

Title: Finding our Joy
Text: Psalm 16:11
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Preacher: Rev Stu Cameron

During the 1990's Greg Norman was prowling the world's fairways attempting to win that elusive golf major. Our son Joel was very young then, and was a very early riser. Some of my best memories of those years was sitting in our lounge room in Tasmania in the early hours of the morning with Joel sitting on my lap, watching TV as together we cheered Greg on. In fact we think that Joel's first complete sentence was, 'Go Greg!'

It was during these father-son bonding times on the couch that my dream was born. My dream was that when he grew up, Joel would be a professional golfer – number one in the world no less - travelling the world with his wonderfully supportive father acting as his caddy, earning a comfortable living on his 10% caddy commission. I had it all mapped out. Alas a few years later Joel's promising golf career ended after six months in the game when we moved to Queensland, even though there were golf courses everywhere, he discovered surfing, skating and girls – in that order.

Parents invest all sorts of hopes and aspirations in their kids, many of them ridiculous like mine. When it all comes down to it, when asked, most parents will say, after being healthy:

I just want them to be...happy

The problem is that happiness, however you define it, is elusive. There are a myriad of measures of happiness, like 'happiness indexes', and all of them point to the fact that across the Western world we are far less happy now than we have been for decades. Newsweek reported that in 2000, 50 new books were published on the subject of happiness. In 2008 that figure was 4000. Our society is obsessed with the pursuit of happiness and it seems wholly unsuccessful in achieving it.

But I think there is an even deeper problem. I think when we make our goal, or we make the goal of our children a 'happy life' we set the bar way too low.

Let's look at it from another angle. What does God want for his children? What are his aspirations for us? If you are not sure if God really exists at all, just humor me for a while.

It's an interesting question. More often than not we approach our relationship with God from a completely different angle. We often will ask ourselves, 'What does God from me?' It's an important question. But there is a question that comes even before that, and which shifts everything; 'What does God want for me?'

In the Gospel of John Jesus addresses his disciples just before he is betrayed, arrested, tried and crucified. It's a long speech where Jesus prepares his friends for his death. He tells a parable of the Vine and the Branches, signaling that they should be grafted in to him and so abide, or remain in his love, like a branch is connected to the root. He wants them to stay firmly connected to him and each other through the gift of the Holy Spirit. He then goes on to say:

I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.
(John 15:11)

God's hope and aspiration for we who are his children is not that we would be happy, but that we would remain in him – abide in his love – and so be joyful –in fact filled to overflowing with his joy. The same joy that Jesus has in living in relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit – he wants for us. Hallelujah!

God is far more passionate about our joy than he is about our happiness.

I did a little research during the week. In the bible happiness or its derivatives is mentioned twenty times, while joy occurs 242 times – more than ten times the amount. Joy, the joy we have in and through God, is a key theme of the bible.

Some of you might be thinking I'm splitting hairs – that happiness and joy are the same thing. For example, the Oxford dictionary says:

Happy (adjective)

Feeling or showing pleasure or contentment.

Joyful (adjective)

Feeling, expressing, or causing great pleasure and happiness.

But biblical joy has a much deeper and rounder definition than the dictionary. Dallas Willard puts it this way:

Joy is not pleasure or a mere sensation, but a pervasive and constant sense of well being. Hope in the goodness of God is joy's indispensable support.

(Dallas Willard)

Simply put, happiness is heavily dependent on circumstances, whereas joy is a gift from God that can be received and experienced in the midst of all circumstances.

Joy is a gift from God. It is part of the fruit of the Spirit – an outworking of remaining in or abiding in Jesus. CS Lewis says that:

Joy is the serious business of Heaven.

(CS Lewis)

God is serious about our joy.

Just after we married Sue and I visited our cousins in Western Australia. One of Lindy and Phil's children was a precocious little girl called Esther. When we visited Esther was smart and sassy and completely adorable two-year old. We were out in the backyard when Esther acted up and her mum gave her a little smack on her well padded bottom. Esther was no cuter then when she cried. She cried for quite a while until Lindy distracted her by saying. 'Esther darling, you've lost your joy – you need to find your joy again.' I thought Esther couldn't get any cuter, but I was wrong as for the next 20 minutes or so this little two year old waddled around the backyard looking behind trees, under sheds and up trees for her lost joy.

Too many Christians have lost their joy. A 'joyless Christian' should be an oxymoron – a contradiction of terms. But the fact is too many of us are miserable.

Too many of us have the spiritual countenance of 'grumpy cat'. Or worse, we pretend to be joyful – put on a happy face – while inside we know only misery and frustration.

