

Aliens and Strangers-Part Three: “Inexpressible Joy!”

1 Peter 1: 8-12

Dr. Richard J. Alberta

Cornerstone Evangelical Presbyterian Church

Sunday October 16, 2011

1 Peter 1:8-12 (NIV) ⁸ 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, ⁹ for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. ¹⁰ Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, ¹¹ trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

In your worship folder today, where it provides space for sermon notes, you will see this sentence: “The key to happiness is_____.” Please take a moment and consider that statement. Don’t share your response out loud but write it in please...literally...or in your mind. If someone was embroidering a pillow and they had written “The key to happiness is_____” what would you put in that blank space? Let us pray.

I had an interesting experience a few days ago. True story. I parked my car and started walking towards a store when I realized that my keys were not in my pocket. I checked everywhere for them including looking into the car itself and under it. Nowhere to be found! So...I concluded that I had locked the keys inside the car. Now....that car has a service where you can call and get directions and assistance. They can even locate the car if it is stolen and they can open it if it is locked. Some people worry about “Big Brother” knowing where you are with such a service. I don’t. Anyway, I got out my cell phone and began to dial the 800 number to be rescued. But while I was holding the phone...I looked down and there on the pavement were my keys! So, I quickly hung up before they even answered. I was looking all about for the keys and there they were...right in front of me!

I’m sure you can see right where we are going with this. The key to happiness is right in front of us! The key to peace and joy is right there in front of us! The key to inexpressible joy is right there in front of us! But perhaps...first...we need to ask a prior question. [We’re going deep here so fasten your seatbelts please!] Here is the question: As Christians are we supposed to be happy and joyful or are we supposed to be miserable with a look on our faces that says “I can't wait to get out of here?” After all, we’ve got room for confusion. On the one hand, we find the Word of God telling us that we are aliens and strangers here on Planet Earth and living among the ungodly. On the other hand, the Word of God tells us the fruit of Spirit is “Love...JOY...etc” [Galatians 5] and Peter is telling us that are to be filled with inexpressible joy. So, can

we be aliens and strangers who would rather be with Christ...yet be filled with joy while we await that time? Yes! Emphatically yes! But we await that time with Christ...sometimes...in pain.

You'll recall that just last week we quoted C.S. Lewis speaking of suffering by saying "Pain is God's megaphone to a dying world!" So, we are pulled in different directions. Suffering and joy. We see the Psalmist speaking of his pain and heartaches. We hear Paul saying "Suffering produces perseverance" in Romans Five. We hear Jesus say in John Fifteen:

John 15:10-11 (NIV) ¹⁰ "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

Yet, a little later, Jesus said:

John 16:33 (NIV) ³³ "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

We naturally want a trouble-free ride. I saw an ad for a book titled "Trouble-Free Travel with Children!" That's interesting. No one ever took a trip of more than a few miles with a carful of kids that was trouble-free. Someone needs a potty stop just after someone else is hungry. All the while this one is bugging that one and the driver is lost. But let's be honest. We want a trouble-free journey. And as Christians, somewhere deep down inside, we rather believe that really if things were right and God was on the job...we would be joyful because our lives in Christ would be trouble free! Oddly enough, that is exactly untrue! Our lives in Christ are supposed to be joyful in the midst of our troubles! There it is!

Again we struggle. Jesus wants his flock to be filled with joy. But how can we be filled with joy if we are also peppered with life's trials and tribulations? Because we tend to think in black and white terms, we find ourselves asking "Which is it? Am I supposed to be saved and miserable in this life or saved and joyful in this life?" And of course the answer is mysteriously somehow "Yes" on both counts.

Peter says these words: **"...you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy..."** Joy. The word Peter is using here is "chara" meaning "delight!" The same word could be used to describe a worldly person addicted to happiness and good times. You know...we can actually learn something from watching unsaved people having a good time. I have no way of knowing who is actually saved but I've seen some people at ballgames and other places really enjoying themselves with drink and revelry. In fact, a Pastor I know who struggled with alcohol before he was saved once told me something interesting. [Please put on your calm mood here so you don't take offense at this.] He used to say that he remembered much better fellowship and laughter in bars than in most churches! Why? Because worldly joy is a different kind of joy...true! But many Christians experience neither worldly joy nor Godly joy. It's almost as if they feel guilty about pleasure and joy.

