described in Scripture and the Christian Patristic writers.

There are a number of Hebrew expressions in the Old Testament that refer to joy, and the Septuagint generally translates these as *ἀγαλλίασις* or *εὐφροσύνη*. Rudolf Bultmann distinguishes the two expressions by stating that *ἀγαλλίασις* refers to joy in its outward expression especially in a cultic setting while *εὐφροσύνη* more specifically denotes the inner mood of satisfied joy.¹ In actual practice, however, the Septuagint alternates and combines *εὐφροσύνη* with other words so that it does not really preserve any one distinct meaning in its various manifestations.²

In the Old Testament joy is presented as a natural response of humanity to God's presence and his saving acts: "in Thy presence there is fullness of joy" (Ps 16.11) and "I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation" (Hab 3.18). Moreover, as Hans

*Dedicated to the blessed memory of Father George Christulides, whose life was the very paragon of Christian joy.

¹ Rudolf Bultmann, "*ἀγαλλιάομαι, ἀγαλλίασις*" and "*εὐφροσύνη*," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, 1964), 1, p. 19 and 2, p. 772.

² Bultmann, 2, p. 772.

Conzelmann states, "joy is not just inward. It has a cause and finds expression. It thus aims at sharing, especially as festal joy."³ Hence, the most characteristic references to joy in the Old Testament present it in a cultic or festal context, as, for example, Psalm 27.6: "... and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord." Dorothea Ward Harvey notes that the Old Testament includes a number of different physical expressions of joy: "singing, shouting, noise, uproar, a loud voice, singing praise; . . . dancing, clapping, leaping, or stamping the feet."⁴ This involvement of the body in joyful expression is also discussed by Pietro Dacquino, who states that the Old Testament writers saw joy as a state which encompassed the whole man, both body and soul.⁵

One essential way to express joy in the Old Testament was to declare the glorious and saving acts of God and to give thanks for his gifts. The Old Testament exhorts rejoicing for God's just rule over the peoples of the earth (Ps 67.4), for God's providence and care of the earth (Ps 65.9-11), and for his deliverance of Israel from Egypt and his continuing protection of his people (Ps 105.43). It is not only humanity which rejoices but all of nature as well (Ps 65.8, 12-13).

The Old Testament also speaks of the joy which should accompany one's pilgrimage to the Temple, his sacrifices to God, and his tithe offerings (Deut 12.5-7). Not only are God's commandments a source of delight to his faithful (Ps 119.143), but his words as well: "Thy words were found, and I ate them, and thy words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart. . . ." (Jer 15.16).

In the Old Testament among the earthly gifts which give rise to joy Dacquino mentions the birth of children as in the case of Hannah (1 Sam 2.1ff.), the presence of the beloved spouse (Prov 5.18), a long life on earth (Ecc 30.22), and prosperity and abundance at the time of vintage (Is 16.10) and harvest (Is 9.2).⁶ Dacquino points out that

³ Hans Conzelmann, "χαίρω, χαρά, συγχαίρω," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, 1964), 9, p. 363.

⁴ Dorothea Ward Harvey, "Joy," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York, 1962), 2, p. 1000.

⁵ Pietro Dacquino, "Human Joy and the Hereafter in the Biblical Books," trans. Anthony M. Buono, in *The Gift of Joy*, pp. 17-32. Concilium series no. 39, ed. Christian Duquoc (New York, 1968), p. 18.

⁶ Dacquino, p. 18.

the reason "Old Testament man" seems to focus so much on earthly joys is "precisely because he cannot project beyond death his need for joy and happiness."⁷ However, eventually the prophets, particularly Isaiah, came to proclaim their vision of the ultimate end of history in which God would triumphantly destroy his enemies and save his faithful (see, for example, Is 25.8-9). Isaiah describes the eschaton as a time of great joy (Is 9.2-3), and he likens it to a great feast (Is 25.6) and to the blissful relationship between God as the bridegroom and his chosen people as the bride (Is 62.5). The joy of God's final salvation will be complete and total because, as Dacquino states, "the things that presently disturb it will become insignificant: man's wickedness, wars, outrages, sins (cf. Is 11.9, 60.18, 60.25, 32.17, 35.9, Ezek 34.25, 28, Zech 14.11) and, above all, sickness (cf. Is 32.24, 35.5-6a), suffering, sorrow and death (cf. Is 51.11b, 65.19b, 35.10c, 25.8b)."⁸ For the faithful of the Old Testament the very hope of this final joy brought joy in itself.

