

Walking with God in Joy

My wife, Sue, make a Heath Bar Bundt Cake that is out of this world. I really enjoy sitting in a chair out in the living room when she begins to create this dessert masterpiece. Susie likes to get all the ingredients and utensils needed and place them on the island that sits in the middle of our kitchen. She preheats the oven to 350 degrees. All the necessities are gathered: one yellow cake mix baked as a bundt cake, one small container of Cool Whip, one small box of vanilla instant pudding (omit the one cup of milk), and of course lots of love.

Sue stirs the cake mix, pours it into a bundt pan and places it in the oven. The cake bakes for 35 to 40 minutes. I can hardly stand it. The aroma saturates the house. It's hard to act like you're concentrating on a book when you're salivating like a dog. Finally, the cake is ready.

Sue, very carefully, takes it from the oven and places it on the island. She gently removes the cake from the pan with a gentle pat. Like a physician with a scalpel she surgically cuts the cake into three layers. The combination of Cool Whip and vanilla instant pudding is placed on the first layer and the process is repeated on the second and third layers. Some filling oozes down the middle and some of it slides down the sides like streams from a volcano.

From my humble vantage point the best part is yet to come. For the next step I bought my wife a very special tool. In order to put the Heath Bars on the cake they have to be crushed into small pieces. Being the good husband that I am, I got my wife a small hammer just for this procedure. Sue breaks up the candy bars, opens the wrapping, and begins to sprinkle those mouth-watering bits of Heath Bar all over the cake. I don't mean this in a disrespectful way at all, but have you ever seen a priest sprinkle something on someone? My wife makes every priest I've ever observed look like a rookie. Sue covers that cake with blessing upon blessing. Heath Bar pieces stick to the top and the side. Some of the pieces fall down into the middle of the cake.

It's at this point when my wife makes her one fatal mistake. She takes the dessert, places it in the refrigerator in order for it to chill and leaves the kitchen. I sneak into the room and open the refrigerator door. Using my index and middle fingers, I slip around to the backside of the cake, fish for a bit of Heath Bar and take a small swipe. There is nothing quite as good as stolen Heath Bar Bundt Cake!

The wonder of all of this is that I have actually met and talked with people who describe God as if He were as satisfying as Heath Bar Bundt Cake.

-J.K. Jones "Longing for God"

Think about that? Maybe that's what David had in mind when he invited us to "taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8)," or Peter when he reminded his readers, "now that you have tasted that the Lord is good (1 Pet. 2:3)."

Imagine what life would be like if being in the presence of God was the most delightful, most satisfying, most enjoyable thing you did every week. Imagine what church would be like, if it was that way for everyone here, if everyone was here because they wanted to be, if there was no other place they would rather be, if everyone in the church talked and acted like this was the most pleasing, rewarding experience of the week. Just imagine

We are looking at spiritual habits for ordinary people in a series we've called *Walking with God*. These spiritual habits or spiritual disciplines as they are known, are biblical practices that draw us and keep us near the heart of God. This morning we want to talk about the habit of joy.

If we merely think of joy as an emotional response, something closely related to happiness, then we've missed the point. The Bible is clear joy is something we can choose. Joy is something we can pursue. Joy is even commanded. In other words Joy is a spiritual habit that defines a life that walks with God. Joy is essential to the Christian life. The Scriptures are clear: God's people are both commanded to rejoice and characterized by joy. Joy is not the icing on our cake of knowing God, but a key ingredient in the batter. It's not that joy is the only ingredient, but even in our most painful losses and our most heart-breaking failures, we discover how deep the reservoirs of Christian joy run. In fact, it may be in the darkest of times where we learn just how essential Christian joy is. Consider Hebrews 12:2 which ties joy directly to the pain and shame of the cross.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

The apostle Paul spoke to his Corinthian readers about being, "sorrowful yet always rejoicing (2 Cor. 6:10)." Joy and celebration, rather than being a distraction and hindrance to dealing with the difficult issues of life, are the key to unlocking the door through them.

Sadly many Christians are characterized by anything but a joy, and many churches are filled with all sorts of things, but not joy. It as if instead of tasting and seeing that the Lord is good, they act as if the Psalmist said, "Taste and see the Lord tastes like Castor oil. Some are so bitter and unhappy, they wouldn't know the joy of the Lord if it bit 'em on the backside.