Let's press in on that idea of joy...just a little further. I'm suggesting that when we see unspiritual people seeking good times and pleasure that they are really doing what God wired them to do. But they are seeking their joy in the wrong places and going about it the wrong way! In short, God made us in his image...to be happy and joyful! So, the unspiritual person is actually acting exactly as God designed but he or she is finding their joy in the wrong places! The desire for joy is a God-given desire! This raises an interesting question: do you see God as joyful and delighted in his nature or an old grump who is just looking for us to disappoint him?

Let's go deeper. Consider this: Yes...C.S. Lewis talked about pain as God's "megaphone." But in another essay, he said something just as interesting. To get to it, let me review for us an important word used in philosophy. It is "Hedonism." "Hedonism" is the seeking of pleasure. A "Hedonist" or sometimes pronounced "Headonist" is someone who lives for pleasure. So, the word takes on a shadowy meaning suggesting that only wicked people are hedonists living for the flesh. We picture orgies and drunkenness and all of kinds of godless behavior. "Bunch of hedonists" we might say. But actually, their desire for pleasure is God-given. The problem is in the pursuit of pleasure without God.

Lewis says that actually Christians...people who really know Christ...are the true actual hedonists! That in some sense God designed us to be hedonists who desire great pleasure...but God also worked it so that all of the pleasures of life...everything from a good meal to success to sexual pleasure to whatever...all of those things fall short! So, only the person in Christ can be the hedonist that God had in mind when he made mankind! Fascinating thought. The thing is that this Divine Hedonism is so very profound that it cannot be described or to use Peter's word...it cannot be "expressed!"

The Psalmist was trying to say exactly this in my view in Psalm 84:

Psalms 84:10 (NIV) ¹⁰ Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.

He was saying he would be more joyful standing out in the rain and the wind and the heat as he served God and was near to God than he would be inside and warm! The man's joy and pleasures were found in God.

OK. So....it is interesting to note that, according to this idea, Peter was writing to other saved hedonists whom he did not even know! Why might that be fascinating? Well...he seems quite certain of their thinking...or their frame of mind. In fact, he dares to express how he knows what they are feeling and what occupies their hearts. He says: **"...you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy..."** Think about it with me. In what life situation can you fully know what someone whom you do not know...is thinking? Only in a situation where you share a common priority and experience. So, for example the winners of a Big Ten football game can be sure they are sharing the same excitement with other fans that they do not even know. The same is true...only much more so among those who share Christ. That is why you can feel more at ease with a Christian that you meet and know for five minutes than you

can with unbelievers whom you have known for years. Providing the Christian is not joyless!

Pressing in just a little more on this theme of shared excitement. When the alumni of a university share a great victory, they can and do express exactly what they are sharing. They might meet perfect strangers wearing their school's logos and then say "Yes! We won by two touchdowns!" They can fully articulate what they share. But, in our passage there is a hidden and marvelous nugget of truth. Again, Peter says:

"...you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy"

This is not just any joy! It is inexpressible and glorious joy! It is a type of happiness that is so overwhelming that it cannot really be described! It is the experience of coming to know the Risen Christ! There is nothing else like it in all of life's experiences. It reminds me of the old Chrysler ads that ran years ago when they introduced a new line of vehicles. The ad said "This changes everything!" Yes! Peter is sharing a most intimate moment with people who may be mostly strangers to him! But Peter and these people share something. They've been changed and now they are filled with inexpressible joy!

To review...Peter is not only reminding us that we are aliens and strangers here among the lost, but we are those who have experienced the Risen Christ and are filled with inexpressible joy. This, of course, is why the unsaved cannot grasp what we are saying when we share our faith. They cannot grasp the personal experience of meeting Christ. It was Thomas Carlyle the great Scottish writer and a strong Christian who advised a young clergyman by saying "Sir...what his town needs is someone who knows God other than by hearsay!" And when we come to know God our souls are satisfied in a completely hedonistic fashion! Our souls are filled with pleasure!

Is it not marvelous what the Holy Spirit has done? The unsaved person finds their pleasure in things they can see and touch. The Word of God says we find our pleasure in a very contrary way:

⁸ 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, ⁹ for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Peter says more. He gives us the explanation for this great joy. He is writing to people who never saw Christ and who do not see him now. God be praised! He is writing in a very real sense...to us! We have not seen him and we do not see him now. But we are certain of his reality. In fact, our inexpressible joy will become muted and diminished by the joy yet to come when we do see him! But, for now, the cause of our joy is simply this: our souls have been saved!