Joy is pervasive and constant sense of well being in God. Joy is not dependent on circumstances, but dependent on God. In fact, some of the most joyful people I have met have been immersed in the most tragic of circumstances.

So how is your joy this morning? How content in God are you? Seriously? Have you 'lost your joy'?

Many of us here this morning have experienced the joy Jesus talks of. In the early days – even years of our faith, everything was new and wonderful and full of life and energy. The bible was alive, prayer was vital and we couldn't wait to get to church. Spiritually, we were a little like this sparkler – bright and colorful and full of energy and life. But like this sparkler, somewhere along the way, we lost the spark – the energy source that gave us life. We still smolder, but we long to be on fire again. Our spoken and unspoken plea or prayer is the cry of David, 'Restore to me God the joy of my salvation!'

Here is the good news. If, like Esther, you have lost your joy, you can find it again. If like David you long for the joy of your salvation to be restored, it can.

In the end, joy is a gift of God that is found in the very presence of God. Our key text today is from Psalm 16, written by King David, a man who was a joy-expert. David said this of God:

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)

In the presence of God there is not just joy, but the fullness of joy – joy that overflows.

God's desire for us is that we be full of him and overflowing with his joy.

Joy is found the presence of God. For the rest of this message I want to be intensely practical. I want to address the question as to how we can experience the joy-filling presence of God.

In Philippians, Paul says:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!
(Philippians 4:4)

To rejoice is simply to express joy. When we 'rejoice in the Lord', we express our contentment in God, and as we do, we enter a beautiful, virtuous and life-giving cycle.

You see, as we express our joy in God, we receive more joy from God

Or as the letter of James says, as we draw near to God; God draws near to us.

I want to give you four very practical suggestions as to how you can rejoice in God this week, and indeed any week. To rejoice in the Lord:

Look Back (Thank God)
Look Around (Adore God)
Look Up (Praise God)
Look Forward (Trust God)

Look Back (Thank God)

Most scholars suggest that David wrote Psalm 16 either when he was on the run from King Saul, or reflecting on that experience. This is the psalm of a fugitive. David was running for his life. He lost everything in the process – including his connection with family and his families land – his material inheritance. And yet David the fugitive was able to write these words of gratitude:

The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.
(Psalm 16:5-6)

The same David who has lost his land and livelihood, who was running for his life and who was slandered and marginalized and treated as a criminal, looked back over this life with gratitude.

The story of every human life is full of twists and turns, ups and downs – great joys and deep sorrows. When we are joyless, the last thing we think we can do is look back with gratitude. But if we will take the time to look back, even over a life marked by pain – as every life is - we will also find a life marked by the unmistakable fingerprints of God. Nicky Gumbel says this:

Joy is not found in the absence of suffering, but in the presence of God.
(Nicky Gumbel)

It is possible to find the unmistakable imprint of God, even in the most awful times of personal suffering. Even in dire and difficult circumstances, David was able to declare with gratitude that in God he had a beautiful inheritance.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Pastor during the Second World War. With others he courageously opposed the evils of Nazism, for which he was arrested, imprisoned and, just weeks before the end of the war, executed. He said this:

Gratitude changes the pangs of memory into a tranquil joy.
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

When we look back over even the most trying times of life and find those things for which we can truly be thankful, something shifts in us as we draw near to God, and in his presence, joy – contentment in God – begins to blossom.

If you want to recover your lost joy, practice the spiritual discipline of thanksgiving, or as Alexander McLaren says:

Seek to cultivate a buoyant, joyous sense of the crowded kindnesses of God in your daily life.
(Alexander McLaren)

Gratitude is a doorway that opens in the presence of God. And in the Presence of God we discover fullness of joy.

Look Around (Adore God)

David spent a lot of time outdoors; first as a shepherd boy, and later as a fugitive on the run from King Saul. I can just lay on his back, staring up at the night sky, as in his mind he composed the opening words of Psalm 8:

LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory in the heavens.
(Psalm 8:1)

David knew how to adore God. David knew who to gaze through created things in order to gaze with adoration on the Creator. He knew that as we do this, we gain a divine perspective on who God is and who we are in God. Let me put it this way:

Creation provides us with icons of beauty through which we encounter a deeper Beauty.

We rejoice in God as we adore God. We adore God as we experience his beauty through the beauty of creation.

One of my favorite places on the planet is Liffey Falls in Northern Tasmania. A couple of weeks ago I walked into the falls and took a selfie. It's a beautiful place; a place where spiritually I go, 'Aaah!' It's a beautiful place where I encounter the deeper Beauty of God. Here I can rejoice in the Lord. Here I find my joy tank filling up again. Henry Ward Beecher says:

The sun does not shine for a few trees and flowers, but for the wide world's joy.
(Henry Ward Beecher)

Where is this world do you encounter beauty? Where are you inspired to gaze on God through what God has created? We live in one of the most beautiful places on the planet. It's the Gold Coast; we have no excuses not to adore God. Seriously!

