

# Rejoicing in the Midst of Sorrow

by John Piper

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*This sermon emphasizes the challenges of urban ministry amidst pain and disappointment, urging listeners to maintain a mindset of perseverance and sacrificial service. It contrasts the worldly expectation of comfort with the biblical reality of tribulations and the need to marvel at the gospel. Practical advice is given on managing expectations, finding inspiration in others, and prioritizing God's stability and contentment over worldly desires.*

**Scripture:** Romans 8:23, Psalms 34:19, Acts 14:22, 1 Corinthians 7:29, Philippians 2:19, Hebrews 6:11, Acts 20:35

**Topics:** "Perseverance in Ministry", "Sacrificial Service"

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## Description

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## Transcript

Father, I ask you now that I would be given help to speak something that would be really encouraging and empowering and life-giving and hope-enlarging and vision-clarifying and Satan-defeating and marriage-building and young people-rescuing and church-edifying and more, for exceedingly abundantly beyond all that I ask or think, would you come and help me with my little part in this wonderful evening, I pray in Jesus' name, amen. What I would like to talk about for a few minutes is how is ministry possible? How do you keep on doing urban ministry in particular, but not just urban ministry, when life has so much pain and so much disappointment? How do you just keep on doing it? Because if you stop doing it because there's pain and disappointment, it won't happen, because that's what there is. So that's where I'm going.

Let me give you a little background and set a stage and then give you about seven or eight ways that the Lord keeps me going. There's a mindset in the West, just say West, prosperous West, with a capital W, Western world, a mindset that we deserve pain-free, trouble-free lives. And when life deals us the opposite, we feel we have a right not only to blame somebody, but to feel really sorry for ourselves and to devote our whole lives to coping and let anybody else go to hell, because I've been dealt a hard hand.

And so I have a right to blame somebody and I have a right to feel sorry for myself and give all my energy to making myself feel better. So that's the mindset I'm very concerned about. That mindset creates a

trajectory in life, a trajectory away from stress, away from pain, away from risk, away from discomfort, toward comfort, toward ease, toward security.

You just feel it happening. If that's your mindset, that's gonna be the trajectory of your life. That trajectory of life tends to create ministries who find it possible to serve within the boundaries of that self-protecting trajectory or mindset.

And it's just a given in that mindset or that ministry shaped by that mindset that you don't put yourself and your kids at risk. And you can develop whole theologies to justify this bubble of ease and comfort and security in the name of a few texts where you shouldn't put yourself and your family at risk. Churches can grow up around this mindset, and they do, and it's real sad.

They can be a completely self-confirming church where everything is happening within and people are caring and there's a little bit of outreach going on, but nothing radical, no big risks, no real abandoning of anything that might be very costly or risky to abandon. That kind of mindset finds it incomprehensible to get an email like this. I got this email some years ago.

It was from a YWAM team in India. I'll read it to you. 150 men armed with machetes surrounded the premises occupied by YWAM in India.

The mob had been incited by another religious group in an effort to chase them off. As the mob pressed in, someone at a key moment spoke up on the team's behalf, and they decided to give them 30 days to leave. The team feels they should not leave and that their ministry work in the city is at stake.

Much fruit has been seen as a previously unreached region, and there is great potential for more. In addition to the future of the work, the situation is very dangerous. In the past, when violence has broken out between rival religious groups, people have lost their lives.

That kind of decision, we're staying, is incomprehensible to this mindset. Now, that's the backdrop for my alternative mindset that I want you to share with me, that I try to believe in, try to act out of, try to strive against my bent towards that mindset. And the mindset that I commend to you is exactly the opposite.

And it assumes that life is hard and is going to be hard. And life is not pain-free, it's not trouble-free. Life is full of groaning, Romans 8, 23.

The whole creation groans in travail together until now, and not the creation only, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Holy Spirit groan inwardly, waiting for our redemption, the redemption of our bodies. Or many are the afflictions of the righteous, Psalm 34, 19. That's a given.

Discipleship 101 in Acts 14 with the new churches was, tell them, through many tribulations, you must enter the kingdom. There isn't another route. If you try in the American way or the Western way, we will find a way into the kingdom without afflictions.

Then you will not walk the Calvary road of obedience with Jesus. So I am commending to you this truth. Frustration is normal.

Disappointment is normal. Sickness is normal. Conflict is normal.

Persecution is normal. Danger is normal. Stress is normal.

Listen to Paul. We are regarded as deceivers and yet true, as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold we live, as punished yet not put to death, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things. That's Paul's description of his life.

