

Jumping for Joy

It was the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw who coined the phrase “*Youth is wasted on the young*”, by which he meant that young people don’t always appreciate what they have.

The two children on this month’s front cover are skipping along seemingly without a thought in the world, using up energy thoughtlessly and rejoicing in their physical ability. Older people watching them might well be heard to say “It’s making me tired just to look at them!” because their stores of energy and strength have now dwindled and, for them, just walking might be an effort.

Discontentment

It is so easy to take things for granted and not appreciate what we have, until we lose it and by then it is too late. When we are young we can’t wait to be older; but when we are much older we would like to be young again, with all that energy and with all of life stretching before us, full of things that might happen. Who knows? It’s all part of the discontentment that many people feel as their lives draw towards a close – many people, but not all.

A remarkable man once penned these uplifting words: “*I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content.*” What makes that statement remarkable is that he wrote those words while in prison, chained to a guard and awaiting a trial that could have led to his immediate execution. His imprisonment followed a series of hardships which included flogging, wrongful arrest, attempts on his life, countless dangers, much persecution, many

periods of hunger and thirst, cold and exposure. Life had been tough for him because of his religious convictions and now it seemed that the authorities meant to make an example of him. But they allowed him to send a letter to his associates, perhaps expecting that it would be full of complaints about his treatment and regrets about his life choices.

Contentment

The letter was anything but that. It was a most joyful and uplifting epistle, sent to a Christian community that had supported him through thick and thin. But he didn’t just say that he was content to make them feel better. He explained how he felt and then told them why, and how they could share his sense of contentment.

Because the letter has been preserved for the best part of two thousand years, we can also read it and share his secret. Here’s a longer extract:

Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have



learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:11–13).

It was the apostle Paul who said that and he was no fool. He knew what might have been and what he had chosen instead for, in Philippians chapter 3, he compares and contrasts his Jewish upbringing, with all its promise, with his decision to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. He gladly gave up a promising career, with all its security and likely material prosperity, for life as an itinerant preacher. Read his own assessment:

I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death (Philippians 3:8–10).

Christ Strengthens Me

It would be an understatement to say that Paul was happy with his lot, despite its inconvenience. Happiness is a fine thing; but joy is a much deeper and more profound emotion. It is rooted in deep convictions and firm assurances and those the apostle Paul had in abundance. He had been stopped in his tracks on the road to Damascus and had been given a vision of the Lord Jesus Christ, alive and well and enthroned at his Father's side in

heaven. That transformed Paul's life and he lived from then on with the knowledge that Jesus had died for him and that his Lord now lives in glory, helping and caring for all those who put their unquestioning trust in him.

The believers in far-off Philippi had never seen the risen Lord: such visions were given to very few first century followers. But they were fully persuaded nonetheless and rejoiced, as did Paul, at all that God has done in Christ to make their salvation possible. That's why Paul could say in his letter:

*I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all **with joy** ... And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and **joy of faith** (Philippians 1:3–4,25).*

They rejoiced together in all that has been done as part of God's revealed purpose, now that salvation has been made possible, through the work of Christ, for both Jews and Gentiles, without distinction.

Inspiring Letter

If you want to be uplifted and encouraged today by Paul's positive and joyful outlook, why not read the whole of the letter to the Philippians?

In the centre pages of this issue you will find a table of Bible readings which, if faithfully followed, will take you through the whole of the Old Testament during the course of the coming year, and twice through the New Testament. That's the way to become joyful yourself, not just for today but all through the year.

Editor