Adoration is a doorway that opens into the Presence of God. And in the Presence of God we discover fullness of joy.

Look Up (Praise God)

In one of his most beautiful psalms, Psalm 103, David begins:

Praise the LORD, my soul;
All my inmost being, praise his holy name.
Praise the LORD, my soul,
and forget not his benefits.
(Psalm 103:1-2)

For the rest of the psalm, in a disciplined way David lists the incredible way he has encountered God. David recognizes that in each of these encounters he has glimpsed something of the awesome character of God. I implore you to read Psalm 103 sometime today or this week. Summarizing his observations, in Psalm 103 David says:

My God forgives, heals, redeems, crowns, satisfies and renews.
My God is just, compassionate, gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love.

The longer the Psalm goes, the longer he meditates on the character of God, the more David gets lost in wonder, love and praise.

The more joy David expresses in God, it seems the more joy he receives from God. Through disciplined meditation on the character, David praised God. Through praise, David drew near to the Presence of God. And in the Presence of God, David discovered the fullness of God's joy.

Often we have an erroneous understanding of what meditation is:

Meditation isn't emptying our mind of thought.
Meditation is filling our thoughts with God.

When we fill our thoughts with God, joy soon follows.

Vincent Van Gogh was a brilliant painter with a deeply troubled mind, suffering mental health challenges all his life. His father was a Dutch Reformed minister, and Vincent himself tried to enter seminary, but was rejected. In his early 20's, Vincent rejected his Christian upbringing and sank into deeply destructive behaviours.

A distinctive of Van Gogh's work is his use of the colour yellow. For him, yellow represented hope and truth. A painting from his depressive period is *The Starry Night*. Here you can find a yellow sun and yellow swirling stars and yellow in the windows of village homes – but no yellow in the church which remains dark and almost hidden. For Vincent, God was dead. Hope and truth and joy could only be found in nature, if at all.

By the grace of God, Van Gogh began to embrace the grace and truth of Christian faith towards the end of his tragically short life. Most of his Christian-themed paintings are from this period. One of them, painted a year after *Starry Night*, is the *Raising of Lazarus*. As you can see, the entire picture is (blindingly) bathed in yellow. In fact, van Gogh put his own face on Lazarus to express his new-found own hope in the Resurrection.

As Van Gogh's mind filled with thoughts of God, his life was painted a vivid yellow – his life was flooded with hope and joy.

As we fill our thoughts with God, like David we will be lost in wonder, love and praise – like Vincent Van Gogh, our life will be colored a joyful yellow – and we will discover in the Presence of God an overflowing joy.

Praise is a doorway that opens into the Presence of God. And in the Presence of God we discover fullness of joy.

Look Forward (Trust God)

David was a brutally honest man. In Psalm 13, he cries out to God:

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
(Psalm 13:1-2)

Ever prayed a prayer like that? Ever felt like praying a prayer like it? David tells God exactly how he is feeling and about the doubts he is experiencing. He doesn't complain about God. In prayer, he complains to God. In going to God in the midst of his despair, David expresses his trust and faith in God. Just a few verses later he says this:

But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
(Psalm 13:5)

Even when he had every reason not to, David looked forward and trusted God. He rejoiced in the salvation he was yet to experience – a salvation to come!

The most radical example of looking forward with trust is Jesus himself. The writer of Hebrews makes this remarkable claim:

For the joy set before him (Jesus) endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

(Hebrews 12:2)

Jesus willingly embraced the horror and shame of the cross because he trusted his future to his Father and knew that beyond unimaginable pain and suffering he would encounter was infinite joy.

In this life we will experience pain, suffering, grief and loss. No one is exempt.

In the midst of life's storms, those of us who follow Jesus have the opportunity to do as he did; lean forward and trust our future to God. As we do, we will be surprised by joy even in the midst of suffering.

In the end, we can trust an unknown future to a Known God.

Trust – faith – is a doorway that opens into the Presence of God. And in the Presence of God we discover fullness of joy.

If you have lost your joy – of the cry of your heart is 'Restore to me God the joy of my salvation!' – if your faith no longer sparkles, but simply smoulders then Rejoice in the Lord. And again I say rejoice!

Look back and thank God. Look around and adore God. Look up and praise God. Look forward and trust God.

As you draw near to God, God will draw near to you – and in his presence you will discover, or rediscover fullness of joy.

Our joy in Him may be a fluctuating thing: His joy in us knows no change.

(Hudson Taylor)