

JOY

STRIVING WITH OUR MINDS FOR JOY IN GOD'S GLORY

God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.
—JOHN PIPER

The final frontier in the discipline of the mind for the sake of loving God, is the pursuit of joy in Him. To love God, while a command, cannot be reduced to a mere duty. Right love produces right obedience, but obedience in itself does not produce love. One should not imagine that disimpassioned duty delights the heart of God more than joy in Him—a joy that delights to do His will, expressing its love.

Looking to Jesus

Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 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 12:1-2

This text speaks of both the discipline of the mind and its satisfaction. Cast in terms of perseverance, the whole principle rests on the idea that the mind will steadily “look to” or “fix its focus on”¹ Jesus as the ultimate model. What’s more, the example of Jesus points us to His own discipline of mind in looking to the reward—the *joy* set before Him. At once we see into the thought-life of the heart and its pursuit of satisfaction. These are both profoundly good practices to follow.

B. B. Warfield offers some rather striking insight for our consideration of Jesus’ example of pursuing joy:

We call our Lord “the Man of Sorrows”, and the designation is obviously appropriate for one who came into the world to bear the sins of men and to give his life a ransom for many. ... In any event we must bear in mind that our Lord did not come into the world to be broken by the power of sin and death, but to break it. He came as a conqueror with the gladness of the imminent victory in his heart; for the joy set before him he was able to endure the cross, despising shame (Heb. 12:2). And as he did not prosecute his work in doubt of the issue, neither did he prosecute it hesitantly as to its methods. ... It cannot be supposed that, this particular occasion alone being excepted, Jesus prosecuted his work on earth in a state of

¹ From *aphorao*, which strictly means: to look away from all else, to give undivided attention to. When used with the preposition *eis* it marks directed attention to its object, which in this case is Christ.

mental depression. His advent into the world was announced as “good tidings of great joy” (Lk. 2:10), and the tidings which he himself proclaimed were “the good tidings” by way of eminence. Is it conceivable that he went about proclaiming them with a “sad countenance” (Mt. 6:16)? ... Joy he had; but it was not the shallow joy of mere pagan delight in living, nor the delusive joy of a hope destined to failure; but the deep exultation of a conqueror setting captives free. This joy underlay all his sufferings and shed its light along the whole thorn-beset path which was trodden by his torn feet. ... If our Lord was “the Man of Sorrows”, he was more profoundly still “the Man of Joy”.²

In a similar manner, A. B. Bruce prompts us to consider: “Hence, though a man of sorrow, he was even on earth anointed with the oil of gladness above his fellows. ... Shall we wonder that there was divine gladness in the heart of him who came into the world, not by constraint, but willingly; not with a burning sense of wrong, but with a grateful sense of high privilege; and that he had a blessed consciousness of fellowship with his Father who sent him, during the whole of his pilgrimage through this vale of tears?”³

These observations argue strongly for our understanding to be settled on this fact: in all the vicissitudes of this life, indeed in the greatest of human sufferings, there is no greater prescription for glorifying God than by disciplining the mind to find its joy in Christ. Joy is a necessary motivation of the heart, and the directing of thoughts to “run with endurance the race that is set before us” is a necessary outworking of faith in the promise of joy.

Jesus is the Messiah. Messiah means “anointed one.” To the Hebrew, joy was linked to anointing with oil. The promise linked to the Messiah’s work was “to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified” (Isaiah 61:3). Proverbs 27:9 says, “Oil and perfume make the heart glad” (see also Ecclesiastes 9:8 and Amos 6:6). Speaking of the Christ, Psalm 45:7 says, “you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.”

What was this joy that Christ exemplified? Christ’s joy came in doing what pleased the Father (Hebrews 10:5-7; Isaiah 11:3). So Psalm 40:8, speaking for Jesus, says, “I delight to do your will, O my God.” There is a profound connection between the glory of God and the joy of man—this is God’s good design.

² B. B. Warfield, “On the Emotional Life of Our Lord,” in *Biblical and Theological Studies: A Commemoration of 100 Years of Princeton Seminary* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1912), 67, 68, 70.

³ A. B. Bruce, *The Humiliation of Christ* (1881), 334.

Defining Joy

The grand quest of fallen human emotions can aim no higher than exultation in the living God. This in a word is *worship*. It captures the purpose for which we were created. We will no more clearly be in direct pursuit of fulfilling our purpose and the Lord's greatest commandment—the command to love the Lord (Mark 12:30)—than when we are striving with our minds for joy in God's glory.

Fenton J. A. Hort suggests, "There is no life, worthy to be called life, entirely separate from joy and gladness. ... He whose heart has learned to make answer to the Lord comes to find that the power of life and joy lives on with him while outward things are taking their course of obstruction or decay. He has a life exempt from being dried up, for it flows not from within himself or from any part of the perishable creation but from an ever living fountain in the heavens."