In the New Testament, although the words *ἀγαλλίασις* and *εὐφροσύνη* continue to play a role, it is the concept of *χαρά* which will become dominant in references to joy. The term *ἀγαλλίασις* has the same use in the New Testament (outside the corpus of Saint Paul, who never uses the term) as in the Old,⁹ and, according to Bultmann, "God's help is always the theme of the *ἀγαλλίασις* which is always a jubilant and thankful exultation."¹⁰ The term *εὐφροσύνη* plays even less a role than *ἀγαλλίασις* in the New Testament and mainly refers either to secular joy (Lk 12.19, 16.19) or to the joy of a festive meal (Lk 15.23).¹¹ *Εὐφροσύνη* is also used to describe the joy of mutual fellowship in 2 Corinthians 2.2 and to refer to eschatological rejoicing in Revelation 12.12 and 18.20.¹²

The words *χαρά* — *χαίρω* in their original Greek usage meant "to rejoice" or "to be merry." Although in the New Testament *χαρά* continued to be used in reference to joy of a secular nature as in the *χαρά* of the woman who finds the lost coin in the parable of

⁷ Ibid. p. 20.

⁸ Ibid. p. 24.

⁹ Bultmann, 1, p. 20.

¹⁰ Ibid. 1, p. 20.

¹¹ See Ibid. 2, p. 774.

¹² See Ibid.

Luke 15.8-9, it also was used to indicate the highest form of religious joy as in the eschatological marriage of the Lamb and his bride in Revelation 19.7. Thus, in the New Testament it is the word *χαρά* which is generally used to describe all forms and levels of joy.

In the Synoptic Gospels it is especially Luke which discusses the various types of joy. The angel Gabriel announced the tidings of joy to Zechariah concerning the birth of John the Baptist (Lk 1.14) and later to the Virgin Mary concerning the birth of Jesus as the Messiah (Lk 1.28ff.). The angel of the Lord proclaimed to the shepherds the great joy which would come to all people because of the birth of Jesus Christ (Lk 2.10). During Christ's public ministry "the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him" (Lk 13.17). Both Luke and Matthew describe the enthusiasm of the people during Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem before his passion, but it is only Luke which specifically refers to their "rejoicing" (Lk 19.37). Matthew mentions the "fear and great joy" (Mt 28.8) of the women at the empty tomb after they had received the message of Christ's resurrection from the angel, and Luke describes the joy and wonder of the disciples during Christ's first resurrection appearance to them (Lk 24.41) and after His ascension to heaven (Lk 24.52).

In the Gospel of John, Saint John the Baptist compares his joy to that of the friend of the bridegroom (Jh 3.29). Conzelmann interprets the "fullness" of the Baptist's joy to mean that "the ancient time has run its course and the time of joy is present with Jesus. . . . Fulfilled . . . does not mean that joy has reached a climax but that its object has appeared. Throughout John's Gospel fulfillment and joy are related to the person of Jesus."¹³ In his farewell discourse Jesus exhorts his disciples to rejoice at his departure since he will be with the Father (Jn 14.28). By receiving Christ's joy within themselves, the disciples may find joy which is full and definitive, and it is through receiving Jesus' words that they may attain to this joy (Jn 15.11 and 17.13). Jesus also promises that we will receive whatever we ask in his name, that our "joy may be full" (Jn 16.24).

Conzelmann notes that in the writings of Saint Paul, *χαρά* is never used in a secular sense.¹⁴ Saint Paul sees *χαρά* primarily as a gift of God to the believer. True faith in God necessarily involves joy

¹³Conzelmann, p. 370.

¹⁴Ibid. p. 369.

(Phil 1.25), and this joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5.22). Saint Paul also affirms the eschatological dimension of joy when he states that the kingdom of God means “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14.17). For Saint Paul our salvation has been inaugurated by the incarnation, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; nonetheless, our salvation will not be complete until Christ’s second coming and final judgment. Consequently, the Christian experiences joy in his relationship with God in the present world, but his joy will not be complete until the full establishment of God’s kingdom.

