

To Live In Joy

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Introduction

"Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian," said G. K. Chesterton. He suggested that Christianity satisfies man's ancestral instinct for being "the right way up" because "by its creed joy becomes something gigantic and sadness something special and small."

Not all will agree with either this claim of Christianity or his definition of joy. By this statement joy is seen as the dominant thesis of Christian faith, while the pagan touches only joy's periphery. Stating it even more graphically Chesterton pictures the unbeliever with "feet dancing upwards in idle ecstasies, while his brain is in the abyss." We find a supporting statement in the Proverbs: "Laughter cannot mask a heavy heart. When the laughter ends, the grief remains."

Certainly, if one is to judge from a large number of morose professing Christians and the vocal claims to joy of the modern pagan, Chesterton claims for both the pagan and the Christian may well seem insupportable. Chesterton may, I believe, be referring to a quality of joy which transcends the pagan's experience. This transcendent and gigantic joy is the heritage of every Christian, in whatever circumstances, and was God's intention for all humanity. The joyless Christian therefore, is either uninformed of his/her inheritance, or distracted from it by lesser pursuits. A Christian without joy is like a clock without hands--hardly typical of the norm!

What, really, is joy? It is perhaps most natural to think of it as an emotion, ranging from merriment to ecstasy, whose opposite is sorrow. However, I would like to focus first and chiefly on joy as a state of mind rather than as an emotion, as perhaps one would discuss a dog without reference to its tail, however vigorously it may wag. While joy certainly does involve emotion, emotion does not define joy, any more than a wagging tail defines a dog.

Small Illusions vs. Gigantic Joy

Eliminate my guilt and fears, create a trouble-free environment, pay all my debts, perfect my relationships; give me a loaf of bread, a jug of wine and a "thou" beside me singing in the wilderness--that is a capsulated form of

the joy formula we are fed from infancy to senility. But the contradictions are everywhere. Without guilt and fear we become reckless of consequences. In a trouble-free environment we become insensitive and lazy. Owing nothing, we become arrogant. We're stunted and dwarfed by easy relationships. The bread molds, the wine intoxicates, the "thou" either threatens or bores, and we are left to sing the modern lyric: "I don't know where we both went wrong, but the feeling's gone and I just can't get it back."

"The feeling's gone." Perhaps these words are a significant cue to what joy really is, and we may ask whether it is indeed adequate to describe it as merely feeling or sensation. An emotional high is easily daunted, highly fragile, perilously insecure. It is threatened by tests and trials, by tensions, ill health, and fluctuating relationships. When "everything's going my way," as another songwriter puts it, one may feel joyful, but the odds for that combination of circumstances are small, the duration transient, and when everything goes our way, it is likely to be at someone else's expense, as well as self-defeating in the long run.

When I was a small child, I was intrigued with our Montana bluebirds, and I remember my dad remarking, with a wry grin, that I could catch one if I would just put salt on its tail. If we make a landmark of the feeling of exaltation that comes from everything going our way, we can spend a lifetime trying to capture bluebirds by dubious means. We have all experienced the frustration of trying to recapture a fond memory from our childhood, an exhilarating adventure, an expired romance, only to find that it was unrepeatable, simply because that unique set of circumstances could not be reproduced.

It would be harmless enough to savor past emotional highs, except that we are all too prone to live in the present on the basis of some memory now become fantasy. Many marriages and friendships have been blighted, some broken, because joy became a command performance, a demand, rather than a by-product. Many have become bitter, hostile, and resentful because some brief period of emotional delight cannot be reproduced or perpetuated, and the supply of either salt or bluebirds has been exhausted.

But joy cannot be catalogued, spindled, or preserved. When pursued it becomes elusive. It comes unbidden and unrehearsed when the mind and heart are free of coercion and demand. Genuine joy is ingenuous, not ingenious--the subtle but significant difference between a product and a production. Authentic joy results from a quality of life, an inner attitude. It surprises the simple and eludes the sophisticated.

Know how to be joyful? the world asks. Buy pleasure; pay any price. Pursue it with body, soul, and spirit. Prostitute your body, perjure your soul, and placate your spirit. Eat, drink, and be merry; who cares about tomorrow? But tomorrow persistently arrives, and demands the price for yesterday's small joys, leaving the celebrant bankrupt and regretful.

Then a new voice is heard, a magic word: change! Change your residence, toothpaste, religion, spouse, deodorant, furniture, eating habits. Move to a new neighborhood, take a South Sea island cruise, adopt a new ideology. Or, in the event all these have been tried and failed, retreat from society. Drop out of the rat race; bury yourself in fantasy or some esoteric notion. Or if the adrenalin still runs high, rebel--raise an angry fist and shout out your frustrations, voice your outrage! Invest every energy in changing (or is it punishing?) a world that has robbed you of joy!

Still, in the small sensual joys, there is the hint of a larger, nobler satisfaction, a joy that will endure to quench a deeper thirst, to feed a greater hunger. There is yet another voice. Quiet and tranquil, yet persistent and pervading, it has sought to be heard in the quiet moments of despair, in the restless moments of anxiety, as well as in the small but fleeting joys of beauty and laughter. Pursue it we must! This is the voice of One who calls to us in the small illusions, the elusive encounters with small joys designed to speak of the gigantic joy for which we were created. Hear the voice of Jesus:

If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. No one has greater love than the one who lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command (John 15:1-14 NIV).

One brief summary from the lips of Jesus, and already there is the joy of discovery! Hear the voice of the One who designed us for joy: Obey me: Love as I love you! Both the means and the end are revealed in his loving command. Joy is the by-product of love, God's love. It is the certain consequence, as well as the clear evidence, of godly love. We will attempt to sketch this beautiful plan God has made for joy through love.

Meanwhile, beware the imitations. Neither love nor joy is genuine apart from God who is Love. We can only effect shabby imitations of the real thing. So long as we persist in building monuments to small joys, trying to content ourselves with the symbol rather than the reality it represents, we must be willing to live with fantasy and illusion and settle for its consequences.

