

“THE JOY OF THE SPIRIT”
Isaiah 65:13-25, Luke 10:17-24, I Thessalonians 1:4-10
July 16 & 17, 2022

“The closing scene of Sholem Asch’s great novel, ‘The Apostle,’ takes place in a dungeon in Rome. Hundreds of Christians have been lowered into the dungeon through a little trap door and they know that they will never come out except to die in the arena. Many of them die in the dungeon. The scene as described by Sholem Asch is one of darkness and horror.

“Suddenly the trap door opens and there is a shaft of light for a brief moment and a man is lowered. And as the man is lowered into this place of indescribable darkness and death and despair, he is singing songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. The word spreads like wildfire among the people in the dungeon: ‘It’s Paul! It’s Paul! Paul has come!’” And Paul’s joy is so contagious that before long he has all the people in the dungeon singing songs of praise and thanksgiving. A whole new spirit has taken hold of them.

“In this, Sholem Asch has given us an accurate description of the New Testament spirit. **Even in the darkest dungeons of life, God gives His people joy and, through His people, He gives joy to the world.**”¹

This is the joy that we are to have in the midst of our lives. We are not to be ashamed of having Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord, but rather to let that hope within us fill us with such joy that we make a difference in the lives of those around us. Can we bring the light of Jesus Christ in to the darkness of our world, surrounded by danger and oppression and hardship? Can we, through the work of the Holy Spirit within us, provide the people all around us with such joy that it is also infectious and causes them to join us in our singing praises and thanksgivings to the Lord our God? That is our calling as followers of Jesus Christ!

But as we’ve seen in our Scripture lesson of Isaiah 65 today, not all people will have the capacity for this kind of joy in their lives. Joy will come only to those who come to know and remain faithful to

¹ (James F. Colaianni, *Sunday Sermons Treasury of Illustrations*, [Pleasantville, NJ: Voicings Publications 1982] pg. 280)

the Lord God, who hear His call and follow Him as their Shepherd. Those who receive Him into their lives and lift Him up as the Lord and diligently seek after Him, will receive His great joy in their lives, no matter what situation they may find themselves in.

They may be poor, but the Lord God will provide for them and bless them abundantly with their daily needs. They may be surrounded by the enemy, but the Lord God will protect them with the power of His powerful right hand. They may be few in number, but the Lord God will not allow them to be overrun by the enemy when they call out to Him for help and assistance. They may be imprisoned, but they will be free on the inside because of the Salvation of the Lord. They may be sick or their bodies broken, but that will not lead to death, because the healing grace of the Lord God will bind up their broken bones, heal their sick bodies and remove all of their infirmities in just the power of His Word!

Those that remain faithful to the Lord are precious to Him and He delights in walking with them, and encouraging them, and leading them through the gates of Heaven, into His glorious kingdom. There is nothing in this world that will be able to crush them or stop them from singing praises and giving thanksgiving to God. The joy of the Holy Spirit gives them hope, despite their situation.

But not all people will be blessed like this. No, those who do not seek Him, those who do not call on His name, those who do not respond to His outstretched hand will not find His blessings in their lives. **You see, God delights in those who hear His call, respond to His invitation to come near to Him, those who remember His commands.** They are the ones who will find His Holy Spirit within them, who will be given such joy in their hearts that it will exude from them to influence those around them. It is a joy to be around these folks, some who are even members of this very congregation.

Isaiah 65 tells us “*My servants will eat...they will drink... and will rejoice*” (65:13). God says, “*My servants will sing out of the joy of their hearts*” (14), because they will inherit “*new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind*” (17). God will bless us with such abundance that there will be no reason for us to be sad, or to cry. We will delight in being the children of God because He will delight in us as His people.

No oppressor can take that away! No president or king or ruler will be able to abolish it from our hearts. No government will be able to outlaw the joy that we receive from the Holy Spirit because they will never be able to restrain it from those who are in Christ Jesus. There will be such peace and hope and life in us from the result of this joy that people will wonder what kind of drug we're on. They'll look at us and say to themselves, "What's up with them? Don't they see all the struggles and trials around us? When will they grow up and take their heads out of the sand and realize the horrible condition we're in?" They will simply not understand us because they cannot understand the Lord and they will not accept Him as their God. So they are left with only the stuff of the world while we have the joy of the Holy Spirit guarding and guiding our hearts to praise the Lord our God.

But hopefully the joy within us will be more contagious than Covid19. Hopefully the ones around us will be so influenced by the Spirit of joy within us, that they also will find their hearts lightened, their minds put at peace, their bodies finding rest and their souls given hope, for all that the Lord has provided for us. If that's what it will be like on God's holy mountain, according to Isaiah 65, think of what it might do in the valley or plain that you live in today?

The joy of the Holy Spirit provides us with such encouragement and joy that when we live diligently for Jesus, even the darkness around us will be forced to recede and depart. When we have the light of Jesus Christ within us, the darkness of the world simply cannot comprehend it nor can it coexist with it. Like the darkness in the room must leave when you turn on the lights, so the darkness of the world must leave when the light of Christ Jesus shines on it. And we are to be the light of Jesus in our world today, driving out darkness and despair and bringing in joy instead.

