

Chasing Joy

The Passionate and Puzzling Pursuit

*“This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us be full of joy and be glad in it.”
Psalm 118:24 NLV*

Recently, a colleague shared that his devotional focus for the year was “Chasing Joy.” Instantly intrigued, I began a quest and soon discovered that the constitution of this thing we call “joy” is both self-evident and a mystery. The inextricable aspects of joy were notable and caught me unawares. In his article, **The Power of Joy**, Jeffrey Kluger wrote, “Defining joy is a fool’s gambit – like trying to parse a joke or diagram love or lift a sand sculpture. To examine it is to have it run through your fingers.” I love the challenge and I’m beginning to sense that the ‘chasing’ part of “Chasing Joy” is an apt descriptor. In the end, I found my curiosity unsatiated; my spirit yearned for greater enlightenment on this wonderful blessing to the human make-up.

Joy is complex, both discernible and enigmatic

There are several things known about joy. It is visceral, an emotion, a robust cheerfulness of the spirit. It is without question an experience passionately sought after, but hard to come by. It is a kindred spirit to happiness, but yet different: “Happiness is an inch deep and a mile wide, whereas joy is a mile deep and a mile wide.”¹ Unlike happiness, joy appears less anchored to one’s circumstances. According to C.S. Lewis, the only thing happiness has in common with joy is that those who experience it, long for it again. In addition, joy is experienced by people of all cultures and creeds and in the midst of all circumstances. Of note is that people of faith in God, know it with greater consistency and intensity. Joy and theopathy are supernaturally interwoven.² Our human genome has a tiny bit to do with how we experience joy, but our mindset, relationship with others (and God), and the depth our gratitude, is of far greater relevance.

Joy is equally inexplicable. I penned the following in my personal journal about the challenge of grasping joy’s meaning:

“Joy is an amazing thing, all of us know it by touch, but none of us can honestly claim to be able to fully articulate what it truly means. Explaining joy is not simple, it is multi-layered, a gift to be revealed and

something to be sought. It is found in celebration and in hardship. It is found in the souls of others and the heart of God. It is not happiness, but one would be hard-pressed to delineate between the two. It is embedded in hope, peace and love, but stands wholly apart from them as well. It is able to render tears and dancing in the same moment. It is both subtle and effusive, resilient and fragile. The longer it’s constitution is explored, the greater its illusive nature is revealed. Joy is a mystery of the divine that our soul craves and pursues.”

Humankind has longed to capture the essence of joy and pondered ways to speak of it. In 1785 German poet Friedrich Schiller’s **Ode to Joy** was a popular attempt. Schiller’s poem spoke of joy as being the “spark of divinity.” In 1824 Ludwig van Beethoven enveloped it in the music of his Ninth Symphony. In 1907 Henry van Dyck married Beethoven’s music to the worship lyrics **Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee**. In another corner of the world ancient Egyptians believed the gods would ask them two questions as a test for entry into the Field of Reeds (paradise), “Did you bring joy?” and “Did you find joy?” The Catholic church includes joy in the first bead chaplet of their prayer rosary known as the Five Joyful Mysteries (of Christ).

Over the centuries a plethora of songs, books and movies have interpreted joy for our consideration; each artistic expression carrying a unique view to how it blossoms in life. In business, the word “joy” is often used to vend products (eg. **Almond Joy** chocolate bars, the **Joy of Cooking** cookbook, **Ultra Joy** dishwashing soap). In addition, there is no shortage of joy focused self-help books to cure what ails you. And yet, after umpteen years of elucidation, the ‘soul’ of joy remains ever illusive.

Joy has an ultimate source

The French priest, theologian and philosopher, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, penned, “Joy is the infallible sign of the presence

¹ Robert Emmons

² Theopathy – the emotional experience arising from religious belief.

of God.” C.S. Lewis claimed that the ultimate source of his joy was also God, joy was a signpost to him through Christ Jesus. He once wrote, “*Joy is the serious business of heaven.*” In my own pilgrimage through life, those who genuinely walked with God not only experienced great abiding joy, but they were also a conduit for it. As children, how many of us sang the words “*Joy is the flag flown high from the castle of my heart...when the King (God/Jesus) is in residence there?*” At Christmas we jubilantly give voice to the words “*Joy to the world the Lord has come! Let earth receive her King!*”

God is the creator (source) of all things, including joy (Psalm 146:6; John 1:3; Ephesians 3:9). Scripture proffers much about the connection between God and joy: “*There I will go to the altar of God, to God the source of my joy... (Psalm 43:4);*” “*The joy of the Lord is my strength (Nehemiah 8:10);*” “*God, my joy and delight (Psalm 43:4).*” Furthermore, the kingdom of God is a “*matter of righteousness, peace and joy (Romans 14:17);*” the fruit of the Holy Spirit is joy (Galatians 5:22) and with the Lord, our joy is complete (1 John 1:1-4). Joy’s origin is divine.

Joy is the fruit of Christ’s work

As a young adult in my home church, I can still recall singing the joy saturated song ***Therefore the Redeemed of the Lord.*** For me the song celebrated my own redemption through the person and work of Christ.

*“Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return,
And come with singing unto Zion;
And everlasting joy shall be upon their head. (repeat)*

*They shall obtain gladness and joy;
And sorrow and mourning shall flee away.”*

The person and work of Christ brings new life – eternal life – the salvation of our souls. Simply put, Christ brings joy. Rather than adding prolix commentary, Scripture can speak for itself.