The God of love calls to us in our emotional highs and our emotional lows. When we respond to him the reward is gigantic and eternal joy.

Where It All Begins

Obey me, says Jesus. "Love each other as I have loved you." The outcome, he says, is that his joy will become our joy. Joy is the essence of life as God intended it to be, the climax of his relationship with his people. All of God's goodness has in it the quality of undiminished joy. Joy is his nature, and when we are joyless we may be sure we have rejected him, ignored him, or misunderstood him in some measure, great or small. Surely hell is the consequence of the final consummate rejection of God's love, and therefore of *joy!*

God commands us to love, because he knows what all of us sooner or later discover, that love is the parent of joy. Love is our deepest need, and when that need is met, the result is joy. But only the loved can be loving. How wise the proverb that says "the earth trembles under...an unloved woman when she gets a husband." How suggestive are these wise words of our human demands for love and the intolerable burden we place on one another when our need for love is not fulfilled. The history of humanity bears eloquent witness to our exploitation of one another in the vain attempt to coerce love, to use one another to satisfy our own deep need and know the joy for which we were created.

If love cannot be coerced, is Jesus then playing some cruel trick on us when he commands us to love one another? God knows we have tried to be loving. Sometimes it even seemed easy--like falling in love, for instance, or the sweet mutuality of friendship, or nurturing a child, or sympathizing with someone's distresses. There was joy in those moments. But always it was a bittersweet joy that saw sadness and rebuff or rebuke as an enemy and a despoiler of our joy. Thus, when the object of love becomes unlovable or spurns our attentions, joy is displaced by despair. Or when the friendship or family tie becomes possessive or burdensome, our joy is smothered. Love that cannot endure hardness and rejection produces ephemeral joy. Small joys flourish and die with small loves.

In the small successes and large failures of human loves, we may flounder and rebel, become callous and bitter. There is, however, an alternative which we may choose. Often the desire to pursue the alternative is born of disillusionment and discontent with the futile attempt to fill the vacuum in our lives with loves and joys too small, too transient, to meet our need. It is doubtful that we will ever come to terms with either the emptiness of our small loves or the reality of the great love until we choose to renounce the lesser for the supreme.

But when we look to the superlative love to which Jesus enjoins us, we must quickly realize that such love is impossible for us to perform. Our best efforts produce only small loves and therefore small joys, mere shadows of the tough-yet-tender, godly love that is suited to every dimension of our humanity. Jesus calls us to love and joy so rich and rewarding, so constant and consuming, that by its light shadows vanish, imitations are readily appraised, and we can live with life as it really is. But such love is beyond our poor human powers. Jesus Christ is the only one who can call us to genuine love, because he has preceded his command with all we need to meet that demand: *himself!*

Jesus Christ offers to love us with unconditional, unremitting love. Because he is love, he does not need our love to complete himself, so the love he offers us is complete and irrevocable. His love does not need to be sustained by our faithfulness; therefore, it remains intact in the face of our failure. He does not love us because

we are lovable, but because he chooses to invest are good, but because he is good.

God loves us so much that he will not allow us to have our own way (living without regard for others), without warning us of the consequences. He made it clear from the beginning that we could not live joyfully with ourselves or with one another apart from him. We cannot find the way without his Word to guide us. He came in person and lived it for us all to see. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus interpreted for us the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament, so we could make no mistake about what is needed to live together in harmony and joy.

Because God so loved this rebel humanity, he died the death, the ultimate death, that represents all of our accumulated sin, washing away the incredible insult to his goodness and justice. Now he offers us the forgiveness for which we could never pay, the only way we can ever be without blame before him against whom we have sinned, from whom we have gone astray into barrenness, futility, and joylessness. Luke records Jesus' parable of the lost sheep which the loving shepherd sought and found, calling in his friends and neighbors to rejoice that the one sheep--insignificant to us among ninety-nine-- was found. This, Jesus says, pictures the joy in heaven over one repentant sinner.

God's love will not compromise with the evil that destroys us and blights our joy. His love heals and redeems us, and brings to fruition all the beauty and joy God meant for our humanity. His love so envelops us that we may squarely face reality, with its mixture of sadness and joys, learning to live redemptively with either or both.

The apostle Paul describes the ultimate in human love: "Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man--though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die." Then he goes on to contrast God's superlative love: "But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners (while we were enemies) Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:7,8 RSV). Again and again we are reminded that God has freely endowed us with his great love so that we, being infinitely loved, may be free to share that same quality of love with others, without regard for what we may receive in return. Unless or until our own need is supplied through Christ's loving sacrifice, and we are accepted and forgiven and loved, we can only relate to others in terms of our need. Such relationships are at best capable of only small and threatened love, yielding small and tentative joy.

The place to begin, then, is to bring to God our emptiness and inadequacy, and the stockpile of resentment and anger we have accumulated in our demands for love and joy. There in the Father's house we will be accepted as sons and heirs. We will find the full price has been paid for our sin, our lovelessness against God and humanity. And our hearts will sing with the joy of being loved as only God can love us.

Thus loved, we are free to make a deliberate and voluntary choice to love both God and our fellows. Since love's obedience cannot be coerced we may choose to love only because we are loved by God. Our response is motivated by his love. Or as 1 John 3:16 (RSV) states: "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." (Incidentally, although chapter and verse designations are obviously uninspired, 1 John 3:16 is an interesting parallel, or corollary to John 3:16!)

How do we know he loves us? Because in the person of his Son he laid down his life for us, when we were yet his enemies, to free us from our bondage to self-centeredness. He gave himself to free us from the arrogant flaunting of others' rights that blights our relationships, disrupts God's created world (we call it ecological imbalance), and makes obsolete the joy God intended for us all. To live in joy is to live in growing acknowledgment of that great love. Having freely received it, we may freely give to others, sharing together the gigantic joy produced by the superlative love.

