

Sorrowful Yet Always Rejoicing

I Peter 1: 6-8

**First Presbyterian Church
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Gerrit Scott Dawson**

In just a few words, Peter expresses the huge paradox of the Christian life. “In this you greatly rejoice, you exult, even though now for a little while you have been grieved with the heaviness of trials.” Rejoice. Grieve. Leaping up with joy. Bowing down with the heaviness of suffering. Both at once. He sounds just like Paul who told the Corinthian church that we are “sorrowful yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor. 6: 9). How can these two go together?



In Brazil, several strong rivers flow into the mighty Amazon River to make it so powerful. The coming together of rivers is called *confluence*. They flow together. What’s fascinating is that they don’t mix right away. In this picture, you see the Rio Solimoes on the left coming into confluence with the Rio Negro on the right. The Solimoes has plentiful sediment so it’s classified as a whitewater. The Rio Negro is aptly named blackwater. It runs clear.

They actually run alongside each other for several miles without mixing. There is confluence but not a merge until way downstream. This is the largest and most dramatic confluence I could find. But it happens as nearby at the Black River and the Diversion, or McGee’s Creek and the Boguechita River.

What if this is a picture of the lives of those joined to Christ? We are fed by two streams. One is a stream of sorrow from the trial, temptations and griefs of life. The other is a stream of joy that arises from what Christ Jesus has accomplished for us and in us. As long as we live in these mortal bodies in this beautiful but broken world, both rivers run in us, side by side.

With that in mind, let’s take a closer look at Peter’s words. “In this, you greatly rejoice.” In this. In what? Well, when you start a sentence with “In this,” you are referring back to something you just said. So we need to look back at all the new things the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have given to those who have entrusted their lives to the Triune God.

More than a hundred years ago, Scottish pastor Alexander Maclaren gave an extraordinary sermon on this passage. Here's how he described the "in this." In Jesus we have been given:

- 1) **New Life:** Born again, made new in Christ the new Adam.
- 2) **New Hope:** Born into a living hope. From the dead despair of atheism or paganism, the resurrection of Jesus has opened the hope of more life to come.
- 3) **New Wealth:** We have obtained a heavenly inheritance that is beyond fading.
- 4) **New Security:** We are guarded now by the very power of God to get us home.

Over what do we rejoice? The riches of grace that God according to his tender mercies have given us in Jesus. Instead of being stuck in old, destructive patterns, we have been made new. Given a fresh start. Once we feared that death is the end of us. Everything seemed futile. Now we have new hope that because Jesus rose, we will rise. And we realize that adopted into the family of Christ, we have become heirs of a great inheritance. We draw on that eternal inheritance right now. And we don't have to fear it can be lost by what we do or what is done to us. God guards us. We are as secure as the fact that Jesus has ascended to heaven and no power can pull him down. Oh, is that all?! New life, new hope, new wealth, new security. That *is* enough to set a mighty river of joy flowing through us!

This joy flows amidst the heaviness of present trials. The pressure of current temptations. The grief of this hour's suffering. For ourselves, of course, but even more for our loved ones. And, if we can think of it, for Christ's people throughout the world. Christians are suffering and dying for their faith every day. It's a weight on a church that prays, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

In his sermon, Maclaren noted such sorrows can be caused by big events such as being arrested or tortured for your faith. But our heaviness can also come from the thousand thousand trials of everyday life. Maclaren notes, "A colony of white ants can pick a carcass clean as soon as a lion, and there is quite as much wear and tear of Christian gladness arising from the small frictions of our daily life as from the great strain and stress of persecution."

Two rivers. Two streams of emotion. Two sources. Sweet clear waters of salvation in Jesus. Muddy, bitter floods of sorrows and strains and trials. Both flowing within the same Christian life at the same time. That's normal. Sorrowful, but always rejoicing. In his sermon, Maclaren urges his congregation not to

pretend that the suffering doesn't hurt. Or to push down the feelings of grief as if they weren't compatible with Christian joy. The pastor tells his congregation to *feel* their feelings, to own "the grip and bite of the manifold trials of our earthly lives." Because, "the feeling of sorrow is the [necessary] condition to [experiencing] the benefit of the sorrow." Trials accepted as trials press us like olives in an olive press. We feel the crushing squeeze. Maybe all the life will get mashed out of us. But in an olive press, what gets yielded from the squeezing is the precious oil so vital to the daily life of the time. The oil was used for cooking, lighting, and even healing. So the faith that comes out of us when trials squeeze us can be as precious oil. The faith from suffering creates fruitful, healing lives that bless others in the world. Joy doesn't prevent suffering. But suffering doesn't have to cancel joy.

Now Maclaren noted right away an objection he anticipated in his audience. He knew they would wonder why they felt so little joy. And wonder if they should start trying to manufacture happy feelings. Or at least fake them in front of others. Absolutely not! Maclaren said, "You cannot manufacture emotion. No, but I will tell you what you can do. You can determine what you will think about most. And what you will look at most. If you settle that, it will settle what you feel."

