

“How’s Your JOY Meter?”

The Big Nine, #2 - JOY

The joy of the LORD is your strength (Nehemiah 8:10). ¹

The Bible tells us that Jesus of Nazareth “*is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him*” (Colossians 1:15-16).

There are several crucial truths in that statement; but the underlying principle I want to highlight just now is the fact that, in its essence, the cosmos reflects the character of Who God Is. Among many other things, the cosmos reflects God’s glory, God’s purpose, God’s creativity, and God’s love. And the aspect of God’s character which occupies our attention this morning is God’s JOY.

Now when you think about God, do you think about God as joyful, as joyous? How about when you think about Jesus? Do you imagine Him—God in human flesh—as serious, as funny, as angry, as joyous? What things come to mind?

Recall for a moment that earthly vista which, upon your first glimpse of it, fairly took your breath away. While God’s knowledge certainly includes the awareness of all of human pain, misery, wickedness, and sorrow, God’s awareness also includes the constant gladness of all that is beautiful, generous, good, and joyous in the world. Were we to take together all of those breathtaking scenes we have just recalled, God sees and experiences every one of those, from every possible point of view, all the time—together with billions of other scenes like and unlike it, in this and untold numbers of other worlds.

Dallas Willard, a Christian philosopher, suggested that God is the most joyous being in the universe. Indeed, God’s abundant love cannot be separated from God’s infinite Joy. All of those good and beautiful things from which you and I occasionally drink tiny droplets of exhilaration, God continuously experiences in all their breadth and depth and richness. ²

“Behold,” says our God, surveying the grandeur of the Cosmos, “it is very good!” Does your concept of God include such things as these?

Or consider your impressions of Jesus as He walked among us long ago in Galilee. We may not generally think of Jesus as a “Really Fun Guy,” but if we do not, we miss a large part of the Story. Children were very fond of Jesus—as were most other people who knew Him—and such fondness seldom attaches to “sticks-in-the-mud” and “party poopers.” And at the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus told us, “*I have told you this so that **my joy** may be in you and that **your joy** may be complete*” (John 15:11).

Teilhard de Chardin famously noted that “**Joy is the surest sign of the presence of God**”; and as Aslan, the Christ figure in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, welcomes the children to The Life to Come at the end of all the stories, He notes that “You do not yet look so happy as I mean for you to be!”

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 6, 2017.

² Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), pp. 62-64.

We've noted again and again that it is God's purpose to use our lives on earth to shape our characters into the Character of Jesus, and we're in the middle of several weeks of examining what we call "the Fruit of the Spirit" as clues to what that Character might be like. And so we come this morning to the quality of JOY.

According to my Bible software, the word, "joy" appears 228 times in the Bible, with Psalms, Isaiah and Jeremiah having most of the occurrences in the Old Testament and Matthew, Luke, and John having most of the occurrences in the New Testament. Over and over again, very nearly "from cover to cover," the biblical writers affirm that God's Way is the Way of Joy.

One of my favorite verses is Proverbs 15:15, where we read that "*a cheerful [joyful] heart has a continual feast.*" And you may remember that my favorite verse in the entire Bible has to do with God's joy . . . over US — "*The Lord your God is with you. He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you. He will quiet you with his love. He will rejoice over you with singing*" (Zephaniah 3:17).

This verse provides us with the crucial insight that God does not love us as through gritted teeth, without actually *liking* us, as we may sometimes find ourselves doing with each other. Our Father in Heaven *delights* in us. He *rejoices* over us and *sings* over us!

I love the way Max Lucado put this idea. You'll recognize part of it: "There are many reasons God saves you: to bring glory to himself, to appease his justice, to demonstrate his sovereignty. But one of the sweetest reasons God saved you is because he is fond of you."

"[God] likes having you around. **If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If he had a wallet, your photo would be in it.** He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning. Whenever you want to talk, he'll listen. He can live anywhere in the universe, and he chose your heart. Face it, friend. He's crazy about you!"³

To come at this from another angle, remember that Jesus told us, "*Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it*" (Luke 18:17). Jesus wasn't telling us to remain naïve and immature, but He was telling us to develop a deep trust in God and to cultivate a robust sense of wonder. We become so easily jaded in this world of ours, so very dull and "grown up." One person put it like this:

- When I look at a patch of dandelions, I see a bunch of weeds that are going to take over my yard. Kids see flowers for Mom and white fluff you can blow and wish on.
- When I hear music I like, I know I can't carry a tune and don't have much rhythm, so I sit self-consciously and listen. Kids feel the beat and move to it. They sing out the words, and if they don't know them, they make up their own.
- When I feel wind on my face, I brace myself against it. I feel it messing up my hair and pulling me back when I walk. Kids close their eyes, spread their arms, and fly with it, until they fall to the ground laughing.
- When I see a mud puddle, I step around it. I see muddy shoes and dirty carpets. Kids sit in it. They see rivers to cross, dams to build, and worms to play with.
- I wonder if we are given kids to teach or to learn from? No wonder God loves the little children!⁴ **Be joyful, my friends. Be joyful!**

³ Max Lucado, *A Gentle Thunder* (Waco: Word, 1995). Lucado's point is developed very powerfully in William Young's *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity* (Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007).