We will need to come again and again to the Source--not because God's love fails, but because we fail his love. With crass ingratitude, we regress and lay our demands for love on those who cannot love, who in fact cannot relate to our lovelessness. Bit by bit, step by step, he will free us to love the unlovely, to love our enemies and to love our friends with self-abandonment. Joy will increase as we learn to come to him for the superlative love that produces gigantic joy. ~n

Joy in Believing

Joy is believing...that the Lord is my strength and my salvation. Glib words? Or proven reality? Let us probe the meaning of this quality of joy.

At one point in the history of the nation Israel, a time of exile and despair, the book of the law was rediscovered and read in the hearing of all the people. It was a moving scene as "all the people gathered as one man" and Ezra the priest, assisted by the scribes and Levites, read from the book of the law of God clearly, and "they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading" (Neh. 8:8 RSV).

The account, recorded in the book of Nehemiah, is vivid with emotion. The national weaknesses, their persistent rebellion and disobedience, the repeated failure of faith in their God, are contrasted with his forgiveness, mercy, and steadfast love. The record is clear: prosperity, national strength, the "good things of life," all gifts of God's mercy and grace, did not secure this nation's worship to him. Instead the gifts became a distraction from the Giver, and with presumption and ingratitude they put him out of their lives.

With arrogant self-confidence, they defied God's revealed plan, worshiped a figment of their own minds, a creation of their own hands, and "committed great blasphemies." Now they found themselves victimized by their own rebellious deeds, and they wept and fasted, dressed in sackcloth, with earth upon their heads--a joyless lot of people indeed!

Confronted with the record of their failure and God's faithfulness, they mourn and weep. They have dealt faithlessly with the God who loved them, and the consequence has been personal and national disaster. They are deeply grieved over their rebellious behavior and the resulting predicament of bondage to men and estrangement from God. Their sin has been their undoing, and they have reaped what they have sown. They have worshiped God's good gifts and idolized their own desires. Their greed and self-centeredness have yielded a harvest of broken relationships and scattered possessions. There will be no easy escape from the consequences of their own choices.

Still God persisted in grace and mercy, pursuing them with steadfast love and kindness. Forgiveness and mercy are even now available to them from the God who never ceased to love them. And now God's messengers call them back from mourning to celebration: "This day is holy to our Lord, and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Neh. 8:10 RSV). How reminiscent of our Lord's words: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:4 RSV).

The world's message is, happy are the proud, the self-sufficient, the merrymakers. Joy is pictured as hilarity, self-gratification without regard for repercussion. Repentance and humility are seen as enemies to joy. "If it feels good, do it," we are told, but those words are an apt epitaph for the death of goodness, love, and integrity in human relationships--and therefore the death of true joy.

The nation Israel is a piece cut from humanity, a sample of us all. Their history is our history. Like them we are thoroughly gullible to any scheme for joy that promises quick results. We love to live in fantasy, utterly reckless of the consequences. We have, in fact, a fantasy about fantasy--we believe it will bring us happiness and joy to evade reality. Accordingly, we insist on seeing ourselves as Cinderellas and handsome princes, as innocent victims and deserving beneficiaries.

Furthermore, we have persistent fantasies about who God is, if we will accept even the fact of God. God, we like to believe, exists to satisfy our whims; therefore, when he falls short of this evaluation we must dispose of him or distrust him. This concept of God is just another facet of a self-image that puts all the power in our hands and makes everything and everyone subservient to us and our interests.

This is the "way which seems right to a man," as the Proverb says, but it is a costly mind-set. Or, as the Proverb bluntly states it: "its end is the way to death" (14:12 RSV). Illusions of power and prestige and control are the cruelest of self-deceptions, sure to bring about the death of the joy for which we were created.

It is against this kind of self-defeating delusion that our loving Father-God strikes when he reveals to us our true nature. Straying sheep; empty earthen vessels--what poignant expressions of the joyless lives that follow

when we go our own way, spurning the Great Shepherd who loves and cares for the sheep. In the mirror of God's Word, we can, if we will, see ourselves as we really are. If we will believe it, agree with God that it is true, and bury our fantasies and delusions about our self-exaltations, then we can become eligible for the greatest adventure in life: becoming whole persons, through whom God's redemptive love can flow to a needy world.

God wants to open the door to reality, so that we can begin to deal with our delusions about life and about who we really are. We fear this kind of exposure because we know instinctively and from experience that we cannot cope with reality. It is painful to see ourselves as incompetent and rebellious. Facing our real selves and our circumstances is fearful and humiliating. We refuse to believe God's revealed truth about life because we know we cannot handle his declaration of what is right and good for us. We want to trim a little here and a little there, altering the facts to suit our own uncensored desires. Eventually, this kind of rationalizing divorces us from absolutes, and we find ourselves adrift without harbor and anchor, insecure, fearful, and joyless.

Myrna is a woman whose life is marked by joy. She came to Christ in desperation, under threat of a broken marriage. She discovered God's love-power in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the unbearable burden of bitterness, guilt, and fear began to melt away under the healing comfort of his forgiveness and love.

Myrna had a backlog of broken dreams. She had bought and paid for the common human delusion of "and they lived happily ever after," the fairy-tale myth subscribed to by most of the human race. Myrna believed in the gift of marriage. It was going to be a dream come true. She awakened abruptly to a nightmare of reality. Her dreamboat was selfish and inconsiderate. He lived for ego-gratification, and she and the children were pawns to his demands. The cozy-cuteness that had made her feel so warm and wanted were reserved for other exploits with other women. The little-boy charm became the big-boy brutishness.

Three children later, bewildered and angry, she opted for a job. She was reluctant to leave the children to sitters and neighbors, but desperate in her search for security. The marriage prognosis was grim. Bruce was now boasting about his sexual conquests. Her job was one she enjoyed, and to that enjoyment she added a neighborhood sewing group. Gradually she was building a life of her own. Now she could wear a happy image, like the one worn by her friends.

Through the sewing group she began to hear about a church nearby, and a long-suppressed longing began to stir within her. In her early teens she had been exposed briefly to the reality of Jesus Christ as Savior, and her heart had been touched by the Great Joy. The pursuit of worldly romance had dimmed that reality, and she had drifted into the delusion that joy was to have and to hold, to possess and be possessed by another person, specifically Bruce.

