



30 DAYS
of
JOY

*You Can Have Irrepressible, Inexplicable, Unshakeable
Joy No Matter What Life Throws at You*

B. H. PATERSON

BHPATERSON.COM

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Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.

James 1:2

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Introduction

Quite a few years ago, my wife and I were faced with a dreadfully painful situation. We prayed, sought God's help and, although there were days when things looked impossible, we came through it, and we praised God for His faithfulness. I couldn't help but wonder what had brought about the need to walk through that trial, but I did know, without doubt, that my relationship with God grew in a truly profound way. I also realized I had some repenting to do, and there were things I needed to be much more careful about never taking for granted, but the main outcome was that while I had known and walked with God in a very real way, I began to cherish my relationship with Him even more intensely. So, while I never wanted to have to walk through anything like that again, I knew I had grown in God through it all.

In all the turmoil of that period, Psalm 103 became alive in my heart. I learned to purposefully take time—whatever I felt like—to bless and praise God. In the process, whenever I would meditate on this psalm and speak its incredible words of praise to my own soul, I never failed to find encouragement. I found myself being comforted by a supernatural joy that, despite difficulties that were without any solution I could bring to bear, sustained me, assured me of God's love and faithfulness, and swept despair out of my heart.

Years later, I was alone in my car, with a long drive ahead of me. I began to think of that awful time, and I thanked God for bringing us through it. I thought about how the situation had impacted my spiritual life, and it was evident to me that I was still walking in the strength God had added to me. With tears rolling down my face and with actual fear and trembling, I told God that I never wanted to walk through a time of trial like that again, but what I wanted more, was to have Him work in me any way He wanted to, that I would go through anything He needed me to if it meant I could grow even closer to Him and to fulfilling His

purposes in my life. What I was really saying was, “Lord, your will be done!”

At the time, other than perhaps some tragic accident or illness striking my loved ones, I couldn’t imagine anything worse happening than what we’d already walked through. How wrong I was! Our lives were turned upside down and I can’t begin to describe the sense of grief, heartache, and profound loss we had to walk through. As before, I turned to God’s Word for comfort and, suddenly, one word began to burn in my spirit and I saw it, practically blazing in neon lights everywhere I looked in Scripture. I saw God’s plan for *JOY*! Wherever His presence is, joy floods in, and even in the darkest, most insoluble of difficulties, we can experience “joy unspeakable and full of glory” poured out into our lives by the very hand of God!

This joy is something far beyond what we experience when things make us happy—this is something we can choose to partake in no matter what is happening around us. I don’t want to suggest that there is no pain, no grieving, no dark days when we simply don’t understand why these things are happening, but I can tell you this with absolute certainty—joy is yours for the asking, and it will be your strength because it is the “joy of the Lord,” a gift God will give to you that no one else can take from you. I may not always like the outcomes of things that happen in my world, but I can still choose to live with joy ringing in my spirit, no matter what else is happening or what evil schemes are being devised for me by others. God is faithful, we can never be separated from His love, and His joy is available to each of us—*right now*!

I pray you’ll be blessed and encouraged as you read these little thoughts over the next thirty days, and that what you’ll experience each day, and then every day afterwards, is access to the unlimited, irrepressible, never-failing, unshakeable joy God has for you!

The Pursuit of Happiness

*You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

PSALM 16:11

It's right there in the Declaration of Independence... All those wonderful Founding Fathers said we have the right to pursue happiness, and do we ever!

Everybody wants to be happy. When my wife cooks her world-famous sticky-toffee pudding, I'm happy. When my team wins, I'm happy. When that tax-refund hits my bank account, you bet I'm happy. Lots of things *happ-en* that can make any of us *happ-y*. That's the catch, though - *Happiness* depends on what's *happening*.

So what do we do when things aren't going so well? When there's a serious illness, or someone we love turns his or her back on us, or there's no money left for that stack of bills, happiness can get a lot harder to come by.

When tough times come, we're going to need something more enduring than a feel-good response that's only available when we like the things we're experiencing. That something is joy, and it doesn't depend even slightly on things that may or may not happen. Joy doesn't happen by chance, joy happens by choice! David wrote this psalm when, as was often the case, he was in real trouble. His enemies wanted him dead, but nothing in this psalm sounds like a man who was defeated or deflated. What was his secret?

This verse says we can find fullness of joy, and the place we'll find it is in His presence. But you and I know that whenever we read God's Word, or worship, or try to call on God in the middle of our ever-more-

hectic lives, it's like all hell lets loose and pulls us towards anything else but being in His presence. But if we want the joy that only comes when we're intimately connected to Him, rather than taking a chance on some fleeting moment of happiness somewhere else, we need to find our way into His presence at all costs.

This psalm is a "Miktam," one of six given this name. Charles Spurgeon described a Miktam as, "The psalm of the precious secret." You and I might use the phrase, "hidden treasure." We need to dig our way through all the clutter and all the distractions until we find Him. Joy is found in His presence, because *He is the joy*. Revel in His presence every moment you can, because that's where you go far beyond mere happiness, and discover fullness of joy!

PRAYER

Father, help me seek you with all my strength today, and not rest until I uncover the treasure of your holy presence, and experience the sweetness and the nearness of your loving embrace. As I draw close to you, help me to listen to your voice, and be ready to rejoice in your perfect will as it is carried out in my life.

JOYFUL GEMS

"Lord, I crawled across the bareness to you with my empty cup, uncertain in asking any small drop of refreshment. If only I had known you better. I'd have come running with a bucket."

Nancy Spiegelberg

Bless the Lord... I Dare You!

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.

PSALM 103:1-2

If you ever want something really encouraging to memorize, take the first five verses of Psalm 103, then tack on verse one at the end again for good measure. When you've committed these joy-generating verses to memory, I guarantee you'll want to speak them out loud, and often.

David calls on every part of his being to bless and praise the Lord. He invokes the holiness of God. He reminds himself of ALL the benefits God has poured into his life. David remembers that God has forgiven his sins, healed his diseases, rescued him from destruction, chosen him to pour out his love and mercy upon, and satisfied him with life-giving, youth-renewing, divine provision. There's so much of God's nature revealed in these few short verses, it's breathtaking just to think about.

Is God greater and more powerful than whoever or whatever is coming against you today? Of course He is, and meditating upon and speaking out the words of this Psalm can help make that a palpable revelation in our lives and circumstances.

Psalms are songs, they are musical in nature, and when we speak out words like these, I can't help but think this is like a musical process. Praising God helps get us in tune with Him and get in tune with His mind and His will, even when we don't understand what He wants to do in our lives. No one had more tough days to get through than David, and in this Psalm, his response is to command his inner being to bless the Lord and to remember all of His benefits. That's how he got in tune with his Maker... That's how he became a man after God's heart.

The pain and heartache we often face is all too real, and I don't mean to minimize the weight of real problems and real crises that must be faced. Yet, when I speak these verses, I know there is spiritual dynamite exploding inside me. I have yet to find a way to speak these words out of sincere praise to God and not have them affect me in a profound way. That's just what God's Word does. Try it—see if you can stay discouraged or downcast when these words soar into your spirit. Go on... Bless the Lord... I dare you!

PRAYER

Lord, when things are going wrong, it sometimes seems hard to think about anything else, but I know how much you've already done in my life, and I know what an awesome God you are! So I choose to lift up your Name. I choose to exalt you, for you are great and greatly to be praised. I love you, Lord, and I choose to bless you with all that is within my being today!

JOYFUL GEMS

"The worst moment for the atheist is when he is really thankful and has nobody to thank. The converse of this proposition is also true... The great saint may be said to mix all his thoughts with thanks. All goods look better when they look like gifts... It is the highest and holiest of the paradoxes that the man who really knows he cannot pay his debt will be forever paying it... He will be always throwing things away into a bottomless pit of unfathomable thanks."

G. K. Chesterton

When You Make the Biggest Mess of Your Life

Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me by Your generous Spirit.

PSALM 51:12 (NKJV)

David was King. He had everything a man could want, but it wasn't enough. He slept with another man's wife, and then tried to cover it up. When the cover up failed, he had the husband murdered. But this is the man after God's heart, the sweet singer of Israel—surely there must be some mistake? But there was no mistake, and God sent the prophet Nathan to call David to account.

Have you ever messed up? I know I have. I've deliberately and selfishly ignored God and done exactly what I wanted to do. And then I've justified myself... I deserved that thing... What harm could it do anyway? Maybe you've been there.

Nathan said David had “utterly scorned the Lord.” (2 Samuel 12:14). The same David who knew such incredible intimacy with God, became so blinded by lust and selfishness that he scorned the One he had loved so much. My friend, if that can happen to David, it can happen to anyone... it can happen to you!

So what happens when God uses a Nathan to tell you, “You are the man!” When Nathan called him out, David had a choice to make, and you and I have that same choice. David chose repentance: “David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’ ” (2 Samuel 12:13).

David didn't argue or blame anyone else. As king, he could have had Nathan put to death with a single word, but he didn't. Instead, David humbly cast himself on God's mercy. There would be terrible

consequences to his sin, and sometimes we can't avoid the fallout from our actions, but that doesn't have to be the end of the story.

Psalm 51 is David's plea to God for forgiveness, a right spirit, and a cleansed heart. What a prayer this is! If God ever calls you out and you know you've done wrong, I urge you to get Psalm 51 into your spirit and make David's prayer your own.

David said, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation." He had sinned, but he knew a God of mercy would recognize the change in his heart and restore his joy. The joy of salvation is the joy of sins forgiven, and the joy of once again walking with a God who loves us without limits.

PRAYER

Thank you, Father, that if I sin, you sent Jesus to be my advocate. Because of His righteousness, I can repent and be restored to you. Because of the cross and the sacrifice Jesus was willing to make there on my behalf, my sins can be forgiven, and you can restore the joy of your salvation to me once again.

