



Connecting With God For a Strong Finish

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CHAPTER 6

Rejoice in the Lord for Strength

Connecting with God activates strong feelings. He enriches our heart with love and sustains our faith with joy.

*Though you have not seen him, **you love him**; and even though you do not see him now, **you believe in him** and are **filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy**, for you are receiving **the goal of your faith**, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:8-9 NIV)*

When the magi arrived in Bethlehem, they “*rejoiced exceedingly with great joy*”.¹ Before setting eyes on Jesus, joy erupted with elevated intensity. Pagan priests rejoiced at the sight of a prophetic sign, a bright star that pointed to Jesus. Luke used four separate words to describe this exceptionally passionate response: *chairō*, *sphodra*, *meγas*, and *chara*.

The word “*rejoiced*” comes from the Greek verb *chairō*; it means to be exceedingly glad. The next word translated “*exceedingly*” comes from *sphodra*, an adverb that means all-out, wide-open, to the max, greatly, or with total effort. *Meγas* means “*great*” and refers to a grand scale. *Chara* means “*joy*” or gladness. The NAS Bible also translates *chara* as “*greatly*”. In God’s presence (sight unseen), exuberant joy converges with strength for dynamic synergy. Joy and strength amplify one another for enhanced benefit.

*Splendor and majesty are before him; **strength and joy** in his dwelling place. (1 Chronicles 16:27 NIV)*

*Sing for **joy** to God our **strength**; Shout **joyfully** to the God of Jacob. (Psalm 81:1 NAS)*

¹ Matthew 2:10 NAS

*... I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. **GOD, the Lord, is my strength** ... (Habakkuk 3:17-19 NAS)*

As we linger in His presence, Jesus fills our soul with great joy and lasting pleasure.

*You will make known to me the path of life; In Your presence is **fullness of joy**; In Your right hand there are **pleasures forever**. (Psalms 16:11 NAS)*

Joy in the Holy Spirit

Rejoicing in the Lord goes beyond elated attitudes and heightened emotions. It transcends conditional humor and jovial temperament. Rooted between love and peace, joy emerges as a premier fruit of the Holy Spirit. It ripens with divine power, despite grief or pain.

*You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of **severe suffering**, you welcomed the message with the **joy given by the Holy Spirit**. (1 Thessalonians 1:6 NIV)*

*But **the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control**. Against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23 NIV)*

Joy and suffering occur together in a counter-intuitive arrangement. Despite adversity caused by oppression, affliction, tribulation, and distress, the joy of the Lord generates comfort and courage. Situational suffering is no match for everlasting joy in the Holy Spirit. When misery and sorrow confound our mood, rejoicing in the Lord activates hope, confidence, and well-being.

*Those who **sow in tears** shall reap **with joyful shouting**. (Psalm 126:5 NAS)*

Suffering may be hard and painful but that doesn't make it bad or detrimental. Without apology, God permits suffering. During each agonizing situation, He offers abiding benefits. James explains why we should "*Consider it all joy ... when you encounter various trials*".² Trials test our faith; they produce endurance so we might become "*mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way*".³ Paul, a consummate sufferer for his faith, endured stoning, beating, imprisonment, and shipwreck. He echoed this optimistic sentiment by writing,

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28 NIV)

² James 1:2 NAS

³ James 1:4 MSG

Though suffering is not God’s fault, He allows it for our good—to strengthen us for a stronger finish.

*But **rejoice** that you participate in the **sufferings** of Christ, so that you may be **overjoyed** when his glory is revealed.* (1 Peter 4:13 NIV)

*that I may know him and the **power** of his resurrection, and may share his **sufferings**, becoming like him in his death* (Philippians 3:10 NIV)

Connecting with the Holy Spirit empowers us to live righteously, endure peacefully, and overcome joyfully.

*For **the kingdom of God** is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of **righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*** (Romans 14:17 NIV)

*May **the God of hope** fill you with **all joy and peace** as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope **by the power of the Holy Spirit.*** (Romans 15:13 NIV)

The Holy Spirit filled Jesus—the Son of Man with joy.

*At that time **Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit,** said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.* (Luke 10:21 NIV)

While suffering on a cross, Jesus gained strength from the prospect of joy, which He anticipated. Excruciating torture and agonizing emotions did not weaken His outlook for joy in the future.

*Let us fix our eyes on **Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*** (Hebrews 12:2 NIV)

As we suffer, joy contributes indispensable strength, hope, and comfort. By definition, “comfort means to ease the grief or sorrow of another by making that person more cheerful, more hopeful, or stronger”.⁴

A Historic Foundation for Laughter

Sarah suffered from chronic infertility. She endured decades of disgrace under a humiliating cultural stigma. Finally, at 90 years of age, she received a prophetic

⁴ The Advanced Dictionary, EL Thorndike and CL Barnhart, (Glenview, IL Scott, Foresman, and Co., 1988).

promise and then conceived and bore a seemingly impossible child. Sarah and her aged husband Abraham rejoiced by naming him Isaac, which means laughter.