She began attending services at the church, and, like the people of Israel, she wept first for sorrow and then for joy as she heard the Voice of the Beloved once again through the teaching of his Word. She grieved as she saw that, like all of us, she was a straying sheep; she rejoiced to know that the Shepherd had not ceased to seek her, to draw her back to himself for healing and restoration. She brought him her emptiness, rejoicing that he had promised to fill the earthen vessel of her humanity with himself, the Treasure who would give her worth and fulfillment and joy.

Myrna has learned to listen carefully to the message of the Scriptures. She is now aware that Christians, too, can live shallow, selfish lives, using their "faith" as one more gimmick for self-gratification. Misreading the Word of God from their own culturally acquired and racially inherited perspective, they presume to believe God exists to make them comfortable. This is a concept of life we are all taught from infancy. It teaches us to use any method or means--from pleasant strategies to hostile resistance--to get what we want. If we see God as existing to be our benefactor, then we will see ourselves as the central figure in his universe, and others as our servants.

The difficult circumstances in Myrna's life did not vanish when she came to Christ. She continued to be confronted with tests and trials. In the early stages of this new relationship with Christ she tried to romanticize her new-found joy. The emotional release which accompanied the realization that she was forgiven, accepted, and loved apart from anything she could do to earn it, brought a sense of exhilaration and excitement. Her

emotions were charged with joy.

But her husband refused to share her new life, and eventually forbade her to attend church services. By now, she was willing to do whatever was necessary to keep the peace in her home, but she was confused and dismayed at the deepening rift in her marriage and the increasing tensions with the children.

Now, through faithful Christian friends, and her own persistent study of the Word, she was finding a whole new dimension of truth. God wanted to change her, to mature her into the very image of his Son. Yes, she did indeed stand blameless before God because the price of her redemption had been paid by the death of God's Son--but she had been declared whole, set free from guilt, so that she could live out of that forgiveness, extending that quality of love and forgiveness and acceptance to others.

Already the indwelling Christ was dealing with her motivation. She had to face the fact that her efforts to persuade her husband of his need for Christ were largely centered around the old romanticism. She was largely aiming at the satisfaction of her own needs and wants, rather than God's plan for Bruce's wholeness for the greater glory of God. This was a whole new vista. It meant that the old romanticism would be replaced with a whole new vision. Marriage would no longer be the end, but the means by which the whole family unit would be conformed to Christ's image--could become, in other words, whole persons. But each person in her life would now be seen as God's responsibility, living his life through her to accomplish his purpose in them.

Myrna did not see God's responsibility as a cop-out from her own human responsibility. Eventually she decided to leave her job and return to the home, to give her full time to being wife and mother. In this way, she chose to make herself available to her family, counting on her new life in Christ to develop redemptive relationships within her home. She wanted to share with them the love she had found in Christ and in fellowship with others who know him.

Through trial and failure, and through persistent Bible study and Christian counsel, with much prayer, Myrna has learned to see herself as God's instrument of peace and the grace of forgiveness and acceptance. The cost of her obedience to the Lord she loves is often high. There is much hardness to endure. But the genuineness of her love toward her family increases along with her loveresponses to Christ, and her developing joy is nourished by her growing relationship with him. She frequently expresses her own astonishment at the joy and peace she experiences in some of the most difficult times. She is increasingly committed to trusting in the faithfulness and sovereign purposes of God, aware that she cannot change the inner state of anyone, but willing to learn to be a signpost to the Lord Jesus by her attitudes and actions.

Commitment to God's larger global plan for redemption sets the heart free from preoccupation with personal needs and desires and therefore from the need to use others to meet them. This is the greater joy, the supreme joy, we find in the Lord Jesus Christ. He indwells us to meet our needs for love, forgiveness, and acceptance, freely endowing us, above what we can ask or think, as we trust him to do so in every circumstance. It is in him alone we find our needs met.

Believing this, we may live in joy. It is what the apostle Peter calls "unutterable and exalted" joy, and it is an entirely different mind-set that transcends life's difficulties and makes sadness small and suffering seem "slight momentary affliction."

This is the confidence Myrna has toward God through his Son, that whether or not her marriage is or becomes what she desires it to be is secondary to the confidence that God is at work in her and through her to add the dimensions of his character to her life in a daily growing relationship of trust and love. God is daily teaching her how to express his love to the unlovely and unloving and to leave the results with him. Often in the most trying situations her joy is deepest and richest, and she is beginning to understand the apostle Paul's description of Christ's ones: "as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10 RSV).

This kind of joy is not an affectation, but the spontaneous response of the heart whose trust and affections are centered on a faithful, loving Father-God, whose promises are "yea and amen" in his Son. "Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy" (I Peter 1:8 RSV).

We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ has provided all we need to be whole persons. We believe that he is at work in all our circumstances to mature us and use us to accomplish his redemption in a broken world. In this we trust, and the joy of the LORD is our strength!

Joy in Loving

At one time, Shelley was easy to identify in our church family. She was a frail young woman, sometimes on crutches or in a wheelchair. But whenever she had mobility she was entwined with small handicapped children. Refusing to acknowledge the negative prognosis of her own illness, she lived each day, as she still does, to her maximum capacity. "Gutsy," some would say.

Shelley has had her arguments with God. It was wrenching to come to terms with her physical disabilities. And only the invalidated know the struggles with pride, anger, and impatience in the specialized tension of helplessness. Independence was to Shelley a treasured mode of life, but that luxury had to be sacrificed to practical needs which made her dependent upon others. There were many days when either asking or receiving help seemed sheer indignity, adding insult to her physical distress.

What does all of this have to do with joy? Everything, really. It was in the frying pan of unanswerable questions and frustrated plans that this young woman opted for letting God be God. It was a traumatic surrender of her will, and she would be the last to claim that it was perfected in one single act. But doubt and confusion, resentment and anger, the despoilers of joy, gradually yielded to the growing conviction that behind all of her life was a loving Father God, whose purpose is to transform earth's tragedies into triumphs. Now a window was opening on a dimension of joy she had never before experienced or even envisioned.