JOYFUL GEMS

"The great paradox [of my life] is that every time I walk into a prison and see the faces of men or women who have been transformed by the power of the living God, I realize that the thing God has chosen to use in my life... is none of the successes, achievements, degrees, awards, honors, or cases I won before the Supreme Court. That's not what God's using in my life. What God is using in my life to touch the lives of literally thousands of other people is the fact that I was a convict and went to prison. That was my great defeat, the only thing in my life I didn't succeed in."

Chuck Colson

Irrepressible Joy

I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.

2 CORINTHIANS 7:4 (NIV)

Sometimes, joy just doesn't make sense! It simply doesn't make sense to the natural, logical processes of our mind to be experiencing joy when the circumstances tell us it's time to panic, or worry, or cry, or quit. Yes, you may be surrounded by crisis, or you may be facing a great need, or grieving a great loss, but, somehow, joy continues to wash over your spirit. You haven't lost your mind or your grip on reality, you just have that irrepressible joy, joy that knows no bounds and it won't be dispelled no matter what the circumstances are—well, I hope that's what you have anyway.

There's only one source of that kind of joy. Paul gets to the heart of the matter in this part of his second letter to the Corinthians. He acknowledged that he'd been hard on them in his previous epistle, but only because he loved them and he wanted to keep them from serious error. Paul regretted it in the natural, but he didn't really regret it because the outcome was exactly what God wanted—the people turned to God with “repentance that leads to salvation.” (2 Corinthians 7:10).

Experiencing the joy that only salvation can bring is incredible, but Paul expresses something even deeper. “But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus.” (2 Corinthians 7:6). Paul and his team were enduring “fighting without and fear within,” but Titus brought news that gave them the comfort and the joy they needed. That news was the repentance of the Corinthians—they had received Paul's correction and turned towards God, and to “salvation without regret.”

Paul had his own salvation to rejoice about, but his joy was turbocharged over the salvation of others! He was in the midst of tremendous difficulty, but Paul knew that to focus on those difficulties rather than his mission of winning the lost was to lose the joy of giving joy to others.

As followers of Christ, we already have joy in abundance just from being His, yet there is “joy that knows no bounds” when we refuse to let difficult circumstances keep us from bringing the joy of knowing Christ to others. Do you need to experience joy today? Give it away! Irrepressible joy is found in salvation, and then sharing that salvation with everyone we can!

PRAYER

Lord, send someone across my path today who doesn't know Jesus. Create an opportunity to share your love and your joy with them. Give me wisdom and insight as I share your gospel, that I might win someone to Christ today.

JOYFUL GEMS

“Are you proving that the Christian life is a joyful, happy thing? Do you look glad that you are a Christian? Does your life radiate joy and enthusiasm? Check yourself carefully on this before you teach it. Make the Christian life contagious.”

Henrietta Mears

Inexpressible Joy

Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

1 PETER 1:8

We've talked about irrepressible joy, joy, if you will, that you can't shut up about. But the other side of that coin is, there is so much about the joy He gives that just doesn't lend itself to being put into words. In the King James Version, it's called "joy unspeakable and full of glory." In other words, there is available to you today a joy that's so deep and so durable that for all practical purposes, it is indescribable.

Peter says you have not seen him, but you love Him. Of course, it's not necessary to see Him, because we know Him, and we know how His love was expressed on the cross... "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8).

Peter had just got through talking about various trials and tests of faith that his readers would have to endure, and practically in the same breath he begins to talk about inexpressible joy. By now we know that joy doesn't diminish in the face of trials or tests, but flourishes wherever Jesus is made Lord.

There's a quote I love in A. W. Tozer's *The Pursuit of God* (from a hymn by Frederick Faber):

Only to sit and think of God, Oh what a joy it is! To think the thought, to breathe the Name; Earth has no higher bliss.

It isn't always necessary to talk. Just delight in the embrace of the God who loves you, and sit and think of who He is and let every breath

exchange the cares of this world for the sweetness and the nearness of His presence. It is joy without equal, joy without limit, joy unspeakable.

Peter said this joy is not just unspeakable, it's full of glory; it's full of glory, because it's full of Him—He is the joy! The moment you determine that His glory will be revealed in you because you're going to cherish His presence and live out your life in service to Him, is also the moment when open access to your life is granted to the God for whom nothing is impossible, the moment when the God of miracles is welcomed into your circumstances—the moment God opens up a pipeline into your life for inexpressible, unspeakable joy.

PRAYER

Lord, my mind can't begin to comprehend your greatness. You created all that there is out of nothing at all. You spoke the stars, the planets, the galaxies and everything else that is into existence, and there they are. You are the mighty and majestic King of Kings and Lord of Lords, but you are also my King, and My Lord, and when I call on your Name, there you are. I give myself to You, Lord, that I might continue to walk in unspeakable joy.

JOYFUL GEMS

“God destines us for an end beyond the grasp of reason.”

St. Thomas Aquinas

Under The Shadow of His Wings

*For you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will
sing for joy.*

PSALM 63:7

This verse talks about David singing for joy, yet according to the Psalm's title, he was in the wilderness—a dry and thirsty land he called it. What's so joyful about that, you might ask? The answer is simple enough—no matter where David's body was, he knew how to welcome God into his circumstances and, wilderness or not, where God is, joy is.

David talks about enemies who sought to destroy his life. Now, it's one thing when people are willing to lie about you, or get you fired from your job, or try to humiliate you, but David's enemies literally wanted to murder him. I've endured some nasty attacks in my time, but no one has ever tried to kill me. David's problems here were on a whole other level!

Attacks will come, and if your greatest ambition is to see that no one gets the glory but God, those attacks may come with more venom and pure evil than you might possibly imagine. So what do you do then? You find the place of safety that only God can offer, under the shadow of His wings!

When David uses this phrase throughout the Psalms, he means it as a beautiful picture of the safest place in human existence. You can see that great eagle covering her young with her wings, can't you? Dangers may lurk in the skies above, but nothing is getting through to harm those young eagles as long as they stay under those wings. And so it is with us. There may be no lack of plotting and conspiring and evil plans being laid for you, but stay under the shadow of His wings and none of the machinations of the enemy can make it past the protection of Almighty God!

Despite his many sorrows, David said, “In the shadow of your wings *I will sing for joy.*” Never mind that you’re still in the wilderness, that your enemies are on the prowl seeking to devour you, you still have reason to sing because God is watching over you relentlessly.

David talks about the fate of His enemies, and it’s not a happy fate at all. The fact is, evil can’t outlast joy, and it certainly can’t outlast the source of that joy. So sing out in praise, rejoice, and worship the God who has you carefully secured under the shadow of His wings!

PRAYER

Father, I thank you for the place of safety you provide in your presence, under the shadow of your wings. Whatever is flying or prowling or sneaking around trying to get at me, you are keeping me safe. For the hedge of protection you have set around me, thank you. Lord!

JOYFUL GEMS

“Happy and strong and brave shall we be—able to endure all things, and to do all things—if we believe that every day, every hour, every moment of our life is in God’s hands.”

Henry van Dyke

Despising Joy is Dangerous!

As the ark of the Lord came into the city of David, Michal the daughter of Saul looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, and she despised him in her heart.

2 SAMUEL 6:16

If ever there was a moment to celebrate, this was it. The ark of the Lord was coming back to Jerusalem, signifying a return of God's presence and blessing upon the people of Israel. The first attempt to bring back the ark was a disaster because God had given very specific instructions about the ark and He wouldn't allow it to be handled carelessly. This time, David sought God, ensured everything was done according to Scripture, and at long last, the ark was coming back!

David knew that where the ark was, God was. The ark wasn't just a sacred object; it was a focal point for the actual presence of God. When David danced in front of the ark, he was literally dancing "before the Lord." No wonder David was elated. It was God's role to defend and prosper Israel, and restoration of the ark meant God Himself was among them to carry out that role and fulfill His promises to His people.

Michal really should have been out there rejoicing with everyone else. Instead she looked at the unbridled joy of David's response to the ark's return and she "despised him." I wish I could say Michal's reaction was unusual, but too often, rather than rejoice with those who are close to God, many folks retreat into anger, jealousy, and petty fault-finding.

In answer to Michal's criticism, David said, "I will make myself yet more contemptible than this!" David didn't care what anybody thought—he was going to dance and rejoice in God "with all his might." If we really want to know the joy of the Lord, the first thing we need

deliverance from is public opinion. This is vital—don't ever let someone else's criticism and fault-finding rob you of the joy of praising God with all your might!

Michal suffered greatly in her bitterness. Along with David's disdain, she also suffered perhaps the most humiliating fate possible for a woman in that day—she “had no child till the day of her death.” I can't find Michal's name anywhere after the events told here. She simply disappears from the pages of Scripture. It's not too difficult to imagine the loneliness and despair of her remaining years. The contrast between David and Michal could not be more stark. One knew spectacular joy in the presence of God, but the other knew only bitterness and emptiness for the rest of her life. Don't ever despise the joy of the Lord—it's downright dangerous!

PRAYER

Father, when I see you bless someone, help me rejoice with them. Keep my heart filled with praise and thanksgiving every time you pour out your anointing and your blessing on one of Your faithful servants. Help me remember that your plan for someone else is different than your plan for me, and I rejoice that you do have a plan for me!

JOYFUL GEMS

“The chance you had in life is the life you've got. You can make complaints about what people, including you, make of their lives after they have got them, and about what people make of other people's lives, even about your children being gone, but you mustn't wish for another life. You mustn't want to be someone else. What you must do is this: ‘Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks.’ ”

Wendell Berry

Rejoice All the Time!

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.