Two thousand years later, Isaac's distant relative Mary gave birth to God's ultimate promise—a miracle child named Jesus, which means Savior. At Jesus' birth, angels proclaimed "*good tidings of great joy*".⁵ With invincible love, Jesus restored indescribable joy to those He came to save. Before demonstrating His passion for us on a cross, Jesus said:

*If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, **that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*** (John 15:10-11 ESV)

In "Laugh Again", Chuck Swindoll encourages us to rejoice in the Lord with deliberate enthusiasm:

- By enjoying the release of our God-given humor
- By finding the bright and sunny side of life
- By deliberately looking for things that are funny during the day
- By loosening up, laughing freely and more often
- By living lives of relaxed laughter, while enjoying delightful fun
- By choosing joy despite our weaknesses

In response to God's reassuring promise, i.e., "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*", Paul wrote:

*Therefore I will boast **all the more gladly** about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, **I delight** in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.* (I Corinthians 12:9-10 NIV)

Swindoll asserts the following caution: "To remain super-serious all the time and fill one's mind with only the harsh and painful realities of life keeps the radius of our perspective too tight and the tunnel of our hope too long".⁶

According to Swindoll, "Joy Stealers" are notorious thieves because they attempt to steal, kill, and destroy our joy, and by extension our strength. Joy thieves are strength thieves. They steal joy and erode strength. Joy stealers include:

- Worry and fear regarding the future

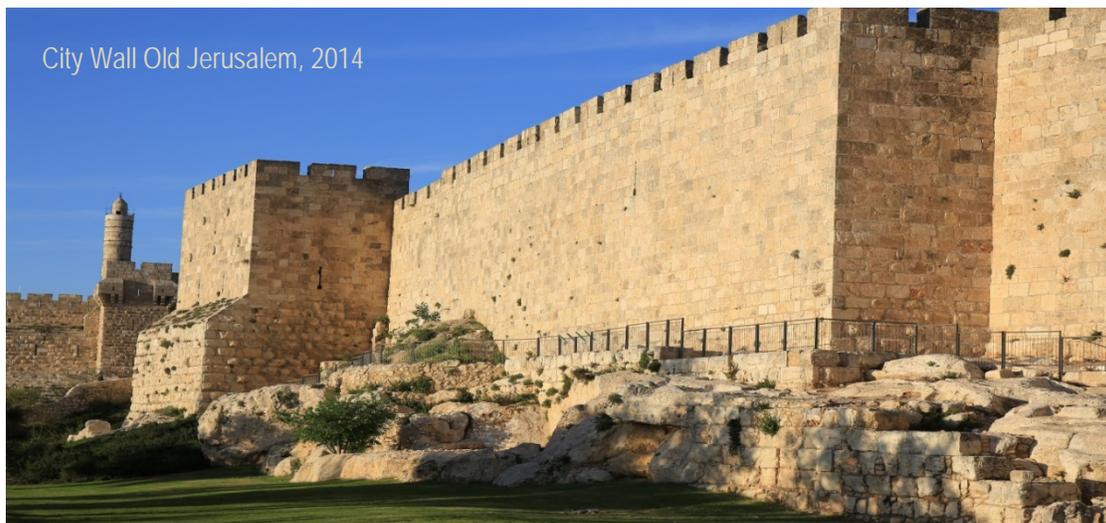
⁵ Luke 2:10

⁶ CR Swindoll, *Laugh Again*, (Dallas, TX, Word Publishing, 1992), p. 103.

- Anxiety, tension, and stress
- Contention, strife, and disputes
- Complaining, whining, and grumbling
- Preoccupation with the opinions of others
- Dilemmas caused by circumstance or limitations
- Dwelling on demoralizing memories

The Joy of the Lord is our Strength

The former cupbearer to a Persian King engineered a heroic effort to restore the massive walls surrounding Jerusalem. After laboring just 52 days, Nehemiah's team repaired the walls and despite much adversity, began restoring the broken attitudes that plagued them. Nehemiah exhorted Israel to rely on the Joy of the Lord for strength.



After publicly reading and then explaining God's Law, Nehemiah declared *"the joy of the Lord"* as the source of their strength. Bible scholars translate the Hebrew word *maowz* as strength. It means a place or means of protection, safety, or security. Used figuratively, *maowz* denotes God as a stronghold, harbor, or refuge.⁷ While celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles after generations of neglect, Nehemiah directed Israel to enjoy a sacred moment with shared food and drink. He said:

*"Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for **the joy of the LORD is your strength** [maowz]."* (Nehemiah 8:10 NIV)

⁷ Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament, Brown, Driver, Briggs and Gesenius, (Hendrickson Publishers, 1979).