As she yields to her new identity as God's woman, seeing herself as made in his image, she finds herself released to the wider world of loving others. The singular excitement of being part of God's plan to love and redeem a lost and hurting world dwarfs her own physical struggles. Seeing herself as part of the eternal plan makes her time-related burdens lighter.

Shelley had worked several years with handicapped children as a para-professional, during which time she was motivated largely by a need to perform. There is small satisfaction in service rendered for credits, because one is always dependent upon approval, and stockpiles of guilt and frustration easily accumulate. When Shelley learned of the free gift of forgiveness and acceptance through Christ, she received the good news with joy.

Now Shelley was embarking upon a new adventure, a new life which embraced a new perspective. The professional approach toward the handicapped which complemented so well her need to perform was about to be radically changed. Through the teaching of others and through her own personal Bible study, she was learning what it could mean to have the living Lord Jesus Christ at work in her, to produce the fruit of his Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal. 5:22, 23).

But trouble was brewing in her own body, and soon she was confronted with some painful and debilitating handicaps. Then the struggles ensued, the arguments with God. Wasn't she supposed to serve him by serving others? Then why the recurring, physical weakness which diverted more and more energy from her desire to help the handicapped? There were angry days, mingled with deep physical distress. There was the frustration of unmanageable circumstances, the apparently futile prayers, and fear of the unknown future. It was not only her future, but the future of all the handicapped "projects" for which she had now assumed responsibility, that she was angry, frustrated, and fearful.

Then a flicker of light began to shine in Shelley's heart. (Could it be in answer to her prayers that God was now speaking?) Did the weight of her life, with its desires and despair, its gains and losses, actually rest on her shoulders? Could her mind contain all of God's answers to human dilemma? Did she indeed have to sort out all the causes and effects, then set out on a solo course of redemption?

Or could it be true, as she kept reading in God's Word, that God is great enough and wise enough and loving

enough to put together a redemptive plan quite apart from and independent of human weakness and frailty and sin? Could it be that John 3:16, so glibly quoted, could have a profound implication she had somehow failed to grasp? Was all of this what was meant by "Christ in you, the hope of glory"?

The light grew brighter! God *loved* the world! The proof of that love was infinite giving, the gift of *himself*! One thing was clear: God is at work, now, infinitely involved in all of our distresses because he *loves* us. Redemption is his initiative. Our unbelief and distrust of him are the obstacles.

Now in the clear, pure light of Truth, Shelley could see that the burden did not rest on her, but on a loving Father-God, who was continually offering himself in every situation for whatever need. Did she need wisdom? He would be her wisdom. He would not provide all the answers, but he would be the answer. She could trust him, and he is perfect wisdom.

Did she need a sense of worth that would not rest on performance? His gift to her was the impeccable righteousness (worth) of his Son, reckoned to her account. She had only to believe it and rest her case with him.

Did she need--yes, she desperately needed--changed attitudes, mature relationships, wholeness of person? He offered her the fruit of his Spirit working within to produce the character of his Son and give her a whole new perspective on suffering, on every kind of human testing.

Now the focus was clearing. Love that is directed toward wholeness--God's kind of love-- does not promise trouble-free, comfortable, easy living. Stresses and sorrow are a necessary corollary to maturity and *joy*! But the joy that issues from these disciplines is purified of illusion and fantasy and undisturbed by perplexity and difficulty. It is joy that believes and trusts and rests in an Almighty, Eternal, All-knowing, Ever-present God of Love! It is joy from a threefold source:

A reason to rest: *faith*

A place to stand: *love*

A direction to walk: *hope*

And it all rests on the character of God himself!

Now a subtle and significant change is taking place in Shelley's life style, the result of her changing mind-set. Relieved of the staggering burden of playing God, knowing that he is willing and able to assume responsibility for global redemption as well as individual needs--that is a liberating joy indeed! It means the persons she serves are no longer her projects, by which she can approve herself before God and people, but redeemable, loved human beings in whom God has invested his own love and life, and for whom he has a plan for wholeness, just as he has for Shelley.

As she yields to her new identity as God's woman, seeing herself as made in his image, she finds herself released to the wider world of loving others. The singular excitement of being part of God's plan to love and redeem a lost and hurting world dwarfs her own physical struggles and emotional stresses. Seeing herself as part of the eternal plan makes her time-related burdens lighter.

It is this birth of freedom from self-confinement that gives meaning and perspective to serving others. Her own physical distresses have added identification and compassion to these relationships. Her sense of God-at-work gives her access to restful activity, since the ultimate responsibility and resources lie with him, not with her.

One such redemptive relationship is taking place with Shelley and a tiny girl born with cerebral palsy. This relationship traces growth in both Misty and Shelley, and therefore the widening vista of joy for each of them.

They found each other through an encounter with an institution for handicapped persons. By the time they met, Misty was three years of age, and more vegetable than human--totally incapable of communication, helpless as

cooked spaghetti. If Shelley and Misty had met before Shelly's encounter with Christ, Misty would have been a project, a job to be done, a body and mind to be healed. The deep mother-instinct Misty stirred would have seemed more a handicap to the relationship than an asset.

Now, as Shelley is learning to serve the Lord in serving others, the threat is being removed from her relationships, so that love and joy and hope are becoming a valid and substantial option to demand and despair and anger. And Misty, among others, is responding to that quality of love. As Shelley is learning to serve without demanding results, the result in Misty's life is emotional and physical response that once seemed sheer impossibility.

In the current apparent remission of her own illness, Shelley is forming a core of people, like her committed to serving in love such small handicapped persons as Misty. They share a vision for serving as God's instruments to bring healing to all aspects of these young sufferers. Not all who serve are physically handicapped, but as they serve others in response to God's love in their own lives, they too are becoming more whole.

It is this quality of loving response to the hurting and the helpless that brings deep joy to all involved, a joy that will culminate in the sweetest words of all, as the Lord himself speaks: "Well done, good and faithful servant...enter into the joy of your master" (Matt. 25:21 RSV).