We heard that in our Gospel lesson of Luke 10 when the disciples returned from their mini-evangelistic crusade that Jesus had sent them on. With the power of the Holy Spirit at work in their lives, these men were unstoppable. They healed the sick in the Name of Jesus; they cast out demons in the Name of Jesus; and they did great work to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel in the Name of Jesus Christ. There was such joy among them because they were able to do so much work, empowered

by the Holy Spirit. What more can we do when we go out in the Name of Jesus Christ to do His work and impact the lives of those living around us? The disciples let their light so shine before the world that others saw their good deeds and glorified their Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16). It made a great difference in the lives of so many! How many can we touch with the joy of the Lord?

There is such need for the followers of Jesus to use their gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit to boldly proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ today. And as we do that, great joy will come to us as we see the power of God being used for the benefit of those who will believe in Jesus as their Savior. **The light of Jesus will blaze brightly in our world today when we work according to the power of the Holy Spirit.** Great numbers of people will see it and come to trust Jesus as their Savior, and revival will happen.

In the newsletter from the Langteau family, they report how the excitement and joy of the Holy Spirit is growing in Thailand. James and Sarah had reached out to Chinese ex-patriots living in Chang Mai. They shared the Scriptures with them and invited them to become believers in Jesus. And as they responded in faith to the Good News they were hearing, these men and women took over sharing the Gospel with other Chinese people in Thailand when the Langteau family had to come back to the U.S. during the pandemic. There is such joy and encouragement taking place in that community that many more are hearing about Jesus and are receiving Him as their Savior. The Light of Jesus is changing the hearts and minds of many through the joy of the Holy Spirit.

Oh, but the world will try desperately to put out that light because it cannot tolerate it. The light of Jesus exposes all that is happening so that the truth can be made known. The good and the bad will be exposed, but we are called to focus on the good and to disregard the bad. **The bad of this world sucks all the joy right out of us, but the good from God's Holy Spirit contributes to the joy in this world.** There is so much good to focus on that we need not be bothered by the bad things of this world. Why let our hearts be troubled? Why let them be afraid? When we have the presence of Jesus with us each day, what is there to fear? When we have the power of Jesus to cast out demons and “*to overcome*

all the power of the enemy, nothing will harm [us]. However, [Jesus warns us,] do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:19-20). The power of the Holy Spirit is not for us to abuse, but to use to make known the love of God through Jesus Christ the Lord. So we are to let the joy of the Holy Spirit fill us so that it overflows wherever we go and to whomever we talk with.

That’s just what happened in Thessalonica when Paul brought the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the people. **The Holy Spirit turned them upside-down, and transformed their whole lives, and they became an example to so many people because of their joy.** Listen to how Paul reminds them of what happened. This is I Thessalonians 1:4-10. (READ I Thessalonians 1:4-10)

Let me give you a quick background to Paul’s arrival to Thessalonica. Paul and his band of travelers had preached their way through Phrygia, on the western side of Galatia, and had made their way into Mysia to the city of Troas. The Holy Spirit had prevented them from going into Bithynia and Pontus, but in a dream, led the team to Neapolis and then to Philippi on the northern end of the Aegean Sea. While at Philippi for two months, they established a community of believers, and made the Jews so jealous that Paul and Silas were horribly beaten by the authorities and then thrown into jail. But God miraculously delivered them through an earthquake, whereby they were released and told to leave.

So leaving Luke and Timothy in Philippi, Paul and Silas continued their trek westward and arrived in Thessalonica. Previous to Paul’s arrival with the Gospel of Jesus, the people of Thessalonica were embedded in idol worship, steeped in false worship to dead, lifeless gods. Even though there was a fairly large Jewish presence in the city, the Gentiles were focused on pagan gods. So when Paul and Silas arrived there from Philippi, it was clear to them that the Jewish religion had not made much impact on the community. So they established the church, sharing the great Good News of Jesus Christ, first at the Synagogue, and then to the Gentiles. **And there was such joy in their witness for Jesus that it became contagious to the people.** They saw the value of having Christ Jesus as Savior and Lord of their lives and they turned away from their dead idols, and turned to Jesus.

You see, the Gospel of Jesus came to the people of Thessalonica powerfully through the words of Paul and Silas, but it also came in the power of the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction (1:5). The people saw that the faith that Paul and Silas had was not manipulative or counterfeit, but the real deal. And as they lived among the people, the people were able to see the real joy that came from having faith in Jesus Christ.

And the people were so impressed with that example of faithful living in Paul and Silas that they “*became imitators of [them] and of the Lord, for [they] welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit*” (I Thess. 1:6). **They fell in love with Jesus, claimed Him as their Savior and received Him as their Messiah.** And this so angered the Jews that a great persecution began toward the Christian church, much like what had happened in Philippi. But the people were so filled with joy in Jesus Christ that it overflowed to the others around them. They began to do what Paul and Silas were doing, telling others about Jesus as they worked, as they traveled, as they bought food at the market, wherever they went they told about the joy of having Jesus as their Savior.