It is particularly in his Epistle to the Philippians that Saint Paul speaks of the joy of the Christian. The fact that Saint Paul was in prison and in danger of death at the time he wrote this epistle is all the more evidence of the genuineness and profundity of the joy which he describes as integral to the life of the Christian. Saint Paul repeatedly states that true joy is in the Lord (Phil 3.1, 4.10) and exhorts Christians to “rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil 4.4). In Philippians 2.17-18 Saint Paul describes the mutuality and reciprocity of Christian joy — it must be shared and communicated with others (see also Rom 12.15). Indeed, as Dacquino points out, throughout the New Testament we have evidence of the joyous nature of the fellowship enjoyed in various Christian communities: Acts 15.3, Philippians 2.28, 2 John 4, and 3 John 3.¹⁵

The New Testament conception of joy differs from that of the Old Testament not only in its rooting in the person of Jesus Christ but also in its expression even in the midst of sufferings and afflictions. In Matthew 5.12 Christ exhorts his followers to rejoice in the very persecutions they endure. The Epistle of James teaches that we should count our trials (*πειρασμοι*) as joy since they produce steadfastness of character (Jas 1.2). The first Epistle of Peter states that we should rejoice in our sufferings as sharing in the sufferings of Christ (1 Pet 4.12-14). Moreover, despite our present sufferings, we look forward to our joy in the eschaton when Christ’s glory will be revealed. The Epistle to the Hebrews also posits joy in the hope of future deliverance against the persecutions and trials of the present life (Heb 10.32-39). Thus, as Hans Urs von Balthasar states:

true faith produce[s] in suffering the patience which leads as such

¹⁵Dacquino, p. 26.

to the eschaton. . . The little bit of sadness and, if need be, 'trials of many sorts' can serve two ends: testing (whether one's faith is genuine) and purification (to make it more genuine); one can already rejoice over this in advance with an 'ineffable and sublime joy' (1 Pet 1.6-8).¹⁶

Before moving on to the Patristic writers' reflections on joy, a brief consideration of the concept of *μακαριότης* or blessedness in the Old and New Testaments would be useful. In ancient Greek usage the term *μακάριος* referred to "the transcendent happiness of a life beyond care, labor, and death,"¹⁷ as Friedrich Hauch states, and was used to describe only the gods and the blessed dead. In the Old Testament the characteristic form of the beatitude, "*Μακάριος, ὃς (τις)*" (Blessed is the one who) is used to translate a number of Hebrew expressions. The Hebrew concept of blessedness according to Hauch has to do with fullness of life, both in earthly blessings (one's wife, children, beauty, etc.) and especially in wisdom and piety as God's gifts.¹⁸ In the New Testament beatitudes are found primarily in Matthew, Luke, and the book of Revelation. Hauch states that

the special feature of the group in the NT is that it refers overwhelmingly to the distinctive religious joy which accrues to man from his share in the salvation of the kingdom of God. . . . As distinct from those of the OT, they [the New Testament beatitudes] are not part of practical wisdom but come in the context of eschatological proclamation. ¹⁹

The reversal of the normal standards of this world in the beatitudes of the New Testament (blessed are the poor in spirit, the mournful, the meek, the persecuted, etc.) is possible because those who suffer in this life for Christ's sake will rejoice in the fullness of God's glory in the kingdom.

In turning to the Church Fathers' observations on joy, it is clear

¹⁶Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Joy and the Cross," in *The Gift of Joy*, pp. 83-96, Concilium series no. 39, ed. Christian Duquoc (New York, 1968), p. 92.

¹⁷Friedrich Hauch, "*μακάριος, μακαρίζω, μακαρισμός*," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, 1964), Vol. 4, p. 362.

¹⁸Hauch, p. 365.

¹⁹*Ibid.* p. 367.

that they set forth genuine faith, trust, and reliance on God as the essential prerequisites for attaining to Christian joy. In his discourse on consultation Dorotheos of Gaza describes his profound joy after a vision which taught him never to rely on himself but to place his complete trust in God in all matters.²⁰ A much more recent writer of the Church, Saint John of Kronstadt, expresses the link between faith and joy as follows: "Faith gives rest and joy; unbelief troubles and wounds."²¹