*“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In 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 can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. **In all this you greatly rejoice,** though now for a little while you may have*

*had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are **filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,** for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” 1 Peter 1:3-9*

Joy comes from serving

American basketball player, coach and author John Wooden once said, “*Helping others is perhaps the greatest joy.*” In my early discipleship, the acronym J.O.Y. was impressed upon me. It stood for “Jesus, others, you” implying that as disciples of Jesus, we put Him first, others second and ourselves last. Core to experiencing joy was loving and serving others, it was second only to Jesus. In pastoral ministry I learned that the most joyless people were those whose life was focused on themselves. In fact, these folks were like black holes that sucked joy from the room. Conversely, when one’s mindset is on seeking the best interests of another, joy is present. Not only does one experience joy in serving others, when one is full of joy, serving others seems to be a natural outcome. Mother Teresa wrote, “*When you are full of joy...you want to go about doing good to everyone.*” Joy comes from serving, and joyful people serve.

Joyful are those who...

Scripture is helpful in expanding our knowledge regarding those who are joyful. For example, “*Joyful is the person who finds wisdom (Proverbs 3:13);*” “*Joyful are those who trust in the Lord (Proverbs 16:20);*” “*Joyful are people of integrity (Psalm 119:1);*” “*How joyful are those who fear the Lord (112:1);*” and joyful are “*those who deal justly with others and always do what is right (Psalm 106:3).*” Writing about these must be left for another time, but I will comment that the joy spoken of here implies a chasing. In this vein, Henri J.M. Nouwen wrote, “*Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day.*” By our actions we indirectly either choose or bypass a slice of joy.

A Root of Joy, gratitude

Swiss theologian Karl Barth claimed that joy is the simplest form of gratitude. With all due respect to this highly acclaimed academic, I am convinced that gratitude is actually

a root of joy. Gratitude is the best attitude and certainly Scripture's counsel: *"Always be thankful (Colossians 3:15);" "Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus (1 Thessalonians 5:18)."* There is wisdom behind this inspired word, and I know from practice that when I pause to recollect the blessings in my life, I become thankful and joyful. Although there is no specific biblical passage I can find directly stating joy comes from a grateful heart, Psalm 100, the go-to text on Thanksgiving Day, voices a relationship:

*Shout with joy to the Lord, all the earth!
Worship the Lord with gladness.
Come before him, singing with joy.
Acknowledge that the Lord is God!
He made us, and we are his.
We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.
Enter his gates with thanksgiving;
go into his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him and praise his name.
For the Lord is good.
His unfailing love continues forever,
and his faithfulness continues to each generation.*

Joy is not found here

The collective personal anecdotes I could share about where joy is *not* found could fill a thousand pages but let me simply submit that in my experience genuine joy has never been found in fame, fortune, power or positive psychology. They may offer a fleeting form of happiness, but not abiding joy. In fact, too often they come with debilitating disillusionment. And, what of choosing life without God? The truth is that every person on earth experiences joy in some fashion, but to what degree is joy forfeited when God is rejected or ignored? I surmise that walking away from the divine source of joy would bring despair much like leaving a campfire would bring cold.

Joy and suffering are intertwined

I am convinced that the disciple who possesses a deep reservoir of joy once stood in a dark well of despair. There is something about suffering that creates the opportunity for joy to take root and flourish in the soul. When I think about those in my life that exhibit an abiding joy, all of them have walked in hurt, hardship, heartbreak. There is truth to the claim that one cannot truly know deep joy unless one knows profound gloom or know peace without conflict or rest without weariness. The early Apostles knew this deep joy, in part, because they experienced persecution and trials. I recall Paul and Silas in the Philippian jail praying and singing

hymns (Acts 16:25). They lived out of their joy, even while chained.

Scripture instructs disciples to not flee hardship because of their faith in Christ, but rather to embrace it for the fruit it will produce in their life:

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything (James 1:2-4)."

It is hard to imagine being joyful in our adversities, but that is Scripture's invitation. The Anabaptists understood persecution under the cross as a sign of the true church (disciple) and even as a form of 'blessing', believing that the joy of their salvation in Christ would sustain them. Menno Simons spoke of every true disciple experiencing the "winepress of sorrow" for the sake of the cross, but in the end reap joy as the King would express his delight in their sacrifice. The psalmist entwines joy and suffering by writing: *"...weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning" (Psalm 30:5).*

Joy, the quest of chasing it continues

I would love to write about joy arising out our identity and purpose in Christ or how a mindset of fixing our thoughts on heaven impacts experiencing joy, or even how physical and mental health intersects with the degree of joy one encounters in life. Reluctantly, this must be left for another person and time. The journey of pondering and writing about joy has been a blessing but I must now attend to other matters.

My best discernment on the matter of joy leads me to conclude that "chasing joy" is actually pursuing or receiving those things that bless us with it: God (Jesus), the work of Christ, our identify as the beloved of God, serving others, a grateful mindset, a godly lifestyle, wisdom and even physical and mental health. Equally, "chasing joy" is not courting fame, fortune, power or positive psychology. This is wisdom. All said and done, "chasing joy" is very much a life-long endeavour. In that light, I think John Wooden has the final apropos word, *"Joy makes the longest journey too short."*

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