But in spite of the persecution that was coming to them by the Jews, the Thessalonian Christians displayed a “*joy given by the Holy Spirit.*” “The same One who gave Paul and his companions power for proclaiming the Gospel, dwelt within those who received the Gospel and transformed them with joy. The greatest attainment for these new Christians was becoming for others what Paul and his companions had been for them.”² Even after Paul and Silas had been chased out of town, off to Berea, and then to Athens, the Thessalonian Christians continued the work that Paul had started and grew the church.

So they began to model what life with Jesus looked like to all the people of Macedonia and Achaia (1:7). They lived their lives with such joy, despite the hardship, that others couldn’t help but notice the huge difference. And they began to replicate the ministry that Paul and Silas and Luke and Timothy were doing throughout the whole region of the Aegean Sea.

So when Timothy reported back to Paul what was going on within the church, he tells them,

² (*The Expositors Bible Commentary*, Frank Gaebelein, [Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1978] Vol. 11, pg. 246)

“your faith in God has become known everywhere” (1:8). **They no longer put their trust in the things of this world, but put their sights on the things of God and came to realize that this was not their home.** They were children of God, and God had prepared a place for them outside of this world so that they could be with Jesus whom God had raised from the dead and had sent to rescue them from the coming wrath (1:10).

That’s what gave them joy in life. It wasn’t what the world could offer to them that made them joyful. Rather, **it was the promise of eternal life with God through Jesus Christ that gave them great joy.** It was knowing that despite all the struggle and hardship and persecution and devastation that they faced here on this world, this is not all that there is.

You see, the joy of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord transcends our lives through all this stuff to a higher level than we can ever imagine. And that’s the difference that the joy of the Holy Spirit makes, as we boldly live our faith so that others can see Jesus through us. **When we set our minds on the things that are above and not on the things of this world, there is such a release of joy that comes to us that it wipes out any fear and worry and hopelessness and anxiety.** It bubbles up within us so that we can’t help but share it. It’s like shaking up a can of soda and then opening up the top of it. It spreads all around because it cannot be contained.

“A gifted public speaker was asked to recall his most difficult speech assignment. ‘That’s easy,’ he answered. ‘It was an address I gave to the National Conference of Undertakers. The topic they gave me was, ‘How to Look Sad at a Ten Thousand Dollar Funeral.’”

“Now, that’s a difficult assignment. But I can think of an assignment that would have been even more difficult: ‘How to Teach the Early Christians to be Sad.’” The early Christians’ absolutely irrepressible joy was one of the dominant characteristics of the New Testament writings. Something so tremendous had happened to those people that it permeated their lives and their beings. And if you tried to put a lid on it, it just came bubbling up again. There was no way to hold it back. It’s contagious. It’s healing. It’s beautiful. They were filled with joy because this Jesus who had lived among them, who

had brought them hope and life, whom they had seen die, seen put in a tomb - this Jesus was alive! And it wasn't an hallucination. It wasn't something they had dreamed up. They reported it as fact, incontrovertible fact. He was alive! They had experienced it!"³

Paul had experienced the risen Jesus for himself, and he shared that same joy of the other disciples having seen the risen Christ. And when he told others about Jesus, his joy overflowed to them so that they could experience Jesus within them, too. And that's what grew the early church, the joy of the Holy Spirit flowing freely to the people as they received Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord.

The joy of having Jesus within our hearts changes our perspective on everything here in this life. The days aren't so dark, the desperate situations are not so hopeless, the pressures of life are not depressing, and the calamities we face are not so frantic. The joy of the Holy Spirit within us gives us the hope of real life through Jesus Christ, no matter what we have going on around us.

So we are encouraged to follow the Thessalonian Christian's example, to let "*the Lord's message ring out from you*" (I Thess. 1:8), into the neighborhoods we live in, into the city that we call home, into the lives of those all throughout Sheboygan County, and then influencing the state of Wisconsin, and even the upper Midwest, and maybe the even whole country of the United States and then into the world. Let your faith in God become known everywhere, and share the joy that the Holy Spirit has given you with all those you encounter, in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray...

Father God, thank You for the great gift of Salvation given to us through Jesus Christ! Thank You for the joy of the Holy Spirit that comes as we put our trust and hope in Jesus. Father, let that joy become so powerful within us that we simply cannot contain it within us, but it becomes evident to all people so that they might receive that joy from us as they receive Jesus Christ as Savior in their own lives. Oh God, our world is in such need of Your joy. Give us the courage to live for You each day of our lives, so filled by joy that it turns our world up-side-down for Jesus again. Keep us focused on all that You have done for us so that we might rejoice every day in Your Salvation. Remind us how much You love us and give us many opportunities to share that love with others through the joy of the Holy Spirit. This we pray in Jesus Christ our risen Savior and Lord. AMEN.

³ (James F. Colaianni, *Sunday Sermons Treasury of Illustrations*, pg. 281-282)