In placing our trust and hope in God, we realize our own sinfulness and falling short of God's will for us; hence, the need for Christian repentance and humility. Saint Symeon the New Theologian identifies the very act of repentance as a source of joy since God's merciful forgiveness "will change the bitterness of his heart into the sweetness of wine, and will cause him to spew forth the poison of the dragon (cf. Ps 14.3) that was burning up his innards."²² Saint Symeon also affirms the joy inherent in the renunciation of this world in favor of devoting oneself completely to God and cites Saint Anthony as an example.²³

A number of Fathers speak of the joy which characterizes sincere and fervent prayer to the Lord, and one writer, Evagrius, identifies joy as the *sine qua non* of its genuineness: "If when praying no other joy can attract you, then truly you have found prayer."²⁴ The basic reason for the joy found in prayer is given by Saint John of Kronstadt as follows: "a lively sense of God's presence is a source of peace and joy to the soul."²⁵ Saint John of the Ladder compares two modes of joy with respect to the two modes of prayer: "One kind of joy occurs

²⁰Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*, trans. Eric P. Wheeler, Cistercian Studies Series no. 33, ed. E. Rozanne Elder et al. (Kalamazoo, 1977), p. 128.

²¹Saint John of Kronstadt, *The Spiritual Counsels of Saint John of Kronstadt: Select Passages from "My Life in Christ,"* ed. W. Jardine Grisbrooke (Cambridge, 1967; reprinted Crestwood, 1981), p. 4.

²²Saint Symeon the New Theologian, *The Discourses*, trans. C.J. deCatanzaro, Classics of Western Spirituality series, gen. ed. Richard J. Payne (New York, 1980), p. 256.

²³Ibid. pp. 120-21.

²⁴Evagrius the Solitary, "On Prayer," in the *Philokalia — The Complete Text compiled by Saint Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and Saint Makarios of Colrinth*, trans. and ed. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware, et al. (London, 1979), p. 71.

²⁵Saint John of Kronstadt, p. 22.

at the time of prayer for those living in community, and another comes to those who pray in stillness. The one is perhaps somewhat elated, but the other is wholly filled with humanity."²⁶ If one truly loves God with all his heart, soul, and mind as Christ taught, then nothing can bring him greater joy than communicating in prayer with God who is the source of all love. Moreover, since we also communicate with the living God and participate with his grace in the Sacraments, Saint John of Kronstadt declares that they too produce "deep peace, with a wonderful sense of joy and freedom in the life of the believer."²⁷

In addition to the joy which we receive through prayer and the sacraments, the Fathers also refer to the joy which accompanies the active working of the good and struggling against evil. In fact, Dorotheos of Gaza sees the joy resulting from good works as an incentive to further goodness: "What, more than anything else, makes a soul do good if not the joy that good itself brings it? Who knows that joy except the man who has experienced it?"²⁸ In fighting evil and practicing the good, one puts himself in harmony with God's will, and this very obedience to God is a source of the deepest joy.

The theme of joy in sufferings and trials as found in the New Testament is also carried on by the Fathers. Saint John Chrysostom in his commentary on 2 Corinthians 1.5 praises the endurance and fortitude of Abraham in his difficulties and then goes on to extol

the blessed Paul, [who] through seeing trials in very snow-showers assailing him daily, rejoiced and exulted as though in the mid-delights of Paradise. As then he who is gladdened with this joy cannot be a prey to despair; so he who maketh not this [joy] his own is easily overcome of all; . . . And truly stouter than any armor is joy in God; and whoso hath it, nothing can ever make his head droop or his countenance sad, but he beareth all things nobly.²⁹

Saint Symeon points to the ultimate joy awaiting the Christian despite

²⁶Saint John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, rev. ed. (Boston, 1978), p. 215.

²⁷Saint John of Kronstadt, p. 100.

²⁸Dorotheos of Gaza, p. 113.

²⁹Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians*, trans. Talbot W. Chambers, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, Vol. 7 (Grand Rapids, 1956), p. 275.

his present sufferings: "Tell me, what is more beautiful than a soul undergoing tribulation, which knows that by enduring it will inherit joy in all things?"³⁰

In terms of the spiritual life, Saint Diadochos of Photiki describes the "ineffable joy" which God's grace produces in the life of "those who are advancing in spiritual knowledge,"³¹ and he describes three stages of joy: an initiatory stage in which joy is not exempt from fantasy, a middle level consisting of godly sorrow and active tears, and a final stage of the joy of perfection.³² Saint John of Kronstadt contrasts the pleasures of this world, which he considers illusory and ephemeral, to the eternal joy to come and states that even godly bliss on this earth is but "a pale shadow of that future bliss which is unspeakable and eternal."³³