Joy in Hope

Not long ago, Diane called me on the telephone. Her calm manner and steady voice were not the usual accompaniment to the kind of story she told. Her young son, who was one of a set of football heroes on his high school campus, had been exposed as a participant in a drug scandal. Craig had been a respected, reliable young man, both as a family member and as a student. His father, the school faculty and student body, and the community were shaken by the disclosure of his unexpected involvement in a serious infringement of the school and civic law.

Diane was deeply concerned for her son, his father, and the young people who had been disillusioned by Craig's misbehavior. But as Diane reviewed the events of the past few days, there was a notable lack of despair in her expressions of concern. There was, in fact, a ringing note of hope which produced a paradox of rejoicing in her suffering.

Diane's joy was based on the hope that God's grace and mercy were available to transform this trying circumstance into triumph. Her attitude was one of positive expectation, because her confidence was in her Lord whose purpose is to forge beauty of character out of times of testing, failure, and heartache.

Because she was anticipating God's victory, the forming of Christlike attitudes and actions in the lives involved, she was not caught up in self-pity and anxiety over others' evaluation of her as the mother of an imperfect son. Because she was free of such self-concern she was able to relate to her family members and other parents and friends in wholesome, loving ways. Her inner peace and joy was undisturbed by fretting over petty remarks, and she was free of the need to be defensive. She was, in fact, able to comfort parents of other boys who were similarly involved.

God has used Diane's confident, joyful expectation to redeem her son's failure. Her forgiveness has formed a bridge to lead him back to the Lord whose fellowship he forsook when he chose to follow those who extended a false hope for fun and excitement. Craig's father was restrained by his wife's gracious and clear-headed behavior from alienating his son, and many others were exposed to a model of Christlike behavior under stressful, tense circumstances. Diane's joy has a richer, deeper quality than ever, because, as Romans 5 tells us, hope that is directed toward God's work of redemption will not disappoint us and we will rejoice in the redemptive outcome of suffering.

My heart sings when the beauty of Jesus is reproduced in such lives, and the fragrance of his love and kindness is spread through families, neighborhoods, and communities. One such friend is so full of daily hope in God-at-work that she can invite others to "come sit by my joy." I have sat with her under the umbrella of

shared confident expectation and discussed the rainstorms of unresolved problems. Together, we have rejoiced in hope because of the faithfulness and loving-kindness of our Father. Friendship's fellowship of kindred minds can be delightful in other dimensions, but the fellowship of believers who have learned through trials and tests to hope in the character of God the Father is the richest of joys.

Self-disclosure encounters are increasingly popular in our society and in our churches. Wherever they are found, if the activity is focused solely on human frailty and hardship with no recourse to the supernatural intervention of God's healing, redeeming grace through his Son the Lord Jesus Christ, the most that can be accomplished is a temporary expedient of mutual self-pity and shallow platitudes. These in the end only perpetuate the problems and plunge people into deeper despair.

There is also increasing recourse to so-called "mental health" facilities, and to psychoanalysis under a variety of categories. It is often helpful to sort out behavior patterns, and an analyst who has integrity toward his patient can often help in identifying problems to which the patient has been willingly or unwittingly blind. However, pinpointing problems can increase the feeling of hopelessness, as can the diagnosis of physical illness without hope of cure.

All too often, the cure offered to the emotionally ill or distressed is a variety of ways of suppressing guilt or efforts to eliminate it. "You are hostile, bitter and resentful," they are told, "because someone offended you; so don't blame yourself." Thus the patient is taught to evade responsibility for his/her actions, and the cycle of emotional weakness is perpetuated. This also serves to justify hostile attitudes and actions, and wipe out any motivation to deal with them.

"Get it all out," says one group of counselors. "Think positive thoughts," says another. "If you think you're okay, you will be." David, the Psalmist, tried the repression route and describes it for us in Psalm 39:1-3 (RSV): "I said, 'I will guard my ways, that I may not sin with my tongue; I will bridle my mouth, so long as the wicked are in my presence.'

'I was dumb and silent, I held my peace to no avail; my distress grew worse, my heart became hot within me. As I mused, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue.'"

The verses that follow trace David's heart relationship with God. They also offer what I have found to be the only valid alternative to hostile expression or hopeless repression of inner turmoil. Rather than venting his inner distress and rage on those he saw as his oppressors, David pours it all out before the Lord. He begins by asking God for perspective: "Lord, let me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is!" (Ps. 39:4 RSV).

Then God gives him the insight he requests, and he is able to measure himself and others by God's value system: "Behold, thou hast made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in thy sight. Surely every man stands as a mere breath! Surely man goes about as a shadow! Surely for nought are they in turmoil; man heaps up, and knows not who will gather!" (Ps. 39: 4-6 RSV)

Like a prick to a balloon, this realistic appraisal of life releases all the pent-up preoccupation with petty pride and self-protection. It delivers him from putting all his eggs in the fragile basket of his temporary sojourn on this planet. And it gives him a sense of identification with others, who are as fragile and temporary as he. David takes another look at the things men strive for, and sees how unworthy they are, that most of our toil, sweat, and tears are spent on things that have no lasting value and no real rewards. Where do we go from here, David?

"And now, Lord, for what do I wait? *My hope is in thee.* Deliver me from all my transgressions. Make me not the scorn of the fool! I am dumb, I do not open my mouth; for it is thou who hast done it" (Ps. 39:7-9 RSV).

It all looks so futile, Lord! All the status seeking, pleasure-oriented efforts, the power plays and subtle maneuvers--for what? This kind of living is not only privately unfulfilling, leaving us feeling victimized and despairing. It is the cause of broken relationships between individuals as well as between nations.

David knew the anguished end of greed and lust. He well knew that the reckless, self-centered pursuit of joy brought an accelerated cycle of heartache and guilt. Now in God's presence, the repression of his outrage against wicked men is no longer necessary. His attention is diverted from their evil to his own need for forgiveness. And he is able to see how small and futile are men's plans for conquest, how truly insignificant are the plans of mice and men. Confronted with the eternal God, his perspective changes, his vengeful angry thoughts subside and he realizes that humility and repentance are the primary issues.