Every single human being ever made has sensed that they were not supposed to die. We know it. We can tell that the great difference between us and the trees and the animals is that we are rational beings with some measure of the Divine image in us and that we are more than flesh. In fact, the Holy Spirit spoke thru Solomon and said:

Ecclesiastes 3:11 (NIV) ¹ He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

I've always loved that verse. God has placed eternity or "written" eternity into our hearts. So, from our earliest days of reasoning, we long for a certainty. We long for an assurance. We long to know that we will live on and that death will not be the end. And so Peter reminded the people that they had a privilege that not even the prophets had! For a thousand years God's people sensed the Spirit of Christ but salvation was veiled from them!

¹⁰ Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, ¹¹ trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

Now...if I were to end the sermon right there...someone would correctly say "Hmm...that's interesting. But I still don't have much joy. All I got out of this is what a miserable Christian I am! This joy thing? I don't see much of it in my life!" And I would say in my own life and the lives of the flock...deep Christian joy is sometimes missing. I mean...let's face it...we really do not act like people whose souls have been released from eternal darkness and who will live forever celebrating with God the Maker of Heaven and Earth! So...why not? Are there things that steal away our joy? I think so. Allow me to suggest FOUR JOY-STEALERS in fact. You may think of others but these are the four that have come my way as I reflected on the issue. Conveniently, they all begin with the letter "D".

FIRST JOY-STEALER FOR THE CHRISTIAN: DISAPPOINTMENT WITH GOD!

All bad theology is rooted in a poor understanding of God and his ways. Far too many Christians project on to God what he "ought" to do. Many elements in the church have taught what God "ought" to do. In fact, this set of "shoulds" and "oughts" that we bring to our Christian lives is often totally inconsistent with the way God has worked in Scripture. God will not suspend the laws of his creation for us and God will not shield us from the effects of sin and God will not hide us away literally in a badly broken world!

Think of it! Moses was obedient to God but he only got to see the Promised Land, not go there himself. Abram was obedient to God but God gave him two sons. One was a deceiver and the other unspiritual man who thought more of lunch than his birthright! The prophets served God and were often tossed in jail or murdered! John the Baptist served God and he was beheaded. The Apostle Paul served God and he was beaten with rods and tossed in the sea. And Jesus served God without sin...and he was

crucified. So, if we have the wrong expectations about trouble-free life because we belong to Christ, our joy will be stolen when we face reality and have to love God unconditionally.

SECOND JOY-STEELER FOR THE CHRISTIAN: DISTRACTION BY THE WORLD!

You remember the parable where Jesus describes so many people who seek God but never grow in their faith.

Matthew 13:22 (NIV) ²² The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.

Many Christians are joyless because they are saved but Christ is at the bottom of their activity list. In short, modern Christians are particularly vulnerable to trying to do it all! It's almost amusing except that it is serious. Fifty hour work weeks...travel jump roaping for the kids...getting out on the boat...getting to the games... travel tidally winks for the kids...there is no end to it! Then even when all of that stops we have the need to earn more and be more successful. The church sets up a menu of classes and implores people to give that extra hour over to being disciple...but so many let it go by.

Most Christians have been avoiding a big and crucial decision for years. "Shall I finally put Jesus first and spend time in the Bible and in worship and in church and among his people? Or will I just keep on living as I do saying 'Jesus...thanks for my salvation. I'll get back to you!'" The cares of the world can be a great joy-steeler. Distraction by the world!

THIRD JOY-STEELER: DESTRUCTIVE JUDGING OF THE CHURCH!

This is the attitude that is always finding fault and always thinking out loud about how the church "should" be. The person who can come to worship or an activity and tell us how much it is lacking. A critical spirit is tiresome to everyone around that person and then they wonder why people may not be drawn towards them. I've seen a lifetime of overly opinionated critical people in the Body of Christ who move from church to church. They are joyless because they are just too demanding not only of God but of his people. I think Paul must have seen a lot of this. So, he wrote to the Church at Ephesus and said:

Ephesians 4:29-30 (NIV) ²⁹ Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God...

FOURTH JOY-STEELER: DISOBEDIENCE TO GOD!

Nothing will take away the joy of the Christian as much as deliberate ongoing sin. Whenever someone tells me that they've lost their joy and their interest in the things

of Christ, I do what Dr. Hess used to do. I ask “What is your sin?” If you’ve lost your joy, is it because you have dropped out of worship and service to the Lord? Are you dabbling in pornography or gambling or some other pastime that God will not bless? What other “gods” ... what idols...are in your life?

It was David after his sin with Bathsheba who prayed this way:

Psalms 51:9-12 (NIV) ⁹ Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. ¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

Disappointment with God; distraction by the world; destructive judging of the church; disobedience to God. So...before we call Heaven and say “I’ve lost my keys” ... we need to look around and find that the key to joy is right in front of us! Stay close to Jesus!

Let us pray.