It is especially Saint Symeon the New Theologian who discusses the ineffable joy of the mystical experience of God by the believer. In describing his experiences of God's uncreated light, Saint Symeon states, "The unexpected marvel struck me with amazement; it filled my whole soul and my heart with joy, so much so that it seemed to me as though my body partook of that unspeakable grace."³⁴ He also affirms the unspeakable joy of a person's mystical union with God³⁵ and even conversation with him: "I thought that this glory and this joy were beyond understanding; then Thou again, the Master, didst speak as a friend conversing with his friend, . . ."³⁶ Nonetheless, in this conversation with God Saint Symeon learns that the joy of the mystical experience of God in this life cannot even compare with the bliss of the life to come.³⁷

Although most of the references to joy in the writings of the Fathers which I have come across are scattered here and there, Saint Nicholas

³⁰Saint Symeon, p. 48.

³¹Saint Diadochos of Photiki, "On Spiritual Knowledge and Discrimination," in the *Philokalia — The Complete Text compiled by Saint Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and Saint Makarios of Corinth*, trans. and ed. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware, et al. (London, 1979), p. 281.

³²Saint Diadochos of Photiki, p. 271.

³³Saint John of Kronstadt, pp. 229-30.

³⁴Saint Symeon, p. 364.

³⁵Ibid. p. 360.

³⁶Ibid. p. 375.

³⁷Ibid.

Kabasilas devotes most of the second half of the seventh book of his *Life in Christ* to the theme of Christian's joy. Kabasilas points out the close relationship between joy and love and his entire discussion proceeds from the following thesis: "Indeed, we have joy in ourselves to the extent that we love."³⁸ Kabasilas states that the source of joy is our love for God, and since our joy is in proportion to the greatness of its source, so the potential for our joy is infinite since God is infinite.³⁹

Kabasilas attests that when we direct our whole will to God in an attitude of loving self-surrender, we find joy.⁴⁰ He further states that Christians "have joy, not because he shares his benefits with them, but because he is in the benefits, since they have him with them and enjoy his benevolence."⁴¹ As Christians we are to rejoice because Christ himself rejoices,⁴² and we are to rejoice in the good of our fellow human beings as well⁴³ since the bond of love which unites us to God unites us also to all of God's children.

According to Kabasilas true blessedness is to abide in love, which is to abide in God, which is to possess him.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the blessed life consists of love and joy⁴⁵ and is marked by "the perfection of the will in the present life."⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Saint Kabasilas along with Saint Symeon the New Theologian and Saint John of Kronstadt maintains that our Christian joy will not be continuous or perfect until the life to come.⁴⁷

For the biblical writers, especially Saint Paul, and the Fathers of the Church, joy is an integral feature and distinguishing characteristic of the Christian life. In the Old Testament joy is understood primarily as a free human response to God's presence and His saving acts. In the New Testament this concept of joy is both

³⁸Nicholas Kabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, trans. Carmino J. deCatanaro (Crestwood, 1974), p. 210.

³⁹*Ibid.* pp. 212 and 213.

⁴⁰*Ibid.* p. 217.

⁴¹*Ibid.* p. 218.

⁴²*Ibid.* p. 219.

⁴³*Ibid.* p. 210.

⁴⁴*Ibid.* p. 225.

⁴⁵*Ibid.* p. 226.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

deepened in its meaning and made more specific in its focus by finding its basis in the person of Jesus Christ. The New Testament writers see joy as a gift of God to the believer through Christ which shines forth even in the midst of sufferings and afflictions. The Church Fathers further describe the nature of this joy by stressing its relation to faith in God, repentance and humility, the sacramental life, and prayer. The Fathers also analyze the relationship of joy to obedience to God, the active struggle for good and against evil, the mystic experience of God, and especially to the depth of our love for God and for our neighbor. As God is love, he is also joy, and it is by deepening our relationship with him that we can participate ever more fully in his joy. Moreover, a deeper relationship with the Lord expresses itself in a fuller and more intimate communion with our fellow human beings. Hence, it is love and joy which mutually reinforce, invigorate, and strengthen one another in our Christian life and goal of salvation.



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