One Scottish divine described joy as

the possession of present good ... it is conscious elevation of character, ... the opening up of a new world, and the hope of final perfection and victory. It is opposed to dulness, despondency, indifference, and all the distractions and remorse which are wrought by the works of the flesh. This joy is the spring of energy, and praise wells out of the joyful heart.⁴

True joy is uniquely Christian. It has well been said that "Joy is more conspicuous in Christianity than in any other religion and in the Bible more than any other literature."⁵ It is the fruit of the Holy Spirit within the regenerate heart (Galatians 5:22). While it is something essential that every human being longs for, its power is felt only within hearts made right with God through Christ crucified and risen. Only the forgiven—those who know and love God—can know the truest nature of joy. What a high stewardship the church has before the world.

HAPPINESS AND HOLINESS

Sometimes well intending Christians say, "God wants us to be holy, not happy." This statement suggests that God is not really interested in our happiness, only our holiness. But this is misleading. It would be better to say that "God wants us to be happy in holiness." The two are not at odds.

Surely Christlike joy is not based on *happenings*, but rather that gladness of heart that is determined by realities greater than a present experience. It is the kind of pleasure that can be experienced only through thought. Thus, a Christlike joy is one that all the troubles

⁴ John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869), 422.

⁵ G. G. Findlay, "Joy," in *Dictionary of the Bible* (1952), 500, as cited by Saucy, 25.

and sorrows of this world prove powerless to extinguish. But the experience of it requires a discipline of mind.

CIRCUMSTANCES

In gracious kindness, God provides good gifts common to all mankind as a witness to Himself as the great Giver of all life and goodness. So we read in Acts, "Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness" (14:17). It is God's purposes that the hearts of His creatures be satisfied, but not merely in the gift of created things.

God is to be our exceeding joy (Psalm 43:4). More than His gifts, the Giver is to be our satisfaction. This principle is woven throughout Scripture. "Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4). "For you make him most blessed forever; you make him glad with the joy of your presence" (Psalm 21:6). "For then you will delight yourself in the Almighty and lift up your face to God" (Job 22:26). "One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple." (Psalm 27:4). "Blessed is the one you choose and bring near, to dwell in your courts! We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, the holiness of your temple!" (Psalm 65:4). "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." (Psalm 73:25–26). "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." (Philippians 4:4).

Joy in God is not circumstantial in principle. It is not determined by circumstances. To anchor our joy to circumstances is to shift our center off of God. This is why God tells the children of Israel, "Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and lacking everything. And he will put a yoke of iron on your neck until he has destroyed you" (Deuteronomy 28:47–48). Instead, we are to express with David a joy in God that surpasses all the riches of His good gifts, "You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound" (Psalm 4:7). The prophet Habakkuk expresses a joy in God that rises above tremendous circumstances: "Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation" (Habakkuk 3:17–18). But undisciplined minds cannot expect to experience such joy.

IMPULSE

Joy does not come by feeding every impulse and desire that springs up from within, it is designed to come with discipline. Following impulse never directs us to purposeful joy. Here is the irony. First, no one plans to be joyless as their goal in life. Second, no long-term goal is reached by following the impulse of the heart. Conclusion: purposeful joy is not obtained by impulse. Are the people who follow their feelings truly the happiest for it? What is your goal in life? Do you honestly think that the path to get there is laid by impulse?

Disciplining the Mind for Joy

I have set the LORD always before me ... Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices ... You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Psalms 16:8-11

A BITTER-SWEET DISCOVERY

You may experience what you might consider counter-productive as you begin to think about your thinking. Richard Baxter offers us helpful counsel:

It is the tempter's method to keep sinners utterly careless of their thoughts, and senseless of any sin that is in them, as long as he can; and when that hope faileth him, he will labour to make a humbled, obedient soul so sensible of the sin of his thoughts, and so careful about them, as to confound him, and cast him into melancholy, discouragement, and despair, and then he will have no command of his thoughts at all; but they will be as much ungoverned another way, and feed continually upon terror. The end of this temptation is to distract you and confound you.⁶

THE GOSPEL

If we believe that duty is all that God is interested in, then we do not truly understand the "good news of great joy." Duty has more to do with function and joy with relationship. How then can we make sense out of this in light of the gospel? Christ did not suffer and die in our place to get a few more hands to do His bidding. The cross reconciles us to God—His mighty, gracious work of redemption brings us back to God (1 Peter 3:18). Joy is a necessary mark of salvation, a result of the gospel, a product of the Holy Spirit. Augustine said, "If I were to ask you why you have believed in Christ, why you have become Christian, every man will answer truly, 'For the sake of joy.'"

⁶ Baxter, 179.

SANCTIFICATION

In the context of repentance of sin, Nehemiah instructs the people of Israel: “And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.' For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. 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 8:9–10).

True sanctification does not focus only on the death of sin within, but by necessity it must pursue the life of God within. We cannot grow in Christlikeness by focusing on our sin only any more than a man can run with one leg. In Deuteronomy, the Lord says, “you shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose ... there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices ... And there you shall eat before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice” (12:5-7). “Strength and joy are in his place,” says 1 Chronicles 16:27. The Lord says, “Let those who delight in my righteousness shout for joy and be glad and say evermore, ‘Great is the LORD, who delights in the welfare of his servant!’” (Psalm 35:27).