⁴ www.preachingtoday.com

One of the very best ways to discern whether your relationship with God is rooted more in reluctant obligation or in resplendent love is to “check your Joy Meter.” Christians who are motivated by obligation tend to be stern, strict, severe . . . and stressed. Christians who are motivated by love tend to be contented, happy, eager . . . and JOY-full! “Obligation Christians” and “Joy-full Christians” might actually be doing the very same things. The diagnostic distinction is the presence or absence of JOY.

Well, so how might we develop more joy in our character and in our lives? Joy emerges as we open ourselves for God to love us; and joy flourishes as we delight in and return that love. Another way to say this is to say that joy grows as we reduce the clutter in our lives, creating space and time for joy.

While God speaks to us always, our lives are often much too busy and much too noisy for us to notice God’s “still, small, joyful voice.” So, one of the first things we can do in order to advance the needle on our Joy Meter is to create space in which to listen to and to be with God. For some of us, such time may be early in the morning; for others, late at night. For some of us, that might be after breakfast; for others, during our lunch break at work. The key thing is to unclutter some CPU time so our spirits can decompress and God’s Spirit can speak freely.

And in that uncluttered space, God can help us to see our lives and our relationships differently. We can begin to see ourselves as God sees us . . . and we’ve already seen that God *delights* in us.⁵

In this, as in nearly everything, Jesus is our Example. Jesus gave a great deal of attention to creating space to be with His Father, our God. As just one example, I don’t believe that you can find any place in the Gospels where Jesus was in a hurry.

Jesus had only about thirty-six months to change the course of human history, and yet He still had time to go to parties, to go fishing, to go on hikes with His friends, and to be alone in the high country with His Father. And remember once again what Jesus told His disciples as they sat at table for the first “Lord’s Supper”: “*I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete*” (John 15:11).

The truth is that a lack of joy in our lives is often associated with a faulty understanding of the true nature of our lives. You may have heard the quip that “if you can keep your cool when everyone else is losing theirs . . . you just don’t understand the situation.” While there is truth to that in the normal sense in which we hear it, there’s a deeper meaning, too. Pastor Tim Keller has offered two illustrations that may show what I mean:

Imagine, for example, that you’re a billionaire, and one morning you notice that you have three ten-dollar bills in your wallet. You get out of a cab, and you hand the driver one of the bills for an eight-dollar fare. Later in the day you look in your wallet and discover that there’s only one ten-dollar bill there, and you think to yourself, “Well, either I dropped a ten-dollar bill somewhere, or I gave the taxi driver two bills.”

So what are you going to do? Are you going to get all upset? Are you going to the police and demand that they search the city for the cabdriver? No, you’re going to just shrug it off. You’re a *billionaire*. So what if you lost ten dollars? You are too rich to be concerned about that kind of loss.

⁵ See Romans 12:2.

Now consider this. It may be that later this week, somebody is going to criticize you. Or something you invested in will turn out to be less valuable than you thought. Or something you wanted to happen won't go the way you want it to. These are real losses; but what are you going to do, if you truly understand who you are as the focus of God's love and delight?

Will such setbacks disrupt your contentment and peace of mind? Will you shake your fist at God? Will you toss and turn at night? If so, that will be because you haven't realized how truly rich you are. You have totally lost sight of the fact that the Eternal God who created and who sustains the Universe *delights in you*. If you let these things destroy your joy, then at the same time that you are in actuality a spiritual billionaire, a Child of the King, you are wringing your hands over what amounts to "ten dollars."⁶ Your problem is that you don't understand your situation.

Or imagine that you hire two persons of the same age, the same socioeconomic status, the same educational level, and even the same temperament. On their first day you tell them, "You are part of an assembly line, and I want you to put part A into slot B and then hand what you have assembled to the next person. I want you to do that over and over for eight hours a day, every day."

You then put these two people in identical rooms with identical lighting, temperature, and ventilation. You give them the very same number of breaks in a day. Their conditions are the same in every way—except for one difference. You told the first person that at the end of the year you will pay them \$30,000, and you told the other person that at the end of the year you will pay them \$30,000,000.

After a couple of weeks, the first person may complain, "Isn't this tedious? Isn't it driving you insane? Aren't you thinking about quitting?" And the second person will reply, "Not at all. I don't mind it a bit. In fact, I whistle while I work."

So what accounts for the difference between the two? Here are two persons who are experiencing identical circumstances in radically different ways. What's going on? The difference in outlook and experience is explained by their very different expectations about the future.⁷

Again, this is a matter of understanding our situation correctly. Whatever our present circumstances, we who are in Christ can still live joyfully, because we know how the Story ends. "Don't be afraid, little flock," Jesus said, "because your Father **delights** to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). There will be Great Reward at the End!

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," Peter wrote. "Because of his great mercy he has given us **new birth into a living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you. You are being guarded by God's power through faith for a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:3-5).

My friends, **the Joy of the Lord is your strength**. Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again. **Rejoice!** (Nehemiah 8:10; Philippians 4:4).

⁶ Tim Keller, *The Two Advocates* (Encounters with Jesus Series) (Penguin Group, 2014), Kindle Locations 242-244.

⁷ Tim Keller, *Making Sense of God* (Viking, 2016), p. 153.