PHILIPPIANS 4:4

You may look at our title today and respond with some skepticism. How can anyone have joy all the time? I don't mean to suggest that circumstances can't be very difficult to work through, but the point we keep making is that joy is not subject to circumstances—that you can choose joy no matter what else is going on.

The entire book of Philippians seems to overflow with joy. When Paul wrote this letter, he did so from prison. That's right, the man who's saying, "Rejoice in the Lord always," is sitting in jail! Paul had more reason than anyone to feel alone, uncomfortable, and unsure of his fate (which we know was eventually to be martyred for his faith). I'm sure Paul felt all of those things, but that doesn't mean he gave up on joy.

It's not as if this kind of thing was new to Paul. Read 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 for a list of the kinds of things Paul could face on any given day. He talks about multiple imprisonments, getting beat with rods three times, receiving thirty-nine lashes (one short of the forty the law allowed) on five different occasions, being stoned, and then shipwrecked three times. Paul goes on to talk about the multiple dangers he faced in his life as an apostle. I don't think any of us have had to endure anything close to what Paul did.

Yet, Paul says we can rejoice in the Lord *always*! Well, if he could, I think any of us can! Again, joy isn't a feeling, it's a choice, and no matter what he had to go through, Paul chose joy, and his whole message to the Philippians and to you and me is, that we can choose joy, too.

What about the time Paul and Silas were in prison (Acts 16:23-40)? That was Paul's first rather unpleasant introduction to the Philippians. At

midnight, Paul and Silas were in jail, so naturally they wept and wailed in despair—wait, no they didn't! At midnight they sang and praised God so much, the power of God fell and shook the prison to its foundations. My friend, even prison walls can't withstand the joy of the Lord!

It's true—whatever prison of circumstances you may feel you're in, God has given you His joy, and you really can experience it **ALL** the time!

PRAYER

I don't know what tomorrow will bring, Lord, except that I know you'll be there with me whatever comes. When everything tries to pull me down and get me discouraged, I ask you to help me make a different choice. I will choose to lift my eyes to Heaven, call on your Name, remember your love from which nothing can separate me, and, in faith, rejoice in you—
ALWAYS!

JOYFUL GEMS

"I can say that I never knew what joy was like until I gave up pursuing happiness, or cared to live until I chose to die. For these two discoveries I am beholden to Jesus."

Malcolm Muggeridge

To Die is Gain

*What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice...
For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*

PHILIPPIANS 1:18,21

When you read almost anything Paul wrote, it's hard not to wonder what kind of person it took to say the things he said, and know that he really believed every word of it. We can all get grandiose at times, and make bold, confident statements. It can be easy to be dismissive when people do that, but don't ever make that mistake with Paul!

Paul lived every word he spoke and wrote, and of course, his epistles are written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This isn't just some powerful communicator with strong opinions; this is God speaking for the purpose of building up and instructing His Church!

Here Paul again refers to his imprisonment, mentioning some whose motives for preaching the gospel are less than noble, who seek to add to his suffering while he is imprisoned. Yet Paul simply rejoices that "whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed." And again, even amid his trials, Paul maintains his joy, knowing that God is in control of his circumstances, and is even using those circumstances for what Paul considers his greatest mission, that is, to "advance the gospel."

Paul is in love with Jesus, and when he thinks of his heavenly destination, he can say, as in verse twenty-three, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better." He isn't being mournful or defeatist—he just knows who is waiting for him. That's why he can put up with so many afflictions; he knows they won't last!

It's easy to say we believe in heaven, but do we really look at the pressures and difficulties of our daily lives in the light of eternity? When

things don't go well, when we lose a loved one, when all kinds of problems erupt, do we remember we're only here for a little while? There's a great movie called "Heaven Is for Real," but if heaven is really real, shouldn't that impact how we view the circumstances and the people that surround us?

Paul faced dire circumstances nearly every day, yet he could still rejoice that the gospel was being preached. And more personally, he could also rejoice that the Lover of his soul would one day call him to His side. I pray that's true for you, too, because on that day, the rejoicing will never come to an end!

PRAYER

Father, one day I'll be in your presence for eternity. Help me remember that even when my trial seems difficult to bear, it is only for a little while. One day, there will be no more tears, and no more heartache, only the unspeakable joy of being with you forever. But I don't need to wait till then to know you're with me, to live my life wrapped up in your purposes, or to rejoice in your presence no matter what path you set me upon today.

JOYFUL GEMS

"We have a faith that does not shrink from death. The fundamental concern of our faith is both to reveal with fearsome accuracy the nature of death, and to draw the sting from it by the victory of the resurrected Christ. We, of all people, need to deny nothing true, the bad and the good. Of all people, we are most able to confess the grand proportions of death: so terrible as to defeat us all!—but defeated, rather, in Jesus."

Walter Wangerin, Jr.

Joy is Just the Beginning!

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

GALATIANS 5:22, 23

We're focusing on joy, but we would be remiss if we didn't note that it is only one of the precious gifts God has for us. When Paul writes about the fruit of the spirit, joy is right there, along with all the other beautiful ways that a believer's life is transformed by walking with God and walking "in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25). Of course, there's something you have to do before you walk in the Spirit, and that's decide to not walk in the flesh. Elsewhere, Paul wrote, "For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." (Romans 8:6).

Paul lists some of the works of the flesh, warning that these can rob a person of his or her inheritance in the Kingdom of God (Galatians 5:21). But when you walk in the Spirit, you walk in love, joy, peace and so much more, and of course you also find the only possible means of walking in the perfect will of God. Yes, some will come against you simply because you choose to walk that way, and you'll have to walk all the more in the Spirit to deal with the resulting obstacles, but that's okay—God will give us all the fruit we're willing to let Him grow within us.

The truth is, there's a war going on within us, and our flesh wants to win that war and leave us bereft of hope, convinced that there's just no way to walk in the Spirit. Why would the enemy want us to experience love, joy, and peace, or live out patience, goodness, and kindness, or strive to excel in faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? If we do that, we become dangerous to him, we become light in the midst of darkness,

and there's no way Satan won't throw every temptation he can in our way to prevent that from happening.

Every new day brings untold opportunities to choose which way to walk. One choice gratifies the flesh, and it always seems like the easy choice. Walking in the Spirit can be hard; we may have to forego some other things (saying yes to one thing always necessitates saying no to something else). But this walk brings the indescribable riches of the Spirit into your life, and along with all the other blessings, there comes—you guessed it—JOY!

PRAYER

Father, I thank you for your Holy Spirit, that He is with me to comfort me, to bring power to serve you and proclaim your gospel, and to help me grow to be more like you. Today I will choose to walk in the Spirit and not in the flesh, and I choose to walk that walk with joy in my heart!

JOYFUL GEMS

“Those people who pray know what most around them either don't know or choose to ignore: centering life in the insatiable demands of the ego is the sure path to doom. They know that life confined to the self is a prison, a joy-killing, neurosis-producing, disease-fomenting prison.”

Eugene Peterson

Joy in His Name

Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

JOHN 16:24

Have you ever asked God for something, knowing that there just wasn't any possible way for your desire to become reality unless God did it? In my own experience, I've been privileged to see incredible answers to prayer. I've seen healing from a doctor's diagnosis that my wife and I wouldn't be able to have children (we have three). I've seen disaster looming, knowing that only God could intervene to bring us through, and rejoiced as He's done exactly that. I've seen people come to know Christ when everyone said they were too far gone, too deeply mired in sin. I've seen people twisted up inside from years of bondage and bitterness literally dance for joy as God set them free by the sweet touch of His Holy Spirit.

God answers prayer—never doubt it! And when we pray in the Name of Jesus, that is, in accord with His will and His character, miracles begin to happen. Sometimes, people tack on the words, “in the Name of Jesus,” to their prayers as if it's some kind of magic formula to get what we want from our celestial Santa Claus. That's not what praying in His Name means at all. And there's no doubt that God is wise enough and knows His plans for us and others well enough not to always answer our prayers in the way we want Him to, no matter how sincere or selfless our prayers may seem. Still, He knows what we need, and every time He answers our prayers in an impossible situation, joy flows through us like a river and God gets the glory.

Prayer in the Name of Jesus is an incredible path to joy, but not only because God answers our prayers. Prayer puts us in the presence of God,

something that's only possible through the blood-bought access and authority Jesus provides as our Lord and Savior; it's only by coming in His Name that we are granted this incredible privilege. Prayer is also how we get to know God more deeply and grow in our relationship with Him—practically the definition of joy!

His Name brings joy in ways I can't even communicate. When I simply say, "Jesus," and call upon Him, with literally just the mention of His Name, things begin to change... I begin to change. I don't really understand how, I just know it brings Him near to me, and as we've said, where He is, joy is!

PRAYER

Father, I thank you that your Son, Jesus, made a way into Your presence for me. In His Name, I call on you, and I know that I am in direct communication with the God for whom nothing is impossible. Help me remember to call on You first, not after I've exhausted all my other resources. Help me to walk with you so that my prayers are not sporadic events that only happen whenever I'm in trouble, or because someone said it's what I'm supposed to do. I want my prayer life to be an ongoing conversation with You, so I can hear your voice, live for Your glory, witness your hand at work, and walk in the joy of knowing you!

JOYFUL GEMS

"Do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger people. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; pray for powers equal to your tasks. Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle, but you shall be a miracle. Every day you shall wonder at the richness of life which has come to you by the grace of God."

Phillips Brooks

Rejoice... Even on a day like today!

This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

PSALM 118:24

Psalm 118 has had lots of attention from authors and scholars far more learned than I am, and even this one small verse has been the subject of great discussion. It's a great subject for anyone to explore, but we just have one simple point to make here. Yes, the psalm looks forward prophetically and wonderfully to the day of salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, and there are other ways to think about the "day" mentioned here, but I'm a simple fellow, and I don't see anything here that means I can't rejoice in the Lord *today*!