And I especially love that phrase. We try to fly it over the banner of our church. Sorrowful yet always rejoicing.

So when I point out what normal life looks like and how difficult normal life is, I don't mean joyless. Oh no. Christians of the people are the people who've learned the secret of sorrowful yet always rejoicing.

Because in a city or in a church, there's always reason to be sad. Always reason to be sad. And glad.

That's the mystery of the Christian walk. We are the people who are being constantly called to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. Those are alternatives.

They're always the case. Always the case in the ministry. So we're these strange people who have tears on our faces and smiles on our lips and this doesn't make any sense.

It's just supernatural. It's Christian. So I hope that you will be granted great grace to put yourself at temporal risk because you are eternally secure.

I just want you to say, I've got such deep roots in eternity because of Jesus. I don't need security here. I've got it there.

And so we walk into hard relationships and hard situations and hard ministries. If anyone will be my disciple, let him take up his cross and follow me. And the cross was not easy to bear.

It was an instrument of execution. So that's the background. And here are my seven or eight suggestions for how do you minister? In a city, in a church, in a place that's simply shot through with pain and disappointment, okay? Number one, glory in the gospel of Jesus or marvel in the work of Christ to save you.

Marvel in the work of Christ to save you. Let me sketch the gospel that I'm referring to and why I say marvel. The gospel is the good news that before the Son of Man says, as the Father has sent me, so send I you.

Before He says that, He says, the Son of Man came not to be served. Nearly gotta let that sink in. But to serve and to give His life a ransom for many.

If I don't feel myself ransomed by an infinite price first, I cannot follow this command as the Father has sent me and you know where He sent Him to the cross. So send I you. I am not going there unless first, I have been stunned that I've been bought, that I've been ransomed, that my sin has been covered, forgiven, and a righteousness that is not my own has been counted as mine.

Second Corinthians 5, 21, God made Him, Jesus, to be sin who knew no sin so that we in Him might become the righteousness of God. Now I'm the freest man on the planet, right? My sins don't count against me. His righteousness counts for me.

Make my day. I will go anywhere with this man. I will do anything with this man.

And so we must come to own our sin. It is really ugly, really ugly. And we don't need to run from it anymore because we got at the bottom of our cesspool of sin, we've got grace, we've got mercy, we've got a cross, we've got blood, we've got righteousness.

And when I say marvel at this, there's the key. C.J. Mahaney last week at a conference in Louisville said, marveling precedes imitation. The imitation he had in mind was imitating the patience of God with people.

And he said, you will not be a patient person with other people's sins until you're marveling, marveling, not just believing, marveling at your own forgiven sins, at the grace that has forgiven you. And so may we pray for our city that those who believe in Christ this way, this gospel will be marveling people, not just heady believing in people, but marveling people. We would get up in the morning and be amazed that we're saved, amazed that we're forgiven, amazed that he would count us worthy of following him and impute his righteousness to us.

So that's step one. It is really foundational. If we're gonna survive in urban ministry or any ministry where there's pain and disappointment, and a lot of it comes from inside of us, you gotta have a glorious gospel and you have to have a marveling experience of it.

That's number one. Number two, don't expect, this is gonna sound bad, don't expect too much from people. Give me a couple of Bible verses that prompt me to say that.

Keep your expectations of your fellow Christians, ministry partners, and the people you're ministering to, keep it kind of low. Here's my verses. Second Timothy four, nine to 10.

Paul says to Timothy, they make every effort to come to me soon for Demas having loved this present world has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Now, if Paul had put all of his eggs in the basket of Demas' faithfulness, he'd be devastated. He wasn't devastated.

He was brokenhearted, but he kept on when Demas disappeared, fell in love with the world, had walked with Paul, had been his partner. He's gone, and you've tasted it. I've tasted it.

Few things hurt more than to be betrayed or abandoned. Here's another verse in that regard. Philippians 2, 19.

This is amazing when you think about it. I don't hardly believe this. Paul says, I hope, he's writing to the Philippians, I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly so that I may be encouraged, for I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.

They all seek their own interests, not those of Christ. That's horrible. Just think of it.

Paul says, receive Timothy. He's one of a kind. All my other partners seem self-absorbed.

He wrote that. What kind of leadership is that? Honest, but just let it sink in. Paul lived with disappointing partners.

Don't put your hope in partners. That's number two. Keep your expectations realistic.

Here's a quote. I almost passed over it. This is from Fenelon, 17th century French saint.