It's kind of like the church where someone had a heart attack in the middle of the service one Sunday morning. The paramedics were called, and they tried resuscitating three guys before they found the right one. That's not what God intended the Christian life. That's not what He has in mind for you.

I. Joy is Possible. (Philippians 4:4)

The first thing you need to know about joy is that joy is possible. Scripture is full of invitations to enjoy the presence of God. Again and again we are invited to find our pleasure in Him. Psalm 37:4 invites us, "*Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.*" Psalm 34:8, "*Taste and see that the Lord is good.*" In the parable of the talents, Jesus invites us, "*Come and share your master's happiness* (Matt. 25:21)."

Indeed in Scripture we find that experiencing such joy is more than just a royal invitation, it is a divine summons. Joy is commanded. Joy is not an option. The apostle Paul puts it most clearly when he says, "*Rejoice in the lord always. I will say it again: rejoice* (Php. 4:4)!" He doesn't just say it once. He says it twice. That's how a Jew would underline and highlight an idea they believed was extra important. It means pay extra attention to this. Don't miss it.

Joy is essential to the Christian life, and any church that hopes to be all that Jesus wants them to be needs to be filled with joy and practice celebration. I don't have too many books on church growth that mention joy and celebration. Few books on church life mention its importance. However, this isn't because it isn't important. It is just hard to categorize. Joy isn't just another component for a church to add to her schedule. It isn't a new program. We're having joy on Tuesday nights at 7pm.

Rather, Joy is an underlying attitude that affects everything we do. Joy is a basic way of looking at things. Celebration is a basic response to all of life. So, joy isn't an item to be added to a list of other things, it is a basic outlook that is interwoven with all that we do.

And so we are to rejoice in the Lord always. "Rejoice...Always!" Not "sometimes, when we feel like it, or usually." Everything we do as believers should be done with a spirit of joy and an expectation of celebration. Try this on for size. If you were to gauge the words of your mouth, how much are words of joy, words of fear? Words of complaint? Words of bitterness? Words of anger?

II. God is a God of Joy (Psalm 115:3)

Why is joy so essential to the Christian life? Why are we commanded to rejoice in all things? Because God is a God of joy. I want to completely mess up the view of God some of you have this morning. Joy is part of who God is. If our view of God is of an Almighty who is harsh, He stern and mean, we have missed who God is. Joy is in his very nature. Psalm 115:3 tells us that God does whatever pleases him. We might read that as God does whatever he wants, but think about this: God is pleased in everything He does. He finds joy in all he does.

This doesn't mean God doesn't grieve or know sorrow. Scripture tells us that Jesus was "*a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.*" However, God's sorrow and grief is just a temporary response to a sinful world. That sorrow will be vanquished forever when God is finished setting all things right. The very work God is doing in his church is a part of that joy.

Eph 1:5

His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. And this gave him great pleasure.(NLT)

What would it be like, if God were not a God of joy? John Piper asks this question:

Can you imagine what it would be like if the God who ruled the world were not happy? What if God were given to grumbling and pouting and depression like some Jack-and-the-beanstalk giant in the sky? What if God were frustrated and despondent and gloomy and dismal and discontented and dejected?

If God were not essentially a joyful God, ours would be a most miserable existence. We would be like children who have a dismal, gloomy, depressed father. We couldn't enjoy him. We would spend all of our lives trying not to bother him or set him off, or we would be striving just to earn some small favor from him.

But that's not the kind of world we live in, and that's not the kind of God who rules it. John Ortberg, in his book *The Life You've Always Wanted* asks us to imagine how the opening sentences of the Bible might read if God were not a supremely joyful being. Imagine Genesis if God approached his work as we so often do:

In the beginning, it was nine O'clock, so God had to go to work He filled out a requisition to separate light from darkness. He considered making stars to beautify the night, and planets to fill the skies, but thought it sounded like too much work; and besides, thought God, "That's not my job." So he decided to knock off early and call it a day. And he looked at what he had done and he said, "It'll have to do."

On the second day God separated the waters from the dry land. And he made all the dry land flat, plain, and functional, so that — behold- the whole earth looked like Idaho. He thought about making mountains and valleys and glaciers and jungles and forests, but he decided it

wouldn't be worth the effort. And God looked at what he had done that day and said, "It'll have to do."