Harley works for a large industrial firm, where men play status-games, jostling one another for rank and sacrificing integrity for small or large personal gains. In this atmosphere of suspicion and fear, good, careful workmanship is often devalued, frequently a secondary issue. Unfortunately, it is not an unusual work scene in a nation that has forsaken moral absolutes from its grass roots to its government.

For many years, Harley attempted to be heard whenever he detected foul play. He would elbow his way to a hearing, and voice his protests. It was a courageous effort but tinged by a subtle self-righteousness. If others were wrong--and they unquestionably were--then he must become their judge. That is an elevation that quickly builds feelings of superiority. But people refuse to be corrected from a pedestal. Humility and identification with need are essential to gaining a hearing.

Recently, Harley has begun to grasp the fact that he cannot take responsibility for the entire industry. He is beginning to see that angry protests, argumentative striving, and derision are hardly the way to restore integrity to his environment; that, as a matter of fact, in so doing he loses not only his credibility but his own integrity.

If Harley is to have an impact for redemptive change, it will be the work of Jesus Christ, first of all in him, and then through him. As the apostle Paul puts it, it is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). When we try to do God's work by asserting ourselves and strong-arming others, we squeeze out their joy and our own as well. When the Lord Jesus is at work in us to remind us we are not our own but have been bought with infinite price, it relieves us of both our self-righteousness and our illusions of omnipotence. Then we can judge others as we have been judged--with grace and mercy, and we can serve them with integrity and without intimidation--to their joy and ours.

A seminar obsession seems to have developed across our nation, the product of an insatiable quest for success--in marriage, sex, career, personal power, and so on. The human heart possesses a powerful thirst for happiness and joy, for satisfaction and contentment. It is a hope planted in our hearts by our Creator, who planned we should know supreme joy by partaking of his character, then sharing his love with one another. Our Father-God has a seminar for success. It is the crucible of life in which we learn to grow up to his love and share it in everything we do and with everyone we know. Other schemes for success will result in hollow victories without lasting joy, for we were not designed for lesser things.

For the Christian, this joy is not for this life only, but we have an inexhaustible hope of eternal joy in the presence of the Lord Jesus himself. We anticipate "an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading." And in this we rejoice "though now for a lime while (we) may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of (our) faith, more precious than gold...may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:4,6,7 RSV).

The hope of being together eternally with the Lord whom we love fills us with "unutterable and exalted joy." But it is our experience of him now that confirms and feeds our hope of that eternal joy. It is an ageless joy, shared by David of old as his heart and mind turned in trustful obedience to his God, and to us as we live in the confusion and tension of this twentieth century. It is a joy that will unite us all together in praise of him whose love has made it all possible.

The Joy Way

Joy is associated with living; it is not an abstract theory, but a valid option to despair. It is not the absence of sorrow, stress, and difficulties. Rather, it is enlarged and enhanced by such circumstances. It is not dependent upon comfort or compatibility. Since Christian joy is a product of Christ's love, it is marked by love's characteristics, It endures the same kind of obstacles, survives the same kind of threats.

The Great Joy embraces both contentment and blessedness, the kind of happiness that is meant by our Lord when he taught the Beatitudes. At its core is a sense of fulfillment and worth which comes from assured love, acceptance, and forgiveness. It survives unjust persecution and ingratitude, because it is centered on relationship with the King of Life, the Lord Jesus himself, who understands our motives--right or wrong--and loves us into maturity.

Contentment is a rare commodity in our restless society. The apostle Paul, writing from prison, writes of his contentment in Philippians 4:11-13 (RSV): "Not that I complain of want; for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in him who strengthens me."

Paul's body was imprisoned, but his spirit was free! He lived in a different dimension, a kingdom not of this world. He lived by a different perspective. He viewed life from God's point of view, saw himself as a new creation in Christ, and his life as a means by which others might be reconciled to God as they heard and saw Christ's life in him.

The giving of thanks was not a forced ritual with Paul. It was the spontaneous response to God the Father who through the Lord Jesus Christ had opened a whole new life of liberty and love to Paul. He delighted to think of himself as a love-slave to Christ, which was an expression of his voluntary choice to serve the One who had set his spirit free.

Paul grieved over the faithless. He had "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" in his heart over his unrepentant fellow-Jews. But nothing could quench his rejoicing in the love and wisdom of God whom Paul saw as "unsearchable in his judgments and inscrutable in his ways" (Rom. 11:33 RSV).

Many, though not all, contemporary Christians have discovered the secret of Paul's unquenchable joy. Some cling doggedly to the mind-set and life style of the world. To them it seems easier to be either shallow and nonproductive, or miserable and destructive, which are actually two stages of the same commitment to self-centeredness. Both attitudes are a complete contradiction to the abundant life Christ came to impart to those in whom he lives.

The apostle Peter teaches us that we have been "born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (I Peter 1:3 RSV). He goes on to say, "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers" (I Peter 1:18 RSV). There is no way we can interpret those words to mean we may hold to Christian profession and continue to live unchanged. But the good news is not simply that we must change, but that we may change! We do not have to remain locked into the old patterns of futility. It is not merely a legalistic demand--it is a dynamic opportunity! The ransom paid to rescue us from our futile ways was the blood sacrifice of God's Son--a perfect life for a futile life.

"Through him you have confidence in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God

"Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere love of the brethren, love one another earnestly from the heart. You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Peter 1:21-23 RSV).

Uncertainty, doubt, and distrust breed discontent and insecurity. Faith and trust in that which is unreliable or incompetent breeds despair. Love which is dependent upon mere biological impulse or emotional reaction is destructive to both faith and hope, and a shabby imitation of genuine love. These are the "futile ways" to which the world is committed. This is the shifting sand of human expediency, its highest expectation.

Joy abounds when there is certainty of faith, positive and realistic expectation, and genuine love. None of these is possible apart from a growing understanding of truth through the written Word and dynamic

love-obedience to the Living Word. Sincere love--love that issues from a pure heart--is the evidence and the outcome of trustful expectation in the God who is willing and able to redeem us and make us whole.

