

Not long now and we'll be celebrating Christmas. Are you ready? By the way, how are you doing at cultivating joy during this season? Wait...cultivating joy? Is that even a thing that we're supposed to do? Not only would I say “yes, it is,” I would also say that if you skip that step, everything you're doing for Christmas is just busy work. You hear a lot of opinions this time of year about “the true meaning of Christmas,” so let me throw mine in there too. Christmas is about finding joy in Jesus, who became a vulnerable little baby for our sake.

But what is joy in the Lord? How do you know if you have it? The apostle Paul has answers, and he wrote a letter to the congregation in Philippi to share them. They apply to us, too, so let's look.

Paul begins by saying “Rejoice in the Lord always; I will say it again: Rejoice!” It is worth pointing out that when Paul says “rejoice,” he is using what a grammar instructor would call an imperative. That means he is commanding us to “Rejoice in the Lord!” That sounds aggressive—but part of what Paul means is that rejoicing, or “experiencing joy again,” is a choice. It's an act of the will. Sometimes you will not feel like celebrating, but if you know Jesus, you have a resource; you have renewable energy for your soul that is always there for you.

Paul is choosing his words very carefully. He does not say: Rejoice when everything is going right. Nor does he say rejoice in your unhappy circumstances. He says, rejoice in the Lord. Do you see where that is focused? It's focused on Jesus and not on circumstances. The apostle Paul is teaching us how to set our thinking straight, and it begins with setting our thoughts on Jesus. That means you use your mind to renew your acquaintance with Jesus. You consciously remember who He is and what He's done; you recall his birth and teaching ministry; his temptation and Passion; His death and burial; his resurrection and ascension; and you remember it was all for you. Jesus' sacrifice on Golgotha and victory over death was for you. And in that, in Him, you find joy--the joy of being rescued.

On October 25, 2017, the United States Navy located a boat that had been missing for months. Working on a tip from some fisherman, the Navy found the boat some 900

miles southeast of Japan. Its journey had begun on May 3rd of 2017, almost six full months prior. Jennifer Appel and Tasha Fuiava had set sail from Hawaii to Tahiti, but things got off to an ominous start. For the first three nights of their voyage, they encountered 40—50 foot waves. When they made it through, they felt like they could do anything. They were mistaken. There was damage to the boat, then another violent storm, and then came the packs of tiger sharks, ramming the hull. The boat's motor stopped working by the end of May. For almost 100 days, they sent out distress signals, with no results. They were just too far away from anything. Fortunately, they had prepared well, with water purifiers and what they hoped was a year's worth of food on board, though by October they had gone through about 90 percent of it. That's when a Taiwanese fishing vessel happened upon them. Though they were not able to tow the damaged boat, they contacted the US Coast Guard, who dispatched the Navy ship, and the two were found and rescued. They had to leave their old boat behind but were given food and lodging on the warship.

Reflecting on the experience, Jennifer Appel said, "There is true humility in wondering if today is your last day, if tonight is your last night," and then, recalling the moment she saw the Navy ship coming over the horizon, she said she felt "relief, elation and joy...it was the most amazing feeling because we honestly did not believe we would survive another 24 hours in the current situation."

I share that story with you in order to say this. If you do not sense that Jesus has rescued you, you haven't experienced the kind of joy the Bible is talking about. It's not until you realize the predicament you were in spiritually that the saving actions of Jesus take on life-changing meaning. If Jesus is just a teacher to you, or a leader to follow as an example, then it's nice to have him in your life, but He won't give you joy. Let me be blunt. You need more than a teacher. You need more than a moral example. You need a rescuer. You need a Savior. And for the record, so do I. Without Jesus, trying to navigate on our own, there's storms, there's sharks, the motor doesn't even work, we're truly lost, and tonight might be the last night. But over the horizon comes Jesus—here he comes to get his hands dirty—here he comes to enter the storm—here he comes to lay his life down because that's what it takes for us to be together with Him. Only Jesus' sacrificial rescue work can inspire "relief, elation and joy."

When you're on top of the world, or when things are at their worst, rejoice in Jesus, which is a process of taking your thoughts and moving them back to Him.

The challenge is that just about everything is going to try to keep you from doing that. Rejoicing in the Lord is really a matter of adopting a “Yes, but” mentality. It is learning how to insert “Yes, but...” into your thinking. Examples: I’m facing something really scary. Yes, but a living Lord who conquered death goes with me. I feel unlovable. Yes, but God loves me passionately and continues to pursue me, and if I ever forget, I can look in the manger, or to the cross. Rejoicing in the Lord is the art of drawing your joy from Jesus and not circumstances. You see, Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem and death on a cross and resurrection victory did not happen only so that you could go to heaven when you die. He did those things so that you could know, today, right now, in this very moment beyond the shadow of a doubt, that you are his treasure. He moved heaven and earth to rescue you. Grab hold of this. Believe it. Work it into your thinking about life. Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again. Rejoice!