And God made a pigeon to fly in the air, and a carp to swim in the waters, and a cat to creep upon the dry ground. And God thought about making millions of other species of all sizes and shapes and colors, but he couldn't drum up any enthusiasm for any other animals- in fact, he wasn't too crazy about the cat. Besides, it was almost time for the Late Show. So God looked at all he had done, and God said, "It'll have to do."

And at the end of the week, God was seriously burned out. So he breathed a big sigh of relief and said, "Thank Me, it's Friday."

Fortunately, creation was nothing like that. Indeed Genesis reads, "*Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was excellent in every way* (Gen. 1:31)."

John Ortberg states unequivocally, "God is the happiest being in the Universe... There is a being in this universe who wants you to live in sorrow, but it is not God." Our God is a God of joy, and he invites us to share in that joy. God has gone to the most extraordinary lengths to give us his joy. God is committed to your joy. Jesus came so that his joy, "may be in you and your joy may be complete (John 15:11)."

III. Joy Empowers us for life. (Nehemiah 8:10)

God is a God of joy, and he invites us, indeed commands us to celebrate in that joy with him. That should be reason enough for us to pursue joy in all we do, to live a life of celebration. But there is another reason why Joy is so essential to the Christian life, and it is this: Joy empowers us for life. Joy energizes us. Celebration moves us forward. Joy gives us the strength to become all that we can be.

Nehemiah 8:10 tells us, "*The joy of the Lord is your strength.*" Strength here is the idea of a stronghold or fortress. God's joy sustains us against everything life may throw at us. We cannot stay at anything for long without joy. Why does the young man go to football practices in the heat of August? Why does a girl spend hours practicing her violin until her fingers ache? It is because of the joy set before them, the exultation of the winning touchdown pass, the exhilaration of a standing ovation at the end of a recital. Without joy we will not continue. Joy empowers us.

Why are we so often weak and powerless in our Christian lives? How come so many churches meander through life rarely impacting their communities and never experiencing the powerful moves of the Holy Spirit so often seen in the early church? Why are we so often trapped in sinful habits that we seem to have no power to stop? Why do churches keep stumbling in the same mistakes again and again, showing no power to change? Perhaps it is because we have so little joy and celebration in our lives. Joy empowers us for life.

When was the last time you laughed so hard your eyes watered? When was the last time you screamed in delight at the top of your lungs? When was the last time you did either of those things and it had something to do with your relationship with God? When was the last time you left a worship service and said, "Wow, that was fun?"

Why do we have such a hard time finding joy?

But if Joy is so essential to the Christian life, if Jesus really wants us to have his complete joy and have life to its full abundance, why do we have such a hard time finding joy?

1. We Think it's unspiritual

The first reason is that many Christians think it is unspiritual. Church and enjoying yourself are just two things that some Christians have a hard time mixing together. To them enjoying yourself means entertainment and entertainment seems somehow worldly, thus it has no place in church.

Let's be honest. Some of us were raised with the notion, "Don't have fun in church." It might not have ever been said in those words, but the idea was certainly communicated. When we were kids, it was, "Shhh, be quiet." "Don't chew gum," "Don't run in church this is God's house." You got the feeling that God was a sick old man sleeping downstairs, and we better tip-toe around or he'll wake up and be real cranky.

By the time we're adults we've gotten the message that church is a place for sober reflection and quiet contemplation. We have a hard time associating ideas like celebration, jubilation, pleasure and enjoyment with church.

Some of this also stems from the idea that emotions are unspiritual, or at less spiritual than rational thought. Anything emotional in church was seen as being charismatic and frowned upon. My dad was almost fired from a church in the mid 80s because people were clapping and raising their hands in church.

Friends, this isn't a biblical understanding of worship. We are to worship God with all of our minds and all of our hearts. Certainly there must be room in our worship experience for sorrow over sin, and there are times we must be still and know that He is God. But there must also be room for feasting and laughter and joy and celebration.

And let me tell you something about our thoughts and emotions. Both are fallen and affected by sin. It's not like our feelings are corrupted and our minds are pure and unpolluted. But when we become Christians, Jesus becomes the Lord of both our hearts and minds. He wants to make holy both our thoughts and feelings. Becoming more spiritual doesn't mean becoming less emotional, but directing those feelings toward the right things, learning to enjoy the things that please our Lord.

It would be a good idea to do things as a church that help us laugh together.