Let's face it, some days there doesn't seem to be a whole lot to rejoice about if we're just looking at the circumstances around us. Yet every day is a precious gift from God and every day is a new opportunity to know Him more. On a day like today we can find Him faithful in the most painful of trials, and experience the joy that can only come from discovering Him—yet again—right there in the midst of even the most difficult day you might ever experience.

Even on a day like today, God still answers prayer. And by no means am I just talking about prayers for your own needs. If you've ever prayed for healing for someone, or asked God to provide for a person you knew to be in great need, or called on God to intervene for someone experiencing a relationship crisis, then you know the indescribable joy you feel when God answers that prayer and moves in their lives. There's no feeling like that, and you can experience it *today*!

Of course, you may well be the one facing great need today, physically, financially, emotionally, or relationally—any area of your life

can be the focus of great distress, and that can happen on days when you simply don't see it coming. How many times have you asked how something could happen "today of all days?" Yet, even this day is a day God made for you.

I know some days bring great sadness, and they can bring grief so wretched it can feel impossible to bear. But God isn't going anywhere, and if you'll reach out to Him, even today, I promise you'll find Him. God's arms of love are extended towards you, and when you let His embrace surround you, you'll find the joy that will get you to tomorrow... Even on a day like today.

PRAYER

Thank you, Lord, for the gift of this beautiful day. You made me a steward of this precious resource, and I seek your wisdom and your help to use this day to bless the lives of others, and to bring maximum glory to you. Help me make a difference in the Kingdom *today!* Keep your hand on me as I walk through the challenges and trials that may be part of this day, and as I sense your touch and your presence in this, the day that you alone have made, I will rejoice and be glad!

JOYFUL GEMS

"His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. The English word new is the Hebrew word *hadas*... It means never before experienced. Today's mercy is different from yesterday or the day before or the day before the day before. Just as the seasonal flu vaccine changes from year to year, God's mercy changes from day to day. It's a new strain of mercy. Why? Because you didn't sin today the way you did yesterday!

"Try this little exercise: Figure out how old you are—not in years but in days. That's the sum total of different kinds of mercy you've received life-to-date. By the time you're twenty-one, you've experienced 7,665 unique mercies. When you hit midlife, it numbers 14,600. And by the time you hit retirement, God has mercied you 23,725 times."

Mark Batterson

Joy and Overflowing Hope

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

ROMANS 15:13 (NIV)

I love the word, “overflow!” If you’re filled with joy, as Paul prays here (assuming you keep being filled), it has to overflow, and if you’re overflowing with joy, Paul makes it clear that you’ll also “overflow with hope.” Then, when joy and peace and hope flow out of you, everything and everyone around you is affected. Do you want to be a world changer? Do you want to be an agent for change that has an impact on everyone you meet? Joy will do that, for joy brings hope and if there’s one thing that people are craving in our world today, it’s hope.

Read the Book of Acts for some real-world examples of how this works... In Acts 17:6, the Jews of Thessalonica complained that, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also...” Paul had just come from Philippi, where his joyful praises and his hope in Christ shook the prison to its foundations, whereupon Paul promptly led the jailor and his entire family to Christ. Shaking things up, or turning the world upside down, if you prefer, is what Paul did. He shook up the status quo, because everywhere he went he praised God with full-throated joy, even when he was bound in chains in some filthy dungeon. And everywhere he went, he overflowed with a hope in Christ that was, to those who opened their hearts to his message, utterly irresistible.

If you want to change the world around you, if you want to reach your friends and neighbors for Christ, if you want to live your life so that it impacts eternity, be the one who overflows with joy, and overflows with hope! There’s plenty going on out there that will rob the joy from

people. There's plenty going on that can make the world seem like there's just no hope (watch a news channel for the next five minutes and you'll see what I mean), but when we overflow with the joy and the hope only Jesus can give, God shakes everything up!

Of course, Paul made it clear that the only route to this kind of overflow is "by the power of the Holy Spirit." We're really talking about the overflow that is uniquely the result of the anointing of God's Spirit. That's a whole other topic in itself to be sure, but if you've experienced the anointing, you know it to be the force that turns the world upside down, gives joy when joy should be impossible, and is the harbinger of hope for those who are cloaked in despair.

PRAYER

Lord, I want to be so filled with your joy that it radiates from me and becomes an irresistible force to those around me. I want to live my life so that they see you permeating everything I say and do, and that the joy you put inside me isn't affected by setbacks or seemingly impossible obstacles. In the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit, help me turn my world upside down, so that people encounter you and are never the same again!

JOYFUL GEMS

"When you speak of heaven, let your face light up. When you speak of hell, well, then your everyday face will do."

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, speaking to his students.

Joy in God's Word

*Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me
a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O
LORD, God of hosts.*

JEREMIAH 15:16

The prophet Jeremiah spoke out to the disobedient nation of Israel, only to be hated and brutalized for delivering the Word of God to them—they simply didn't want to know. To say the least, that's a whole lot like the world we're living in today. To take a stand for biblical values, or just speak a passage of Scripture in certain places, or say a simple prayer that honors God, will bring vitriolic hatred down on the head of anyone who dares do such a thing. It seems that to live for God these days is to be expected to silently endure whatever evil society or its institutions choose to inflict, while being denied the same rights noisily demanded and readily granted to everyone else.

For all the opposition Jeremiah endured just for speaking out in obedience to God, he himself knew something that sustained him through all the hatred and mistreatment. He knew that God's Word would sustain, strengthen and nourish his spirit. He knew that the Word of God gives light and hope wherever it is proclaimed and wherever human beings make the choice to hide that Word in their hearts. As Jeremiah feasted on God's Word, it became the "joy and the delight" of his heart.

Meanwhile, those who rejected the prophetic warning Jeremiah faithfully delivered, faced exactly the horrifying fate and divine judgment Jeremiah promised them. The degree to which the actual events and suffering that Israel experienced were so accurately and painstakingly foretold isn't just uncanny, it's a reflection of the love of

God and the lengths to which He went to make sure His people were fully warned and prepared. Once again, they just didn't want to know—just like the people we can watch on our news broadcasts every day. They are busily pursuing their own agendas and pleasures without restraint, ignoring God and ignoring the love He has proclaimed all around them if only they'd choose see it.

If you and I are to prevail in this generation, and if we are to have any hope of living a life marked by the joy and delight Jeremiah spoke of, we'd better make sure the Word of God is being soaked into our spirits on a daily basis. And, like Jeremiah, when God commands us to speak that Word to those around us—no matter how hatefully they may choose to respond—we'll also discover the eternal value of being filled with a joy no one can ever take from us!

PRAYER

Lord, thank you for the power of the Holy Spirit that enables us to be a witness to your love and grace. When it's difficult to take a stand for you because of the opposition of those who hate you and hate your Word, fill us afresh with that power. With joy in our hearts, and the life-changing Word of God burning within us, let us declare your greatness at every opportunity.

JOYFUL GEMS

“The word judgment carries negative overtones for a good many people in our liberal and postliberal world. We need to remind ourselves that throughout the Bible God's coming judgment is a good thing, something to be celebrated, longed for, yearned over. It causes people to shout for joy and the trees of the field to clap their hands. In a world of systematic injustice, bullying, violence, arrogance, and oppression, the thought that there might come a day when the wicked are firmly put in their place and the poor and weak are given their due is the best news there can be. Faced with a world in rebellion, a world full of exploitation and wickedness, a good God must be a God of judgment.”

N. T. Wright, Bishop of Durham

The Joy of the Lord is Your Strength

*Then he said to them, “Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for **the joy of the LORD is your strength.**”*

NEHEMIAH 8:10 (EMPHASIS ADDED)

This passage describes another instance where great joy resulted from an encounter with God’s Word. The people had returned from exile, Nehemiah had led them in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, then a hunger for the Word of God took hold of the people. Around fifty-thousand souls gathered in a public square, and they stood listening for hours as the Word of God was read and explained to them.

There were tears, the Bible says, as the people felt the impact of God’s Word. Make no mistake, if the Word is let loose upon hungry hearts, conviction will take place, sin will be exposed, and people will feel sorrow over that sin. But the people were encouraged to rejoice, because now that they had returned to God and to following His ways, they were now in a position to experience the strengthening of the joy that only God can give.

We need to realize that the joy we need only has one source—it’s the joy **of the Lord** that gives us strength. People look all over the place for joy like this, and in their search they can even find some diverting pleasures for a while—what we’ve discussed elsewhere as a circumstance-dependent happiness—but there is no such thing as unshakeable joy to be found anywhere except in the heart of someone who is truly a follower of Christ.

The Lord is the source of all things, and when we find ourselves in trouble, in need, at the end of our rope, if you will, that’s when we find out if our joy is real or not. When we discover that God is there with us as we walk through those dark times, that His presence overshadows us no matter

what else is taking place, and that His love never fails—not for a second—joy is what follows, and that joy really is our strength.

He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, creator of the universe and ruler of everything He has made. And not only is He King of Kings and Lord of Lords, but you and I can say, He is *my* King, and He is *my* Lord. The awesome God who spoke the heavens and the earth into being is calling you and me to walk in relationship with Him as our “friend who sticks closer than a brother.” (Proverbs 18:24). It is our amazing God whose joy is being poured out on us, and who strengthens us through it.

PRAYER

Fill me with your joy today, Lord! You are all I will ever need, and I ask you to pour out your joy upon me in abundance! I receive your joy as a precious gift from you, and I receive the strength your joy gives me. Thank you, Lord, that as I draw near to you, you draw near to me, and when you draw near, your joy fills me completely!

JOYFUL GEMS

“To ascertain where you really are with the Lord, recall what saddened you the past month. Was it the realization that you do not love Jesus enough? That you did not seek his face in prayer often enough? That you did not care for his people enough? Or did you get depressed over a lack of respect, criticism from an authority figure, your finances, a lack of friends, fears about the future, or your bulging waistline?