Stone walls may offer an illusion of security. Posing as an indomitable fortress, they do not protect against selfishness, pride, greed, lust, envy, anger, fear, hatred, discord, strife, unforgiveness, worry, guilt, shame, rejection, anxiety, and deception. Rejoicing in our amiable connection with Jesus, He offers durable protection against these intangible foes. His joy prevails when circumstances fail.

The prophet Habakkuk envisioned a season of extreme hardship where crops, herds, and flocks all failed. Instead of relying on food and drink, he rejoiced in the Lord who became his strength. No other attitude or activity generates strength like that derived from the Lord. The Hebrew word *chayil* refers to might, ability, efficiency, wealth, and/or military force. In the context of a devastating famine, Habakkuk used this word to punctuate the lyrics of a prophetic song.



Fortress of Masada, 2014

*Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet **I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength** [Chayil]; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places. To the choir-master: with stringed instruments. (Habakkuk 3:17-19 NAS)*

God is for us—Who can be against us? (Romans 8:31 NIV)

God thrives as an impenetrable fortress and an infallible stronghold. We are betrothed to Christ—an Almighty bridegroom with infallible competence; He guarantees our eternal destiny with supreme authority.

*But as for me, **I shall sing of Your strength; Yes, I shall joyfully sing of Your lovingkindness** in the morning, For You have been **my stronghold And a refuge** in the day of my distress. (Psalm 59:16 NAS)*

*And **do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him** [God] who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matthew 10:28 NKJ)*

In a world fraught with demonic evil, the joy of the Lord supplies comfort and peace—an ever-present help in times of trouble. When dangerous conditions become too frightening, painful, or intimidating, the joy of the Lord fortifies our soul.

*Finally, my brothers, **rejoice in the Lord!** It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and **it is a safeguard for you.** (Philippians 3:1 NIV)*

Rejoice for the Right Reason

Jesus specified an appropriate focal point for joy. He said,

***do not rejoice** that the spirits submit to you, **but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.** (Luke 10:20 NIV)*

When properly focused, joy strengthens our resolve to concentrate on concerns beyond this life. When discouraging thoughts attempt to dominate our emotions, commander our attitudes, or crush our spirit, rejoicing in our eternal destiny inspires extreme gladness.

As we comprehend the truth, the joy of the Lord propels us into the future. Joyful living hinges on knowing the truth about Jesus, embracing the truth about our Heavenly Father, and experiencing the truth about the Holy Spirit. Favorable circumstances and agreeable people are welcome and wanted but they are not essential. Rejoicing in the Lord:

- Does not depend on our performance—it is not task-oriented
- Does not depend on our accomplishments—it is not achievement-oriented
- Does not depend on our ability—it is not success-oriented
- Does not depend on our net worth—it is not asset-oriented
- Does not depend on our popularity—it is not approval-oriented

Ultimately, the quality of our joy depends on where we fix our eyes. The Magi fixed their eyes on Jesus the Messiah. When they finally saw Him, they fell facedown and worshiped Him.

*Let us fix our eyes on **Jesus**, the author and perfecter of our faith, who **for the joy set before him endured the cross**, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2 NIV)*

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:18 NIV)

Joy Provides Strong Medicine

***A joyful heart is good medicine**, But a broken spirit dries up the bones. (Proverbs 17:22 NAS)*

In an article posted on helpguide.org, Melinda Smith, MA and Jeanne Segal, PhD advocate laughter “as strong medicine for mind and body”.⁸ They list physical, mental, and social benefits associated with this manifestation of Joy.

Physical Benefits	Mental Benefits	Social Benefits
Boosts immune system	Adds joy and zest to life	Strengthens relationships
Lowers stress hormones	Eases anxiety and fear	Attracts others
Decreases pain	Relieves stress	Enhances teamwork
Relaxes muscles	Improves mood	Helps defuse conflict
Prevents heart disease	Enhances resilience	Promotes group bonding

Laughter serves as a natural painkiller. Whether genuine or pretend, laughing relieves toxic tension and reduces damaging stress. Expressions of joy release feel-good chemicals into the brain, which diminishes our perception of pain. These morphine-like hormones are called endorphins.

According to Smith and Segal, laughter improves mental health because it dispels upsetting emotions and it facilitates relaxation and recharging. They also emphasize that mutual laughter creates a positive relational bond essential for social well-being; joy wants to be shared.

Warning!

Disguised behind alluring menus, sin dishes out gourmet emptiness. It is a cruel joke with a deadly punch line. Don't be deceived, sin may advertise pleasure but it's a counterfeit for joy.

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23 NAS)

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

(Philippians 4:4 ESV)

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⁸ Melinda Smith, MA and Jeanne Segal, PhD, Laughter is the Best Medicine: The Health Benefits of Humor and Laughter, <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/emotional-health/laughter-is-the-best-medicine.htm> (updated 2015 and retrieved 9-3-15)