He wrote this. It should be remembered that even the best of people leave much to be desired, and we must not expect too much. Do not allow yourself to turn away from people because of their imperfections.

I have found that God leaves, even in the most spiritual people, certain weaknesses which seem entirely out of place. Isn't that gloriously realistic? God leaves in the most spiritual person you know, some little or some larger traits. You look at him and say, that doesn't fit.

It doesn't make sense. And no, it doesn't make sense. Sin never makes sense.

Imperfection never makes sense. It's just there in Christians, and will always be there, which is why we marvel that we're loved, right? We marvel. This marveling enables us to press on into the lives of imperfect people.

Number three, we must instead, looking to our colleagues or ministry objects, we must look to God for stability, security, contentment that we long for. In other words, number two is take your eyes off of excessively high expectations and fix them on God with infinitely high expectations. That God will never, ever, ever let you down.

He's always perfect. He's always there. So fix all of your heart and all of your expectations, all of your satisfaction, all of your longings on him.

Look to him for your satisfaction. Listen, I don't know if you like these verses. They don't make a lot of sense to some people, but let me try them out on you.

This is 1 Corinthians chapter seven, hardly ever quoted by anybody. 1 Corinthians 7, 29, Paul says to the Corinthians, from now on, those of you who have wives should be as those who had none, and those who weep as though they did not weep, and those who rejoice as though they did not rejoice, and those who buy as though they did not possess, and those who use the world as though they did not make full use of it, for this world is passing away. What is that? Here's the least that means.

Hold everything loosely. You buy? Sure you buy. Of course you buy.

We gotta buy. You sell? You're married? You rejoice? You cry? Yeah, well, don't let your crying be all. Don't let your rejoicing be all.

Don't let your wife or husband be all. Let Jesus be all. Hold everything else loosely.

I don't have any diagrams for that. I can't give you any quantitative measure about am I holding my wife too tight? Am I holding my kids too tight? Am I holding my health too tight? Am I holding my ministry too tight? I just know that verse says buy as though you're not buying. Be married as though you're not married.

I use a lot of other good things to say about marriage, big time, right? Ephesians 5, love her like Jesus loves the church and die for her, but there's a kind of awesome inner detachment. My citizenship is not Minneapolis. I intend to die here, but I'm not gonna spend eternity here.

My citizenship is in heaven, and from it I await a savior, a king, who will transform this lowly body to be like his glorious body by the power that enables him to subject all things to himself. That's my citizenship. So it's not marriage.

There'll be no marriage in heaven. Whoa, shock, whoa. What did that do for kids? Oh, I can't wait to get married.

Well, it ain't gonna last. It will be over. It's for a season.

It's not the main thing. Jesus is the main thing, and serving him together in a solid covenant marriage, if you're married, is the main thing. If she's not, I'm not.

He is. That's number three. Number four, be inspired by those who keep on giving out of brokenness and pain from their own God-dependent lives.

In other words, I'm asking you to have heroes. Be inspired from history or from the city here where you know some people or you've read about some people who did it. They stayed in there.

They just took it to the end and read their lives and watched their lives and be inspired like Hebrews 6:11. We desire that each of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the end that you may be not sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. Be imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

So find somebody to admire. And if they're not on the planet, then find them in a biography because God has appointed us to be encouraged by imitating the lives of others. I'll give you one example.

I've got lots of heroes. Most of them are dead, but some are living. And a lot of those are missionaries.

And I'm gonna read you right out of my journal here. We were in Africa some years ago, and on the way, I'm reading from my journal, on the way to Kupchura, we visited some missionaries who shared with us, I'm leaving out the names. I had the names, I struck them, shared with us some of their burdens and let us pray with them.

Their car was breaking down. Their computer was broken. And just recently, their landlord defaulted on a loan so that their house was about to be taken out from under them.

Add to this that last year, their 18 month old daughter was backed over and killed by a visiting missionary friend in their yard. In response to all of this, the young mother was radiant with hope that if God took away their home, it would be because he has a better place for them to live. I sat and marveled.

They had not even gone home to America when their baby died. They buried her in Kenya and pressed on with their work. This is the stuff that great testimonies of faith are made of.

Know these people, they do live. Some of them are in your churches probably. You're probably one of them.

Know them, be inspired by them. That's number four. Number five, keep reminding yourself that the greener grass on the other side of the fence is not nourishing.

It's deceptively green. It is nutritionally, in fact, bankrupt. It looks better, tastes better in short run, and it doesn't nourish the soul.