“Conversely, what gladdened you the past month? Reflection on your election to the Christian community? The joy of saying slowly, ‘Abba, Father’? The afternoon you stole away for two hours with only the gospel as your companion? A small victory over selfishness? Or were the sources of your joy a new car, a Brooks Brothers suit, a great date, great sex, a raise, or a loss of four inches from your waistline?”

Brennan Manning

When Jesus Comes

When they saw the star, they were thrilled with ecstatic joy.

MATTHEW 2:10 (AMP)

There are people who seem like they are supposed to know (or else they just think they know) everything about everything. You know, the politicians, the pundits, the celebrities, the “wise men” of our day. But how often have things happened that seemed to catch them all by surprise? In case you weren’t sure, the answer is, a lot!

There were some folks just like those a couple of thousand years ago. For them, as the sun climbed into the dawn sky, it was just like any other day. They didn’t know about the struggle of an unknown young couple to complete their journey to a little town in Israel. There was no reason for the elites to pay them any mind. The couple weren’t rich, they weren’t famous, they had no political power, they had nothing at all to bring them to the notice of the privileged or the powerful. If only all those “important” people had known what that day really meant... It was the most significant day in human history, and they had no clue.

With Mary in the last stages of pregnancy, Joseph led her painstakingly towards Bethlehem. You know what happened when they got there. No room at the inn, and nowhere to take shelter except to join the animals in a humble stable. How could anyone possibly mistake these lowly circumstances as being at all important?

Well, the angels had no doubt, and they filled the heavens with their praises: “And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” (Luke 2:10). Then, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Luke 2:14, KJV).

Then the wise men proved just how wise they really were, risking everything to see the One they sought: “Where is he who has been born king

of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” Matthew 2:2.

The greatest day in history, and only a few were able to recognize it. Jesus came, and the world has never been the same. Our job is to make sure we’re there like the wise men (and unlike so many of the supposedly wise) to welcome Him into our lives and our circumstances every single day, and declare that He is our King! And when He comes, as He did for those wise men, He’ll fill our seeking hearts with nothing less than “ecstatic joy.”

PRAYER

Lord, help me to seek you throughout this day and every day. When my attention turns towards my work and so many other responsibilities, that’s okay, but help me find you in everything I’m doing. Today, I’m going to seek you, because you said when I seek, I’m going to find, and when I find you, that’s where I know I’ll find joy!

JOYFUL GEMS

Our Lord came down from life to suffer death;
the Bread came down, to hunger;
the Way came down, on the way to weariness;
the Fount came down, to thirst.

Augustine, Sermon 78

He so loved us that, for our sake,
He was made man in time,
although through him all times were made.
He was made man, who made man.
He was created of a mother whom he created.
He was carried by hands that he formed.
He cried in the manger in wordless infancy, he the Word,
without whom all human eloquence is mute.

Augustine, Sermon 188,2

Joy When You Need It Most

Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way.

JAMES 1:2-4 (THE MESSAGE)

If you've been a follower of Christ for any length of time, you'll understand what I mean when I say that God has repeatedly shown up in my circumstances just in time. Any other time, things just wouldn't have worked out the way they needed to. When we're going through tough times, we naturally want God to take them away as soon as possible, but the Bible counsels us to see God's hand at work even through our toughest, darkest days.

"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds," is how the ESV puts it. Well that just is not the way most of us react to tragedy and trouble. We don't like to hurt, we don't want to suffer loss, we don't like hard times and we sure don't usually see them as anything to be joyful about. Yet, hard as it may be to see sometimes, God has a meticulous plan for your life, a unique purpose He's preparing you for, and He knows exactly when and where to move on your behalf.

Writer and leadership expert, John Maxwell, describes a puzzle game on a baseball scoreboard, where the crowd try to identify a baseball player as one small piece of the picture is revealed at a time. Maxwell says, "I'm here to tell you that we usually get one piece of the puzzle. In God's sovereignty and God's timing, many of the things that happen to you and many of the things that happen to me make us just shake our heads and say, 'I don't understand. I don't understand this in my life.'"

One piece of the puzzle is all we may see right now, but in God's timing, He'll bring us to where He wants us to be, even if you and I never understand why He chose this particular path. But even on the toughest days of the journey, God wants us to know that His joy is still ours for the asking.

And what is joy worth if you can't live it and experience it when you really need it? If God could not pour His joy into our souls when we're hurting the most, He wouldn't be God. It may make no sense to a logical, human mind, but we really do find God in these impossible times, and when we find Him, the joy He brings is, by definition, supernatural, and it simply can't be stolen from us by mere circumstance. While we wait on God's timing, joy is still our portion, right now, today, just when we need it most.

PRAYER

Father, thank you for your wisdom, that you know the end from the beginning, and that you will always move at exactly the right time. When circumstances seem overwhelming, I thank you that you are there, no matter how many things keep trying to pull my eyes away from you. I trust you today, I will trust you every day, and when I need joy the most, when I need you the most, I know you'll be right there with me!

JOYFUL GEMS

"Life is not a straight line leading from one blessing to the next and then finally to heaven. Life is a winding and troubled road. Switchback after switchback. And the point of biblical stories like Joseph and Job and Esther and Ruth is to help us feel in our bones (not just know in our heads) that God is for us in all these strange turns. God is not just showing up after the trouble and cleaning it up. He is plotting the course and managing the troubles with far-reaching purposes for our good and for the glory of Jesus Christ."

John Piper

Joy No One Can Take Away

When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world.

So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.

JOHN 16:21-22

Jesus is speaking here to His disciples about the sorrow they would feel at His death, but how that sorrow would turn to joy upon His resurrection. They weren't quite on His wavelength, but all would become clear soon enough—the horrors of the cross were imminent. It's hardly a joyful thing to discuss death in any fashion, let alone one's own. Jesus knew everything that was coming, and He certainly knew the despair that would fill the hearts of His followers when they were faced with His death.

Jesus was the one who had to endure one of the cruelest ways to die imaginable, yet here He is encouraging His followers and assuring them that there would be great joy ahead. There's a famous sermon titled "It's Friday but Sunday's Coming." Imagine if you were one of those present on that awful Friday. Jesus is on the cross, and as He died, all the disciples' hopes and dreams died with Him. Yes, He said He'd rise after three days, and yes they'd even seen Him raise others from the dead, but as they watched His brutalized body and He took His last breath, there was only profound sorrow, indescribable heartbreak.

But Sunday did come, and the resurrected Christ defeated death itself, and if He can defeat death, there's nothing else He can't defeat! Jesus gave the analogy of a woman giving birth, how, despite the pain of childbirth, her joy at the sight of her newborn child is all that matters to

her. Only on Resurrection Sunday, does the pain of Friday make any sense.

And it's not just babies that get born. Sometimes, God gives us something we have to get started, to give birth to, if you will. And if it's difficult to get that thing started, if birthing that vision from God brings us incredible challenges, that's not time to give up, that's time to remember that joy is just ahead!

Jesus purchased that joy with His own blood and there is absolutely nothing that has the power to take it from you! If Sunday seems impossible to get to, it just seems that way—it will come! Will there be pain to battle through on the way to what God has planned for you? I can guarantee it. But on the way, and as those God-given dreams become reality, you've been promised joy—joy that no one can take away!

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you knew the cross was coming, you knew the agony that was to come, yet love kept you from turning aside. You stayed on that cross till every last sin of mine was paid for. Then you rose again, the conqueror of death itself. When all the hopes and dreams of those who loved you seemed dead, you had a far better plan, and when I can't make sense of the ashes of my own hopes and dreams, you still have a far better plan. Help me follow your example and let love—love for you and love for those you love—keep me on the road to the destiny you have planned, even if I know there's pain ahead. Thank you, that to follow you in love, and to follow you as you work out your perfect will in my life, is to follow you to a joy no one can take away.

JOYFUL GEMS

“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? This is so true that even Satan cannot deny it. Christ's resurrection and victory over sin, death and hell is greater than all heaven and earth. You can never imagine his resurrection and victory so great but that in actuality it is far, far greater.”

Martin Luther

Obey Your Way to Joy

When people do not accept divine guidance, they run wild. But whoever obeys the law is joyful.

PROVERBS 29:18 (NLT)

It's not that complicated... If you make the determination to seek God first, let His Word permeate your entire being, and then live in obedience to what God says, you'll be in right-relationship with your Creator. Do that and you'll be walking out your life with God's presence surrounding you, His Spirit guiding you, and His power manifesting itself in the everyday circumstances of your life. And if God is that involved in your decisions, in the words you speak and the things you do—again, this isn't complicated—if God is where you are, so is His joy!

Have you ever done something wrong, and you knew immediately that it was, in fact, sinful. If you've ever been in that place—and I know I have—and you've turned to God in repentance and received His forgiveness, what is it you felt? Freedom from guilt? Yes! Relief that God's forgiveness is available for the asking? No doubt! And when you realize that whatever it was is no longer hindering your relationship and your walk with Jesus? Well, the universal result that I've experienced and observed, and that holds true in every genuine case, without exception, is an outpouring of simple, unsullied, absolute JOY!!

God's Word is, quite literally, the way to joy. Follow the precepts and commandments of His Word, and joy will follow you more surely than day follows night. For those who follow their own way, who “do not accept divine guidance,” we're told here that, “they run wild.” As the NIV puts it, they “cast off restraint.” Or if you prefer the King James Version, without a vision from God to guide them, “people perish.”

Take a look around at the end result of the relentless drive to exclude God from public discussion. Somehow, in the warped thinking of those who have cast off restraint, it's perfectly okay to redefine every aspect of life, from marriage, to family, to when life itself begins, then ignore what God says about it all and work to make it unconstitutional—that is, illegal—to even point out the folly of that kind of thinking. This just doesn't just threaten people on an individual level, it's a devastating threat to society itself—and the one thing it will definitely not lead to is joy.

