

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

For the Joy before Him, Christ Came

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The Happiness of Christ

Thomas Goodwin wrote that Christ's "own joy, comfort, happiness, and glory are increased and enlarged by . . ."

Now how would you finish that sentence?

There are various biblical ways to answer, and we should beware a one-dimensional portrait of Christ that elevates one to the neglect of others. It would be true to say that Jesus rejoices when his disciples forsake all to follow him ([Mark 10:21–23](#)). It would be valid to see Christ rejoicing when believers' faithfulness in a little prepares them to be faithful over much ([Matt. 25:21, 23](#)). We can affirm that he rejoices in the way his Father reveals divine truths to the childlike rather than the intellectually impressive ([Luke 10:21](#)).

But there is an equally biblical truth that is more easily sidelined in our thoughts of Christ. Christians intuitively know that it pleases Christ when we listen to him and obey him. But what if his very heart and joy is engaged in a new way in our foibles and failures?

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Goodwin completes his sentence like this: Christ's "own joy, comfort, happiness, and glory are increased and enlarged by his showing grace and mercy, in pardoning, relieving, and comforting his members here on earth."¹

A compassionate doctor has traveled deep into the jungle to provide medical care to a primitive tribe afflicted with a contagious disease. He has had his medical equipment flown in. He has correctly diagnosed the problem, and the antibiotics are prepared and available. He is independently wealthy and has no need of any kind of financial compensation. But as he seeks to provide care, the afflicted refuse. They want to take care of themselves. They want to heal on their own terms. Finally, a few brave young men step forward to receive the care being freely provided.

What does the doctor feel?

Joy.

His joy increases to the degree that the sick come to him for help and healing. It's the whole reason he came. How much more if the diseased are not strangers but his own family? So with us, and so with Christ. He does not get flustered and frustrated when we come to him for fresh forgiveness, for renewed pardon, with distress and need and emptiness. That's the whole point. It's what he came to heal. He went down into the horror of death and plunged out through the other side in order to provide a limitless supply of mercy and grace to his people.

Christ's Deep Desire

But there's a deeper point Goodwin is making here. Jesus doesn't want us to draw on his grace and mercy only because it vindicates his atoning work. He wants us to draw on his grace and mercy because it is who he is. He drew near to us in the incarnation so that his joy and ours could rise and fall together—his in giving mercy, ours in receiving it. Goodwin even goes on to argue that *Christ gets more joy and comfort than we do* when we come to him for help and mercy. In the same way that a loving husband gets more relief and comfort in his wife's healing than in his own, Christ "brings in to himself more

¹ Thomas Goodwin, *The Heart of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2011), 107. Similarly Sibbes: "We cannot please Christ better than in showing ourselves welcome, by cheerful taking part of his rich provision. It is an honor to his bounty to fall to." Richard Sibbes, *Bowels Opened, Or, A Discovery of the Near and Dear Love, Union, and Communion Between Christ and the Church*, in *The Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. A. B. Grosart, 7 vols. (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 2:34.

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comfort . . . than it procures to them" when he sees our sins being placed under his own blood.²

Reflecting on Christ as our heavenly mediator—that is, the one who clears away any reason for us to be unable to enjoy friendship with God—he writes:

[The] glory and happiness of Christ [are] enlarged and increased still, as his members come to have the purchase of his death more and more laid forth upon them; so as when their sins are pardoned, their hearts more sanctified, and their spirits comforted, then comes he to see the fruit of his labor, and is comforted thereby, for he is the more glorified by it, yea, he is much more pleased and rejoiced in this than themselves can be. And this keeps up in his heart his care and love unto his children here below, to water and refresh them every moment.³

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Translation: When you come to Christ for mercy and love and help in your anguish and perplexity and sinfulness, you are going with the flow of his own deepest wishes, not against them.

We tend to think that when we approach Jesus for help in our need and mercy amid our sins, we somehow detract from him, lessen him, impoverish him. Goodwin argues otherwise. Jesus surprises us in “exercising acts of grace, and from his continual doing good unto and for his members . . . from his filling them with all mercy, grace, comfort, and felicity, himself becoming yet more full, by filling them.”⁴ As truly God, Christ cannot become any more full; he shares in his Father’s immortal, eternal, unchangeable fullness. Yet as truly man, Christ’s heart is not drained by our coming to him; his heart is filled up all the more by our coming to him.

To put it the other way around: when we hold back, lurking in the shadows, fearful and failing, we miss out not only on our own increased comfort but on Christ’s increased

² Goodwin, *Heart of Christ*, 108.

³ Goodwin, *Heart of Christ*, 111–112.

⁴ Goodwin, *Heart of Christ*, 111. Felicity is an older term for happiness. As another older pastor movingly put it: “If you meet that poor wretch that thrust the spear into my side, tell him there is another way, a better way, of coming at my heart, if he will repent, and look upon whom he has pierced and will mourn. I will cherish him in that very bosom he has wounded; he shall find the blood he shed an ample atonement for the sin of shedding it. And tell him from me, he will put me to more pain and displeasure by refusing this offer of my blood, than when he drew it forth.” Benjamin Grosvenor, “Grace to the Chief of Sinners,” in *A Series of Tracts on the Doctrines, Order, and Polity of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1845), 42–43. I am grateful to Drew Hunter for drawing my attention to this reference.

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comfort. He lives for this. This is what he loves to do. His joy and ours rise and fall together.

He drew near to us in the incarnation so that his joy and ours could rise and fall together.

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But is this biblical?

Consider [Hebrews 12](#). There Jesus is called “the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the same, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” ([Heb. 12:2](#)).

“For the joy.” What joy? What was waiting for Jesus on the other side of the cross?

The joy of seeing his people forgiven.

Remember the whole point of Hebrews—Jesus is the high priest to end all high priests, who has made the final atoning sacrifice to completely cover the sins of his people so that they are provided for “to the uttermost” ([Heb. 7:25](#)). And remember what the writer means when he speaks of Jesus sitting down at God’s right hand, at the end of [Hebrews 12:2](#). Elsewhere the writer to the Hebrews is explicit about what this signifies:

After making purification for sins, he *sat down at the right hand* of the Majesty on high. ([Heb. 1:3](#))

Now the point is what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is *seated at the right hand* of the throne of the Majesty in heaven. ([Heb. 8:1](#))

But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he *sat down at the right hand* of God. ([Heb. 10:12](#))

In all these texts, Jesus’s seating at God’s right hand is associated with his priestly atoning work. The priest was the bridge between God and humanity. He reconnected heaven and earth. Jesus did this supremely through his climactic and final sacrifice of himself, purifying his people once and for all, cleansing them of their sins. It was the joyous anticipation of seeing his people made invincibly clean that sent him through his arrest, death, burial, and resurrection. When we today partake of that atoning work, coming to Christ for forgiveness, communing with him despite our sinfulness, we are laying hold of Christ’s own deepest longing and joy.

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This article is adapted from Gently and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers by Dane C. Ortlund.



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