

WALKING IN ABUNDANT JOY**2 Corinthians 8:1-7**

INTRO: My translation of choice has been the New International Translation but I appreciate how the New Living translation renders my text for this morning. Listen:

Now I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, what God in his kindness has done through the churches in Macedonia. They are being tested by many troubles, and they are very poor. But they are also filled with abundant joy, which has overflowed in rich generosity.

For I can testify that they gave not only what they could afford, but far more. And they did it of their own free will. They begged us again and again for the privilege of sharing in the gift for the believers in Jerusalem. They even did more than we had hoped, for their first action was to give themselves to the Lord and to us, just as God wanted them to do.

So we have urged Titus, who encouraged your giving in the first place, to return to you and encourage you to finish this ministry of giving. Since you excel in so many ways—in your faith, your gifted speakers, your knowledge, your enthusiasm, and your love from us—I want you to excel also in this gracious act of giving.

2 Corinthians 2:1-7 (NLT)

A couple weeks ago, as I met on ZOOM with several pastors, one of the group shared from 2 Corinthians 8 and he pointed out the abundant joy of the Macedonian Church that was very evident in the passage I just read. His word to us was to walk in abundant joy.

I thought at that point how such a message would be a good beginning to the New Year and an encouragement for us at ABC. We've heard endless recountings of what a challenging year 2020 was and, frankly, we're tired of it. Some of you groan to yourselves when I bring it up, because we know about it, we've just been through it for goodness sake. I'm not going to recount the year other than to say you embraced those challenges with the kind of faith that comes from knowing that we have a great God. It has been a joy for me to be part of this church family as we have met the enemy, stood up to his attacks by the strength and power of God, and weathered those attacks. Satan will still attempt his guerilla raids, but, rest assured, he is defeated and therefore he is history.

With that in mind and using this text from 2 Corinthians I want to encourage us to make even greater strides to walk in abundant joy in this new year of 2021. Over the past several weeks, one time was when we went Christmas Caroling, we sang the familiar carol GOD REST YE MERRY GENTLEMEN which begins with these words:

*God rest ye merry gentlemen
Let nothing you dismay
Remember Christ our Savior
Was born on Christmas Day
To save us all from Satan's pow'r
When we were gone astray
Oh tidings of comfort and joy
Comfort and joy
Oh tidings of comfort and joy*

Let nothing ye dismay. We cannot be dismayed when we know who's in charge. Another song encourages us with,

*Be not dismayed whate'er betide
God will take care of you
Beneath His wings of love abide
God will take care of you*

That's the promise – God will take care of us. That is why we can walk in abundant joy.

Now to the passage. Next week I will resume my BEING THE CHURCH IN CHALLENGING TIMES series, which is a study of 1 Corinthians. As I pointed out in that study, Paul probably wrote more letters to the Corinthians, but the two letters we have here in our New Testament are what remain.

Our passage for this morning is in the second letter and it is a rather extensive aside in Paul's teaching. This is a hallmark of Paul's teaching method – when a thought hits him, he doesn't put it off until later, he deals with it on the spot. So don't worry, he's not the earliest recorded case of A.D.D. (THERE'S A SQUIRREL!) instead he is making sure his teaching is complete.

This passage is the beginning of that interlude where he brings up the subject of generosity and it runs through both chapters 8 and 9. I've often used these chapters for sermons on giving, and I'll talk about that a little bit today, but what I mostly want to talk about is walking in faith and abundant joy as we face the future.

First all, notice how . . .

Abundant joy, and the generosity that comes with it, come from the grace of God

- Paul uses the Macedonian churches as an example and points out how they had been challenged by various troubles including extreme poverty. But poverty is not something that stops God. His grace is available and can be shared by the poor just as well or better than by the rich. God's grace is good enough for anyone who chooses to utilize it.
- The description of the generosity of these extremely blessed Christ Followers in Macedonia is that of a wild, joyful, and reckless giving. But it is not because they have lost their minds, but because they have experienced the extravagant and lavish giving and grace of God. Jeffrey leads us in a song that pictures this when it talks about *The overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God*. That is grace. That kind of reckless love stirs us on to our own holy recklessness. That, in itself, is a picture of walking in abundant joy, and such joy just naturally overflows.
- Paul tells us that . . .

Abundant joy begins when we give ourselves fully to God

- Paul was obviously very blessed by what he saw in the extravagance of the Macedonian generosity. He presented the great need of the suffering Church in Jerusalem and they fell over themselves to be able to give to the need. Like the Israelites in Exodus 35, which Karen read earlier, they brought their gifts in to overflowing.
- They were not stanching by their poverty. In Paul's words, *They even did more than we had hoped, for their first action was to give themselves to the Lord and to us, just as God wanted them to do*. 2 Corinthians 8:5. They gave themselves to God first. That is the way it is intended. It is the Old Testament idea of giving the first fruits to God. Another song puts it this way, *All to Jesus I surrender, all to him I freely give*.
- Giving ourselves fully to God flows into . . .

The abundant joy that comes from giving ourselves to one another

- In a lot of ways this flies in the face of our culture.
 - On one extreme we believe in rugged individualism where what we have is ours because we worked for it and we earned it and we keep it, and if you want your own, you go do what we did to get what we have.
 - On the other extreme we believe that everything is everybody's and if you have more than me, you should give me some of what you have even though you worked hard for it and maybe I didn't.
- We have both of these extremes in our culture, and in between them we have a lot of good people. But, the Christ Follower knows that what he/she has is God's anyway and the God who generously gave his one and only Son wants us to give all as well. And joyfully, at that.
- In other words, abundant joy comes from faithful generosity whether it's monetary, time, wisdom, talent etc. It's not a sacrifice, it's a privilege.
- In fact . . .

Walking in abundant joy urges us on to excellence

- This is my prayer for us in 2021 ABC: That we walk with faith, excellence, and all the while with abundant joy. We frequently talk of being a holy people. And I frequently define holiness as being set apart – literally, reserved for God. If we are going to be that, we need to actually be different. To be different we need be:
 - People of integrity – keeping our word, reliable, honest . . .
 - People of faith – not shaken by world events, keeping our eyes on Christ and not distracted into fear by what we see around us and around the world.

- People of the book – in other words, we believe what we find in the Bible and then practicing what we find here in the word of God.
- People of witness – We have the best news ever! Share it! We have experienced God’s kindness, grace, and generosity – tell people about it!
- People of generosity – ABCers give and give and give! Let’s keep it up. Let’s keep our eyes open for opportunities to be Jesus to people and then pass on the lavish love of God through giving. That might be here in the offering plate. It might be with the struggling mom in the line at the grocery store. It might be with giving to needs around the world. God knows and he will lead you and that will make us into . . .
- People of abundant joy. It will be the natural outcome.

In 2021 let’s walk in abundant joy ABC. Amen.