Immerse yourself in God's precious Word today, obey it, and walk out its wisdom in your life, unless, that is, you prefer to live a life in which there is no joy.

PRAYER

Lord, whatever you have planned, I will not only trust you, I will obey you. I will obey your Word, and I will obey the still, small voice stirring within me, calling me to take action, right a wrong, help a hurting soul, speak your Word to others wherever you send me. This is my desire, Lord, but I know a thousand things will push their way in. try to persuade me I heard wrong or that it can't be that important, so I ask you to help me stay the course, and walk in the joy of obeying you today.

JOYFUL GEMS

“If we answer the call to discipleship, where will it lead us? What decisions and partings will it demand? To answer this question we shall have to go to Him, for only He knows the answer. Only Jesus Christ who bids us follow Him, knows the journey's end. But we do know that it will be a road of boundless mercy. Discipleship means joy.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Total Joy

Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

JOHN 16:24

This is our second look at this verse, but we certainly won't exhaust the riches of the life-changing words Jesus spoke here. It would be an easy thing, especially having previously discussed the path to joy offered by God's Word, to glibly tack on some advice to pray your way to joy. It would be sound advice, but you and I know that when we try to do those two things—study God's Word and pray—every distraction possible seems to emerge to prevent us doing so. So, let's allow that some self-discipline might be needed, but this devotional isn't about discipline or duty, it's about joy. If something produces joy, in this case, joy that's "full," surely any initial effort required to get to that joy is utterly worthwhile, and ultimately going to be seen as no effort at all.

There is a way to total joy—joy that's full, joy that's complete and joy that will sustain us when everything (and everyone) else is falling apart. Jesus said we have to ask, that is we have to pray, and pray in His name. That's when God pours directly into our lives those things we've asked for, and I know if you've ever experienced God's answers to your prayers, you know exactly the joy I'm talking about. Certainly, we need to pray according to God's will, and pray to bring to pass those things that please and honor Him, but pray we must. Prayer that is based on relationship with Jesus and offered from a heart that is committed to putting Him first, produces—without fail—a response from the Creator of all things. And with that response, comes joy... Total joy!

One of the old Scottish "divines" by the name of John Brown wrote this: "There is a close connection between the two advices given by an

apostle under the influence of the Spirit of His Master: ‘Rejoice evermore: pray without ceasing’ (1 Thessalonians 5:16, 17). The second is the means of securing the first. If we cease to pray, we are likely to cease to rejoice—we must ‘pray without ceasing’ that we may ‘rejoice evermore’: and were we, instead of being anxious, careful, and troubled about many things, to ‘be anxious about nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, make our requests known unto God, with thanksgiving’ (Philippians 4:6), assuredly the ‘peace of God, would keep our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus’; and, amid external troubles, our joy would be full.”

Prayer changes things, they say, and so it does. I’d say, prayer changes *us*, and offers us the opportunity to experience total joy!

PRAYER

Thank you, Lord, for the power of prayer, that you come down and listen to the innermost thoughts of my heart while I pour them out to you. You, the Holy One, the great I Am, the Ruler of all creation, great and mighty though you are, you still listen to every word I speak out in sincere prayer, and for that I thank you with all my heart. Help me to pray constantly, without ceasing, and in that life of prayer and communion with you, I thank you for the joy I know will flow into my heart,

JOYFUL GEMS

“What I am anxious to see in Christian believers is a beautiful paradox. I want to see in them the joy of finding God while at the same time they are blessedly pursuing Him. I want to see in them the great joy of having God yet always wanting Him.”

A.W. Tozer

Joyful Remembrance

And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days.

LEVITICUS 23:40

What a scene this must have been. Every year, a week-long festival was to take place, celebrating Israel's miraculous deliverance from captivity in Egypt. They would remember their journey through the wilderness, God going before them and supernaturally supplying their needs. They were to find the best trees and build booths out of their branches. It didn't matter if they had the finest house in the city, for seven days, they were to head outside and live in those rough shelters.

I don't know about you, but I don't do camping well. Leave me with my Wi-Fi, and my comfy bed, and my nice tiled bathroom with all the hot and cold running water I can use, and that combination in the kitchen of freezer and microwave is entirely indispensable, and don't forget my High Definition TV in the corner, thank you very much. I know the household amenities back then weren't quite the same, but, still, I imagine heading outside to shelter under some tree branches wasn't exactly appealing.

But there was an important principle at work here. God took care of His people in the wilderness and did so with miracle after miracle. Quail fell from the sky when they needed meat. Manna was there every morning to feed them, and when they were thirsty, water flowed from a rock that followed them. One of the things that strikes us as we look at Israel's history is how easily they forgot the amazing things God did for them, and how often they forsook Him over the years. But the fact is,

you and I are just as quick to forget His goodness and His miracles in our lives as the Israelites were.

We're no longer expected to spend a week outdoors living in shelters made out of branches, but I would suggest spending plenty of time remembering and celebrating all the amazing things God has done for us in our lives. Has He ever healed you, or healed your spouse or your child? Has he restored your marriage when the circumstances seemed to scream out that there was no hope? And where were you before you accepted Him as your Lord and Savior? Is being delivered out of whatever that situation was worth celebrating?

If you're having a rough day today, or even if you're not, take some time to remember the awesome things God has done in your life, and don't just remember them, celebrate them, and rejoice that the God who did all that is still with you, He still loves you passionately, and He's right there by your side every single moment of your life!

PRAYER

Thank you, Lord, for the blessings you pour out on me every day. And for the blessings of the past, that have helped shape my life, I thank you, Lord. Even when, like the Children of Israel in the wilderness, it seemed like a rough trek, you were there. You have used even the mistakes I've made and the dark days along the journey to bring me to this day, and I thank you for those as well. Even when I wasn't faithful to you, you were faithful to me, and you never gave up on me—not ever! I remember your goodness with great joy, and that joy propels me forward, for in you, the best is always yet to be!

JOYFUL GEMS

“A person's spiritual life is always dwarfed when cut apart from history. Mysticism is empty unless it is enriched by outward and historical revelation. The supreme education of the soul comes through an intimate acquaintance with Jesus Christ of history.”

Rufus M. Jones

The Joy of Being His

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

ISAIAH 43:1

All of the Scripture passages we’ve looked at so far directly address joy or rejoicing, and there are plenty more we might choose that do the same thing, but I wanted to include this verse, as it’s long been a comfort and encouragement to me. The thing is, and I pray you’ve come to understand this, the only lasting joy we’ll ever know comes from Jesus—if we walk with Him, joy flows into our lives without measure. But without a living, vibrant, night-and-day longing for Him and relentless pursuit of that most precious of all relationships, we’ll surely be deprived of the joy He wants to bring to us.

God is saying He has redeemed you, He has called you “by name” and you are His. What incredible love this expresses. In relentless pursuit of your redemption, He understood all too well that to redeem you, the price of that redemption had to be paid in full, and that price was the sacrifice of His own life on the cross. That redemption rescued you from an eternity of unspeakable suffering and separation from His presence—I’d say that’s worth a massive shout of joy all by itself!

He called you by name. He knows your name and everything else there is to know about you. In fact, He is intimately acquainted with every minute detail. All those things you know about yourself that you don’t want anyone else to know, He knows completely, and He loves you anyway. There’s not a single thing in your life that will ever take Him by surprise, and His plan for you is being worked out every day, and there is

not one thing in this entire universe that has the power to separate you from His love!

And He says you are His. From the beginning of time, He has done everything He has done to ensure He could make a place for you by His side as His own “peculiar treasure,” His prized companion, the “apple of His eye,” for He is the lover of your soul. Just like our children feel uninhibited in enjoying our homes and all that we provide for them, because they know that their place in the family gives them special access and special privileges, God has given you access to Himself, and to everything His love-driven plan for you involves. That’s how it is when you belong, when you’re His. Sounds like joy to me!

PRAYER

Thank you, Lord, that I am yours... I am your child, bought with the precious blood of Jesus, and I am bound to you with a love from which I can never be separated. For the breathtaking joy that comes from being yours, and for access to the infinite blessings that flow from your goodness and mercy, I thank you!

JOYFUL GEMS

“Just as husband and wife live out their lives against the backdrop of being married, so do we live out the entirety of our lives against the backdrop of a constant relationship with God. He is always there, always loving us, always ready to listen to us. As we recognize his unwavering commitment to us, we are able to live in the day to day adventure and challenge of his presence. We enjoy the dialogue. It’s as if we say, ‘Oh, I must talk to him about this!’ ”

John Guest

When People Hate You

*Blessed (happy—with life-joy and satisfaction in God’s favor and salvation, apart from your outward condition—and to be envied) are you when people despise (hate) you, and when they exclude and excommunicate you [as disreputable] and revile and denounce you and defame and cast out and spurn your name as evil (wicked) on account of the Son of Man. **Rejoice and be glad at such a time and exult and leap for joy**, for behold, your reward is rich and great and strong and intense and abundant in heaven; for even so their forefathers treated the prophets.*

LUKE 6:22-23 (AMP, EMPHASIS ADDED)

Have you ever done something nice for someone? You really went out of your way, and you sacrificed a lot of personal time, maybe spent money you needed for other things, and just poured out all you could into this person’s life because you felt like it was the right thing to do. You weren’t looking for anything in return, no fanfare required or expected. You love Jesus and you acted to show His love to someone else. That was the end of it—or so you thought. Out of nowhere, that person for whom you acted out of love and concern, attacks you, questions your motives, calls you a liar, and then lies about you. Apparently, you didn’t do something exactly like they thought you should have, and so they feel free to attack you over it. Then their friends pile on, somehow accepting every word as if it simply wasn’t possible for any of it to be untrue. Before you know it, you’re in the center of a perfect storm of hatred and loathing. That’s just one scenario, but there are lots of reasons why, in your desire to live for God and proclaim His Gospel, you can end up being the object of someone’s profound hatred.