And if you jump the fence and go to that nice, peaceful, serene, idyllic, pastureland grass, you will near your grave feeling massively inauthentic. And your soul will begin to shrivel up, and you'll begin to think

you sold your soul to a pasture. Don't go there.

The grass that God intends for you to eat is the grass of ministry. The deepest lessons, the deepest nourishing things in life are in hard places and hard times. Nobody has ever said in my hearing in 64 years, I went deep with God in the bright, sunny days and drifted from Him in the dark days.

I have never heard that testimony. It's always the bright, sunny days were tempting days, luring days, drifting days, and the hard days drove me down into Jesus. And that's what you got to preach to yourself when the grass starts to look really green on the bright side of the fence.

Number six, take breaks into a bit of heaven now and then. It's needed by most. I can't tell you what those breaks should look like, how long they should be.

Or how short they should be or what you should be doing with them. But there come seasons in your life, probably besides the Sabbath principle of the weekend that everybody should find a way to observe one in seven, turn off the steam. You're not God.

And there come those seasons when the soul needs to be tested. The vision needs to be tested. God will make that plain.

Don't be afraid of stepping back and taking a break, but be careful of this. Don't turn your life into a break. In this life, it's hard.

In this life, it's disappointing. In this life, it's pain. And if there's a break, it's a break to keep you going.

It's a break to get yourself oriented. It's a break to find the pace to finish the race. That's what breaks are for.

Number seven, two more. Help each other with stories of God's faithfulness and with prophetic words of God that arrive at the appointed hour to sustain. See if I explain to you what I mean.

1993, I, with our church, walked through the darkest days of our 30 years together. And among other means, God sustained me with people's timely Bible-saturated words. And I'm just saying, be this for each other and avail yourself of this.

Do not think you can make this ministry trek towards heaven on your own. God appoints not only that we go here, this glorious, infallible, inerrant, God-inspired word every day, absolutely essential to my soul. I hope it is to yours.

He also ordains that this come to us, not just like this, but like this. Somebody else is over there going deep with God. And I need him.

I need her. Come to me. Talk to me.

I'm not seeing much. I am so discouraged. I can hardly read.

Talk to me. You got it? We must be there for each other. When one is weak, another is strong.

When one is blank and hopeless, another's being given a ray of hope. That's not to be kept for yourself. It's meant to go over here and land on this person at an appointed time.

This is my understanding of prophecy. Just at an appointed golden moment, a God-given word arrives through this, through this, into this, into this, and light is given. Hope is given.

So number seven is help each other with stories of God's faithfulness and with prophetic words of encouragement. Let me give you one example. No, I think I'll pass over it and just go to the last one and give you an example of that.

Last one, number eight. Remember, in summary, of all the others, it is more blessed to give than to receive. The devil will tell you otherwise.

He will say a good night's sleep is better or watching this TV program is better or playing with your kids at 8.30 in spite of the suicidal call you just received is better. Paul Brand was a missionary surgeon to India. He wrote this.

Beautiful, I'll end with it and then give you a summary. Some people voluntarily take on suffering as an act of service, and these, too, find that pain can serve a higher end. I have met a few living saints in my time, men and women who, at great personal pains and sacrifice, have devoted themselves to the care of others.

As I have watched these rare individuals in action, though, any thought of personal sacrifice fades away. I find myself envying, not pitying them. In the process of giving away life, they find it and achieve a level of contentment and peace virtually unknown in the rest of the world.

That's what we want, isn't it? In giving our lives away, we want to find our lives and a kind of peace and contentment that the world cannot have or comprehend. So let me summarize these eight points and I'll pray. Number one, how is ministry possible in a life so permeated by pain, so permeated by disappointment in ministry? And it will always be this way.

Just lower your expectations while this world lasts. Through many afflictions, we must enter the kingdom. Number one, marvel at the gospel.

Number two, don't expect too much from people. Number three, look to God for stability and security and contentment. Number four, be inspired by examples of those who kept on giving in pain.

Number five, realize or recall that greener grass is not nutritional. Number six, take breaks as needed, but don't turn your life into a break. Seven, help each other with words in season and out of season that point to Christ.

And eight, remember the word of our Lord. It is more blessed to give than to receive. Father, my longing for this band of friends of Here's Life Inner City is that we would be granted a spirit of perseverance, joyful perseverance, self-denying, sacrificial, sorrowing, yet always rejoicing.

That's the miracle we long for, and we must have it by your Holy Spirit if we're gonna press on in the crucial works of our city. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.

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