2. We are too anxious about tomorrow.

A second reason we have a hard time finding joy is we are too anxious about tomorrow. In Php. 4:4 Paul tells us, "*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, Rejoice!*" But listen to what he says next, Phil 4:6-7

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The reason many of us have a hard time finding joy in our lives, is because our hearts and minds are filled with worry about tomorrow. When we are so concerned about what's coming we can never enjoy where we are. We spend so much of our lives in anticipation of a time that is yet to come: pay day, the weekend, a day off, vacation. We are so focused on the future that we miss God's presence in the moment. As Bob and Michael Benson say in their book *Disciplines for the Inner Life*, it does no good, "to be so busy planning to earn bread for next week that I cannot enjoy what I am eating now." We need to learn to find joy in the little things, to celebrate the everyday.

This is hard for us to do, because we all live with the illusion that joy will come some day in the future when our circumstances change. When I am a teenager and in high school, then I will be happy.

When I get to College and am on my own, then I will be happy. When I graduate and begin my career, then I will be happy. When I get married, when I have children, when the children are gone, When I retire...do you see how this works.

The Psalmist tells us though, "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." He doesn't say, "Yesterday, was God's day- how happy I was then." Nor does he say, "Tomorrow will be God's day- just endure until then." Now this day, with all of its shortcomings, demands, and imperfections, this day is the day the Lord has made. This is the day to rejoice. This is the day to be glad. If we are going to know joy, it must be in this day- today.

3. We enJOY the wrong things.

Another reason we have a hard time experiencing joy in our lives, is because we've learned to enjoy the wrong things. We've learned to associate pleasure with sin. If something is really enjoyable, it must be wrong. Good times and guilt go hand in hand.

But we need to see this as a terrible trick of Satan. He's gotten us to chase after the trinkets and trash of this world, when Jesus has offered us treasure. Just listen to what Paul says we have in the Christian life. He says we, "*have the full riches of complete understanding*" He tells us That in Christ, "*are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge* (Col. 2:2-3)." He promises, "*My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus* (Phil. 4:19)." He reminds us that "*in Christ the riches of God's grace have been lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding* (Eph. 1:8-9)." *God has shown us the incomparable riches of his grace* (Eph 2:7). There are many more such references.

I also like what C.S. Lewis says in a sermon called "The Weight of Glory:"

If we consider... the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at sea. We are far too easily pleased.

This ties right in to the fourth thing that keeps out the joy in our Christian lives.

4. We let sin rob us of our joy.

The fourth reason we have a hard time finding joy, is because we let sin rob us of our joy. Joy and sin are the bitterest of enemies. There's not enough room in town for both of them. One of Satan's greatest tricks is to get us to believe sin leads to joy. Oh, sure, sin is great fun...for a little while. But in the long run sin never leads to joy. Sin always leads to misery, regret, and disappointment. When we choose to hang out with sin, we can't hang out with joy.

In Luke 11:28 Jesus says "*Blessed... are those who hear the word of God and obey it.*" Blessing and joy comes to those who are obedient to God. Listen to what Richard Foster writes in *The Celebration of Discipline*:

Some people live in such a way that it is impossible to have any kind of happiness in their home, but then they go to church and sing songs and pray hoping that God will somehow give them an infusion of joy to make it through the day. They are looking for some kind of heavenly transfusion that will bypass the misery of their daily lives and give them joy... There is something sad in anyone's running from church to church trying to get an injection of "the joy of the Lord." Joy is not found in singing a particular kind of music, or getting in with the right kind of group...Joy is found in obedience

If we want to have the joy of the Lord in our lives, we are going to have to quit seeking joy in the mirage of pleasure that sin promises. The key to opening the door to joy in some of your lives this morning is repentance and confession like Roy talked about. There is some sin in your life that you let linger there. Maybe you even encourage it in some way. Unrepented sin sucks the joy out of your life.

Take a look at it from a bit of a different perspective. C.S. Lewis in his book, *The Screwtape Letters* has a senior demon, uncle Screwtape writing to his nephew demon in training, Wormwood on how to entrap and ensnare believers. Listen to this,

Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures; all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our enemy has produced, at times, or ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden...An ever-increasing craving for and ever diminishing pleasure is the formula... to get the man's soul and give him nothing in return- that is what really gladdens our Father's heart.

God wants to know you because he finds joy, He finds pleasure in knowing you. It pleases Him to have a relationship with you. He wants you to find joy in knowing Him. He invites you to know Him.