The instinctive response tends to be to hate them back, but Jesus said, “Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” (Luke 6:28). Then He gets even more outrageous: “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:35-36).

In our verse today, Jesus says we are to “leap for joy” when people despise us on His account. I don’t know about you, but that’s not always been my immediate reaction. But one day, the scenario I mentioned above happened to me. I wish I could tell you this is something I always get right, but on this occasion, I could not ignore God’s strong call to respond in love and forgiveness. I felt my heart fill with thanksgiving, and found the counsel of Scripture more valuable than ever. My response made no difference to the other person, though perhaps one day it will, but release and relief flooded my heart and the joy of the Lord poured into my soul in a tremendous way. It may not match your immediate emotions, and it may be the hardest thing imaginable to do, but when people hate you, let love be your answer... and great joy will follow.

PRAYER

Lord I forgive! How can I do otherwise, for your Word teaches that if I do not forgive others, how can I expect you to forgive me? Heal my heart from bitterness, fill me with your love so that I can love even those who hate me, or who have lied about me, or who have betrayed my trust. It isn’t always easy to do, Lord, but because you loved me in all my wickedness and filthiness and sin, you’ve shown me what it takes to love unconditionally and unreservedly, and, with great joy in my heart, that’s what I will do.

JOYFUL GEMS

“Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Wait for It...

*Though the fig tree may not blossom, Nor fruit be on the vines;
Though the labor of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no food;
Though the flock may be cut off from the fold, And there be no herd in
the stalls— Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my
salvation.*

HABAKKUK 3:17-18 (NKJV)

The Book of Habakkuk begins with the prophet in serious complaint mode. He's basically reprimanding God for what he sees as God's slow response to some serious problems. "Can't you hear me? Don't you see this mess?" is basically what he's saying. God lets him rant a while, because a gracious God will do that, and then points out some things. Habakkuk didn't especially like what he heard and got back to complaining. We don't have space to dissect the whole book here, but God lets Habakkuk know that He has a plan, He knows how to execute that plan, and it will ultimately bring the very things Habakkuk desires. However, God doesn't just know the plan, He knows the timetable, and that is so often what many of us have trouble with."

God told Habakkuk this: "For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay." (Habakkuk 2:3). When God has an important role for you in His purposes, only He knows when the right time is. The vision has an "appointed time," and our job, even if it seems slow, even if it lingers, is the one thing we usually don't want to hear about... we must wait for it!

Finally, Habakkuk gets it. He understands that God is in control and that he needs to trust Him no matter what things look like. In fact, he is so overwhelmed by his understanding of God's sovereign power,

Habakkuk begins to sing. The entire third chapter is a song of praise and rejoicing. Even though the nation was about to be judged, and there would be a tremendous price to pay for the disobedience the people had shown in the face of God's warnings, Habakkuk could now see past that and he knew that God's purposes would prevail—even amid chaos and war and captivity.

As our verse today indicates, there might be no crops and no livestock—none of the things we would normally depend on—but there is always reason to rejoice in the Lord! Maybe the wait is beginning to seem a little long to you today. You know God has a plan but you just wish it would hurry up and happen. Now is the exact time to trust God with all your heart, to take him at His Word, and to rejoice that He never fails to come through at just the right time. Until then, whatever it is God has promised you, with joy in your heart, wait for it!

PRAYER

Lord, thank you that the moment I turn to you, everything is set in its rightful place. The circumstances may not have changed yet, and even though the things I need are still not on hand, you are right here, fully in control. What I need most is you, and you haven't gone anywhere—you're still as close as the whisper of your Name. For that reason alone, although there are many others, I will rejoice in you, the God of my salvation!

JOYFUL GEMS

"Crises of every kind will find us... [But] these crises enter our lives not just as challenges to us to retain our balance and stability, but as invitations to stretch our hearts and minds... [Every crisis] includes within [itself] an invitation for us to move from being good people to becoming great people."

Ronald Rolheiser

God's Works Bring Joy

*For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work;
at the works of your hands I sing for joy.*

PSALM 92:4

I was born in Scotland, and while I may be biased, I think our small nation is home to some of the most beautiful landscapes on the planet. I've been fortunate enough to travel to many places and I've seen some incredible things, but Scotland can hold its own with any of them in terms of breathtaking beauty. Whenever I get the chance to visit, one of my greatest pleasures is to get in a car and head into the Scottish Highlands. I'll stop constantly to get out and gaze at the gorgeous scenery that just seems to get more magnificent around every bend. I look in amazement and say, as one great preacher put it, "Well done, God!"

The Psalmist sings for joy at God's works, and no wonder. But the home God has given us on Planet Earth isn't just beautiful, it's one carefully prepared to nurture and provide for his most treasured creation, you and me.

I'm no scientist, but even a layman like me can look at the incredible fine-tuning of where our planet is in the solar system, the beneficial effects of the just-right positions of the moon and the sun, the location of our solar system in the Milky Way Galaxy and so many more factors that, were they even slightly different, would make advanced life on our planet impossible. I won't even discuss the vast reaches of the universe itself, except to say that from its beginning until now, its development has been perfectly engineered for the benefit of human beings living right here, right now.

Of course, some will dismiss all this as mere coincidence, but there are just so many of those coincidences, all occurring at probabilities so low as to make it mathematically impossible for all this to have happened by mere

chance. No, these are the incredible works of God, all designed for His specific purpose of providing a home for us, where we can enjoy not just His creation, but a relationship with the Creator Himself.

Look around you at the marvels of God's works, take a stroll outside tonight and look up at the stars, and consider the vastness and complexity of the universe—a universe created just for us. In all this, know that none of these is His greatest work. That happened on Calvary, when His only Son paid the price for our sins and made the miracle of salvation possible. God has given us literally countless reasons today to follow the Psalmists example, and “sing for joy!”

PRAYER

Father, I look to the heavens, and I look to the earth, and see the majesty and the beauty of all that you have created, and I know that they are only a pale reflection of the majesty and the beauty of their Creator. Thank you, too, that you haven't finished creating. There is a new heaven and a new earth that you are preparing for us, where we will rejoice in your presence for ever. But until then, I can see the evidence of your marvelous works right now, and I pray they always make me sing for joy!

JOYFUL GEMS

“Here is something I began to feel after I had faith: the unexpected joy of living things. At some point, living things began to seem precious to me, and I wanted to pet them, hug them—babies and dogs and lizards, whatever. For me, the great fruit of belief is joy. There is a God, there is a purpose, there is a meaning to things, there are realities we cannot guess at, there is a big peace, you are part of it.

“ ‘God is good.’ Near him is where you want to be. There is something called everlasting happiness, and Saint Paul—a fiercely imperfect man who was a great man—was granted visions of it, and that great user of words was floored by it and said that no one can imagine how wonderful it is. The human imagination cannot encompass it.”

Peggy Noonan

Joy Comes in the Morning

*For His anger is but for a moment,
His favor is for life;
Weeping may endure for a night,
But joy comes in the morning.*

PSALM 30:5 (NKJV)

David has been ill, so ill that he felt near to death. David sees his illness as a sign that God was not pleased with him—that God was, in fact, angry with him. In verse six, David talks about how in his prosperity he felt that he would “never be moved,” but in the following verse he tells how God hid his face from him, and he knew he was in trouble. Sometimes, God just has to step in, slow us down, and make sure we recognize who is in control. Not even a king gets to set God’s agenda.

When things went wrong, David got praying. It is a sad fact of life that so many of us, like David, sometimes forget to pray till catastrophe hits. Trust me, when God decides it’s time to get your attention, He’s more than able to do it. At times like that, we can feel terrible despair. There’s guilt, there’s self-recrimination and then there’s that long, painful night of weeping. There may even be many nights of weeping, but whatever reason God has for engineering that circumstance in our lives, those are the nights He wants us to find Him, to trust in Him, to yield to whatever it is that He wants to do in and through our lives.

The trials we endure as followers of Christ may have nothing at all to do with God being angry, but they always have to do with His incredible plans and purposes for our lives. I can’t promise that things will turn out the way you want or expect them to, but I can promise that nothing you’re experiencing is a surprise to God. He won’t leave your side for a moment, and certainly not while you’re weeping through the darkest,

longest nights of your life. You need to believe this—He won't leave you alone for a single second!

And when that night is over, when the dawn breaks and the power and presence of Jesus shines into your heart more brightly than the sun itself, you'll find that you know Him more sweetly and more intimately than ever before. Some of these trials may never be explained till the morning you wake in eternity and embrace Him face to face, but what a morning that will be! In that majestic moment, and for every moment in His presence for endless eons to follow, I wonder if we'll even think of these troubled nights. Yes, weeping may endure for a night, but make no mistake, there is a purpose, and there is an end to even the longest night, and joy always comes in the morning!

PRAYER

Lord God, when things trouble me so much I weep through the night, or just weep because it feels as dark as night and there seems to be no such thing as a morning to come, help me look for the light of your presence, and refuse to let these awful circumstances take my eyes from you. For you are always with me, no matter how long the night seems, and morning will find me on my way to the joy of walking in your plan and purposes for my life.

JOYFUL GEMS

“In the morning, prayer is the key that opens to us the treasures of God's mercies and blessings; in the evening, it is the key that shuts us up under his protection and safeguard.”

Jacques Ellul,

Endless Wells of Joy

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

ISAIAH 12:3

Working with an orphanage in the remote rural heartland of Moldova in eastern Europe, we learned a lot about wells. The water supply at the orphanage would seem to be okay for a while and then it would simply dry up. We had to resort to trucking in barrels of water from the city, 90 kilometers away. It was literally the only way to make sure the kids wouldn't die of thirst.