Three questions will probe our mind-set and adjust our perspective, and redirect us toward joy.

1. In whom do you trust?
2. For what do you hope?
3. Who motivates your love?

It is easy to put our trust in the visible, simply because it is there and available. It's the old "bird in hand" philosophy. But the things that are seen are transient and fallible as we are. The only durable dimension is the spiritual; the only unfailing goodness is God himself. Why, then, will we trust anything, anyone, but the One who made us and gave himself for our redemption and who is always available to meet our real and deepest needs? We have learned to sing, "The arm of flesh will fail you; you dare not trust in your own." In practice, however, we trust political systems for national security, sentimental whims for our marital health, and television for our children's education, leaving the transforming grace of God as a last desperate resort in case all else fails.

We want an easy faith that leaves no unanswered questions and requires no painful growth. Wanting quick formulas for happiness and joy, we shun the hard encounters with raw human sin and suffering, thinking to preserve our own ease and thus preserve our joy. We seek our satisfaction and fulfillment from human beings who in turn seek their satisfaction and fulfillment from us, and we both fall in the ditch of disappointment and frustration.

Trusting God means believing his Word. Believing God's Word means placing ourselves under its authority. It means taking our definitions for life from it, and using it to judge and evaluate every other system of thought and mode of behavior. Trusting God means we will entertain no doubt as to his absolute perfection--that we will allow no circumstance to discredit his love for us, nor any person to take priority over him in our love-commitment.

Trusting God for who he really is means transferring our hope and expectations from human perspectives and schemes to God's view. It means that, counting on his inscrutable wisdom and consenting to his cosmic plan, we may be unthreatened in a threatening world and secure in perplexing circumstances. This is the point of view from which Paul derived his state of contentment. This is true emotional health.

From such a state of emotional stability, we may identify with the early Macedonian Christians, of whom it is written:

"...for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of liberality on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints--and this, not as we expected, but first they gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God" (2 Cor. 8:2-5 RSV).

Note the context of their "abundance of joy": extreme poverty! What a contrast to the standard contemporary Christian--we who are preoccupied with demanding our rights, and so sated with luxury we can no longer discern our true needs. We who scan the marriage manuals to see how to manipulate ourselves into dominance. We who see blessing only in terms of wealth and health and easy relationships.

I believe the reason there is so little evidence of the Great Joy in even the Christian community is our persistence in skimming from the Scriptures whatever seems supportive of our own selfishness, without tracing those statements back to their basic principles. Thus, we demand physical healing on the basis of a superficial textual reading, disregarding the broad principle of redemptive suffering. We demand bigger and

better houses, more sophisticated appliances, more prestigious jobs, on the basis of "My God shall supply all your needs," ignoring our Lord's teaching (Luke 6:2-26 NIV):

**Blessed are you who are poor
for yours is the kingdom of God.**

**Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.**

**Blessed are you who weep now
for you will laugh.**

**Blessed are you when men hate you,
when they exclude you and insult you
and reject your name as evil
because of the Son of Man.**

**Rejoice in that day and leap for joy,
because great is your reward in heaven.**

**For that is how their fathers
treated the prophets.**

**But woe to you who are rich,
for you have already received your comfort.**

**Woe to you who are well fed now,
for you will go hungry.**

**Woe to you who laugh now,
for you will mourn and weep.**

**Woe to you when all men speak well of you,
for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.**

We cannot go blithely on our way, ignoring such profound and basic principles as these which our Lord taught and demonstrated with his own life, without jeopardizing the joy he intends for ourselves and for all of society. For behind this perspective of voluntary self-sacrifice is the giving of ourselves first of all to the Lord, making ourselves available to him at whatever personal cost to meet the deep physical, emotional, and spiritual needs with which we are surrounded.

The teaching of this passage is intended to direct us toward the Great Joy. It is not, as a superficial reading might indicate, a judgment of earthly joy, but an evaluation of it. Here Jesus teaches us that when we major on the satisfaction of temporal needs we limit our measure of contentment and joy to temporal, perishable sources of supply. And even in those brief moments when the stomach is full, the body clothed, and the biological impulses satisfied, there is an unfilled vacuum which is meant to be filled with a greater joy from an eternal source.

It devalues and degrades our humanity to commit ourselves to these lesser pursuits. The results are evident in society, where materialism and greed have taken their destructive toll. Jesus is warning us that we must evaluate our lives from long-range perspectives. Our little self-centered kingdoms may give us the illusion of satisfaction but it is a house of cards built on shifting sand. Society is the total of its individuals and so are families and marriages and friendships.

If we insist upon living our lives in the limited dimension of the body, then we must be prepared to experience limited and threatened joy, and to limit other's joy as well. If, on the other hand we choose to give ourselves to the King whose kingdom is built on God's love for us and in us then we will find that all of life is enriched and invested with lasting values, enduring contentment, and eternal joy.

Joy does not come through self-centered demand. That is the very means by which joy is spoiled. Joy begins and is continually sustained by facing ourselves with humility and repentance, judging our own attitudes and actions, and bathing in the forgiveness and healing of the Word of truth and the pardon purchased through Christ's death and sealed through his resurrection.

In this way, we may continually renew our freedom from destructive self-preoccupation, and serve our Lord Jesus in love's liberty. Then we may know the joy of being free from bondage to things and human support-systems. These are the things that spoil our joy and make us part of the problem rather than part of the great redemptive plan.

This brings us full circle, back to the voice of the Beloved, calling us to Gigantic Joy, calling us to be a part of his plan to restore Joy to the world

**"If you obey my commands,
you will remain in my love..."**

**I have told you this so that my joy may be in you
and that your joy may be complete.**

**My command is this:
Love each other as I have loved you!" (John 15:11 NIV)**

Joy is the by-product of God's love in us and through us.

Lord Jesus, teach us to settle for nothing less, that you may rejoice in us and we in you.

**"We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine;
Rightly do they love you!" (Song of Solomon 1:4 RSV)**

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