We have little joy when our minds are pinging from one swipe of information to the next. When our minds always have the noise of voices or music or traffic diverting them. When we sit in front of the TV watching dark, violent, depressing stories for hours. When we game into the small hours blowing up virtual enemies or capturing pretend treasures. When we let the anger-makers of our favorite media outlets nightly outrageous with what "those" people are doing.

I asked our some of our music staff how important rehearsal is to singing or playing a complex piece of music with confidence and joy. Of course they said rehearsing is absolutely essential. Rehearsal based on prior learning and training. You have to work hard to make a piece feel spontaneous and joyful. A gymnast doesn't just somersault in joy across the floor exercises on her first try. It's years of hard work and study and practice. Why would I ever think that joy in Christ is supposed to fill me spontaneously and without practice or effort? That's a delusion that Christians may fall under. We may mistakenly think joy is something that happens to us rather than something that arises from rehearsal, practice, quest and intention. So we might well arrive at church late, distracted, angry, and prayerless, then say, "What's the matter with those musicians today? They seem flat. I didn't get moved." Right.

We have a four fold treasure on new life, new hope, new wealth and new security. Maclaren urged his congregation to think and meditate on these facts before, during and after trials. Sorrow's river will flow through us all our days. But so will joy's streams. We can let Christ's river of joy wash clean the torrent of grief as we worship, pray, study and integrate the truth of Jesus throughout our lives.

I want to take some time now to consider where all this can lead. Let's focus on verse 8. "Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not see him now, you believe in him, and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and full of glory." Peter wrote from Rome to Christians scattered all throughout what was called Asia Minor, the region around modern day Turkey. It's highly likely that he had never met most of these believers face to face. The news of Jesus' resurrection had caught fire from a handful of disciples to thousands of believers throughout the Roman empire. It was way beyond the first disciples. Yet Peter felt confident to say something crucial that he knew about these believers. They had not seen Jesus like he had. But that was no barrier to their experiencing Jesus deeply and personally. "Though you have not seen him, you love him." What a declaration. You love him. That's just the facts of it. You love Jesus.

There weren't many pretend believers in those days of persecution. No one snuck over to a house church for secret worship just to make business contacts. No one slipped into a worship hideout because that dingy room looked pretty at Christmas. Those who heard his letter read aloud had gathered in clusters because they had experienced the risen Jesus giving them new life, new hope, new wealth and new security. So he reminded them of what that meant. *You love him.*

Many years ago, I had a profound experience one late summer afternoon reading that simple verse. I was not in a good place. Earlier that spring I had broken an engagement. Just three months before the wedding. I wasn't man enough to just admit that this wasn't going to be a good match. I don't think I had admitted it to myself. But something made me open to starting another relationship while I was in seminary. That gave reason for the break up. I crushed that sweet girl's heart and dreams. It's why I still try to avoid going to Texas. If her father is still living, I know he has a shotgun loaded for me. I remember that summer reading a lot of depressing John Irving novels. Like the one called *Setting Free the Bears*. It's about a zoo in Vienna, Austria where all the animals escape. I could relate because I had escaped what would have been the cage of a wrong marriage. But in the novel, once the animals get their freedom, they all die. That

was my life too. I wasn't living like I should. I wasn't close to God. I was in a dark state.

That afternoon, though, I picked up my Bible and was reading in I Peter, a book I had loved since I first came to Christ. My eye caught at this verse. "Though you have not seen him, you love him." I thought, "How does Peter know that? I don't know if I love Jesus anymore. I don't feel it. I feel muffled and dull." But I couldn't get past that verse. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Oh there's something wonderful about the Word of God! It doesn't only describe realities. It creates them. The Spirit takes the word off the page and makes it real and alive in our hearts. You love him. Peter declared it about me. The Word of God declared it about me. All of a sudden I said, "OK. I love Jesus. Because you say so, I say so. I don't feel it but I accept it. I love Jesus." And all of a sudden I did. The emotion of love returned. A sense of hope returned. I got reconnected to the heart of my own heart.

I can't think of a better thing to say to you my dear congregation. Though you have not seen him, you love him. That's the truest thing about you. You love Jesus. As pastor Steve Brown always said in his benedictions, "The central fact of your life is that you belong to Jesus. His work is your work and he is your companion." You love him. That's just the truth. Go ahead and live from it.



Two streams run side by side in confluence. The stream of trials and griefs and sorrows. Feel all that stream brings you and offer those heart cries to your savior. But also remember the stream of joy runs right through you as well. Look upon that stream. Draw from its new life and new hope. Let that stream flow over into the muddy stream of sorrows and grief. These two streams

will run side by side through all your mortal days. But your life goes on way past these brief years of paradox and pain. Not much further down stream, the rivers will join. And the stream of Christ's joy will wash over and resolve all the sorrows. The river of your life will join the mighty river of life that flows from the throne of God. That is your reality. That is your future. That is the truth that rises from faith in the midst of suffering. Though you have not seen him, you love him. You just do.