After navigating through the maze of Moldova's communist-modeled bureaucracy, we eventually found the government department with the right people to help us. A huge study was done, and one day I sat across the desk from the government engineer as he very proudly unrolled his sheets of plans and technical papers and showed me the problem. "Your well is in the wrong place," he said, "and you need to go much deeper. Look, there's plenty of water there, but the well you have can't reach it."

Sure enough, thanks to a generous sponsor, we got to work on a new well, and drilled down to where the water supply flowed without limit. There's never been a problem with water since then because our well is tapped into the proper water source, so it can supply all we need and more.

The right well in the right place will save your life, and when Isaiah wrote these words, few things were more highly prized in that arid climate than a well that supplied free-flowing, clear, cool water. Such wells were crucial to survival, and the evocative word picture given by the prophet is no less compelling today, even in our modern world. Everyone understands that you can't survive without water, but here Isaiah is saying that there is a limitless supply of something even more

essential than that. The wells Isaiah is talking about are connected to the One who said, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Rivers of living water will brim and spill out of the depths of anyone who believes in me this way.” (John 7:37-38, The Message).

The wells of salvation are plentiful. Matthew Henry said it this way: “God’s promises revealed, ratified, and given out to us, in his ordinances, are wells of salvation; wells of the Saviour (so some read it), for in them the Saviour and salvation are made known to us and made over to us.” The wells are filled with endless supply, “waters to swim in,” (Ezekiel 47:5), if you will. The joy that comes as we draw from these wells is as endless as the resources of the One who offers it to us freely. Simply put, He is offering you endless wells of joy!

PRAYER

Father, I thank you for the endless wells of joy you have provided. I pray that I’ll draw freely, that I’ll never look to be filled from some other well, and that rivers of living water will flow out of me, bringing the joy and the reality of your salvation to thirsty souls everywhere I go.

JOYFUL GEMS

“The enjoyment of [God] is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied.... Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends are but shadows, but enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams, but God is the fountain. These are but drops, but God is the ocean.”

Jonathan Edwards

What Praise Does

*My lips will shout for joy, when I sing praises to you; my soul also,
which you have redeemed.*

PSALM 71:23

Have you ever made it to church by the skin of your teeth? I mean, the weight of so many troubles almost persuaded you to stay in bed, cover your head and try to hide from the world and all its woes. Been there, done that! Thankfully, I've learned something vital to my life and to my relationship with God, and when that feeling hits, I get up even more determinedly, and I get myself to the House of God. So, the first thing to know for today is, while it's okay to feel that way from time to time, whatever happens—DON'T DO IT!

Let's visualize the scenario... Somehow, you get yourself to church, and perhaps you hide your worries behind a smile while you say hello to some folks. Then the service begins and perhaps you still feel awful, but, hopefully, you've learned that it's worth making the effort to enter in anyway.

Then the worship team begins to sing. I pray you're in a church where the goal is not to give a performance, but to exalt God and bring Him to the forefront of everything that is being said and done. You begin to sing words that stir up your faith, words that have their root in Scripture, words that express your thanks to God for who He is and what He has done. In short, you've begun to praise God.

Then, somehow, in your praises, you begin to once again grasp the greatness of God, and the spiritual environment you're operating in becomes completely different. As you praise Him and thank Him for His love, His mercy, and His mighty power, your faith rises to grasp these things as reality, not just nice words in a song. Finally, seen through the

prism of praise, those problems we came in with seem far less weighty. For me, just the act of heartfelt praise to God makes a difference. Praise may not change my problems, but it absolutely changes me.

We've talked here about praising God in church and that is definitely a powerful thing to do, but we certainly shouldn't wait till we're in church to praise God. We need to say with the psalmist that, "I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth." (Psalm 34:1). When David sang praises to God, our verse today tells us his lips would "shout for joy." God deserves all our praise, all the time, and the joy that fills our hearts when we do praise Him, is palpable and it is life-changing.

PRAYER

Lord, I gladly and exuberantly praise you, and I rejoice before you with a heart filled with love and adoration. My awesome God, you deserve all the praise and all the glory, for you never stop working for the benefit of your children. I praise you with a joyful heart, and that joy is but one more reason to keep praising you!

JOYFUL GEMS

"Like a victorious locker room, church is a place to exult, to give thanks, to celebrate the great news that all is forgiven, that God is love, that victory is certain."

Philip Yancey

The Joy of Giving

For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:2 (ESV)

When Paul wrote his second letter to the Corinthians, he wanted to encourage them to send a gift for the relief of the poor in Jerusalem. As an example, he told them about the Macedonian church and the generosity they had shown. Paul tells the Corinthians that these godly people gave freely, despite great affliction and the extreme poverty of their own circumstances. Paul said they not only gave according to their means but “beyond their means.” Clearly, their generous gift was provided at the cost of great personal sacrifice. Yet, there was no reticence on the part of the Macedonians. In fact, Paul says they were “begging earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints.” (2 Corinthians 8:4).

The Macedonians weren’t just a good example for the Corinthians, they make an excellent example for you and me as well. In their giving, they experienced “abundant joy,” despite the extreme sacrifice involved. Has God ever challenged you to give something that, by any logical measure, you simply couldn’t afford to do without? When God challenges you to give like the Macedonians—beyond your means—that’s a whole different level of giving. This is giving that gets God’s attention!

It almost stretches the bounds of credibility in our materialistic age to suggest that giving away what you need for yourself could ever have a positive outcome. Yet, for the follower of Christ, it is absolute truth. We have no greater example than Christ Himself. As Paul says later in this

chapter, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:9). Not only did Jesus become poor for our sake, His sacrifice was offered with great joy: “Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:2).

Great sacrifice made Christianity possible in the first place, and great sacrifice continues to make it possible to proclaim the gospel and minister in Jesus’ Name to poor and hurting people. Again, this kind of giving gets God’s attention, and His response to it will likely astonish you. And without doubt, when you obey God in this realm, it produces joy on a supernatural level—joy in the hearts of those touched by your giving, and, like the Macedonians, you’ll experience the “abundant joy” that only a “wealth of generosity” can impart.

PRAYER

Lord, you have been ridiculously generous to me. The blessings you have given me are literally uncountable. Help me, Lord, to be like you, full of extravagant generosity, giving wherever I can, instantly obeying you when you lead me to give something, ready to sacrifice for the sake of the Kingdom with a glad and joyful heart. For the privilege of giving and therefore learning to be more like you, I thank you!

JOYFUL GEMS

“Laughter is an instant vacation. Giving is a two-week cruise with pay.”

Bob Hope

In His Presence

*You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

PSALM 16:11

Here we are, back at the verse we started with. We've looked at so many ways God can pour joy into our lives, but they all bring us back to this one thing: where Jesus is, joy is! To be in His presence is everything, and all that we need can be found there, no matter what we might be facing.

Years ago, when my daughter was eleven, I had a conversation with her. She was trying to grasp the idea that her parents grew up in a world with no Cable TV, no cellphones, and (this was the one that shocked her most) no Wi-Fi—in fact, no internet at all. As I laughed at her amazement, another thought struck me, and it wasn't funny at all. We can carry a world of information and entertainment around in our pockets, and with social media and all the other ways we can get “connected,” my daughter, along with the rest of us, is surrounded by a world of perpetual distraction.

I need not add that easy access to material that is positively harmful only makes the problem even worse. With all that bombards us, screaming for our attention on a constant basis, we need to make sure we are ruthlessly intentional about getting alone with God and cultivating His presence in our lives.

Some say the endless choices on offer have literally affected our brains, and many of us have developed desperately short attention spans. But there is no shortcut to knowing God—only spending time in His presence does that. God tells us, “When you come looking for me, you'll find me. Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more

than anything else, I'll make sure you won't be disappointed." (Jeremiah 29:13-14, The Message).

Even from the backdrop of a far simpler time, C. S. Lewis knew how vulnerable we are to distraction, how willing we are to spend our days on everything but knowing God. "We are half-hearted creatures," he said, "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 the sea."

Today, refuse to be distracted, refuse to be lulled into a well-entertained stupor. Focus, tune out all the commotion, and go after God with all your heart. The prize is the presence of God, and in His presence, there is fullness of joy!

PRAYER

Lord, I make it my goal to find you in every moment, whether I'm enjoying a time of quiet reflection, or at my busiest with a long list of urgent activities to carry out. I refuse to be distracted by shiny baubles and fake trinkets; only the genuine treasure of your presence will do. And no trial or obstacle will take my eyes from you either. My heart's desire is to know you, to proclaim your love, and for irrepressible, unshakeable joy to overflow my soul and influence every person I meet and every circumstance in which you place me.

JOYFUL GEMS

The most holy practice, the nearest to daily life, and the most essential for the spiritual life, is the practice of the presence of God, that is to find joy in his divine company and to make it a habit of life, speaking humbly and conversing lovingly with him at all times, every moment, without rule or restriction, above all at times of temptation, distress, dryness, and revulsion, and even of faithlessness and sin.

Brother Lawrence in *The Practice of the Presence of God*

About the Author

B. H. Paterson has been in ministry for nearly 50 years. He is Vice President of Adullam International Ministries (AIM), with full responsibility for its programs in Moldova. AIM serves vulnerable people in Moldova, Kenya, and Alabama.

For many years Brian led Stella's Voice as its Global Director. Stella's Voice was founded to be a voice for the orphans of Moldova, giving love and care to teens at risk of being sold into human trafficking. That work continues today as AIM Moldova, now being folded into AIM, caring for almost 40 young people in three homes.

Brian and his wife, Yvonne, live in the Montgomery, Alabama area. They are the parents of three grown children and proud grandparents. For more information, visit www.aim.world.

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