

The Fruit Of The Spirit: Joy

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Does anyone on earth not want to live confidently and joyfully? Undoubtedly, out of six billion people, a few are so soured on life that they would rather be dead, a thought they express in their downcast, grumbling and sometimes even snarling demeanor. However, they must be a trifling number in contrast to those who sincerely desire to possess joy in overflowing abundance.

Here in the United States, one of our nation's foundational documents, the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence, states that "we are endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." This was penned in 1776, and since then, we Americans have been seriously and zealously pursuing happiness with greater vigor than perhaps all other people on the face of God's green earth!

Perhaps the pursuit of happiness has reached a peak in terms of the greatest numbers in history diligently chasing after it. Americans, however, do not stand alone in this because this pursuit is an innate drive found in every man's very nature. It does not matter what race we are, when we lived, whether we are well-educated or ignorant, skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled, male or female, tall or short, healthy or diseased, wealthy, middle class or poor. Everyone wants to be happy and seeks it in varying ways and intensities.

Some cultures, like those of Rome and Greece during their declines, are notorious because their pleasure-seeking reached such levels that their festivities—sometimes lasting a week or more—are termed "orgies" or "bacchanalian revelries." Of course, the seeking of happiness is not limited to such occasions, but they stand as notable examples of how some seek to fill this empty place inside.

Others have sought happiness through entertainment or a certain performer they just "love." Some seek it in athletic endeavors, hobbies, travel, dancing, fashion, home improvements, wealth, status, alcohol, food and drugs. These all fail except for a brief period of satisfaction and sense of well-being.

Solomon and Joy

King Solomon conducted a series of experiments in a quest to discover by practical experience and analysis how to get the most and best out of life. His experiments included some of these very areas just mentioned above. As Solomon described the parameters of his search for meaning in life, he used words that are translated into English as "mirth," "laughter" and "pleasure," all of which we normally associate with joy. Even more interesting is that the word translated "pleasure" in Ecclesiastes 2:1 is the Hebrew word *simha*, the word most frequently translated as "joy" throughout the Old Testament.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 records:

I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure"; but surely, this also was vanity. I said of laughter— "It is madness!" and of mirth, "What does it accomplish?" I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was

good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives. I made my works great, I built myself houses, and planted myself vineyards. I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made myself waterpools from which to water the growing trees of the grove. I acquired male and female servants, and had servants born in my house. Yes, I had greater possessions of herds and flocks than all who were in Jerusalem before me. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the special treasures of kings and of the provinces. I acquired male and female singers, the delights of the sons of men, and musical instruments of all kinds. So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart rejoiced in all my labor; and this was my reward from all my labor. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labor in which I had toiled; and indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun.

In verses 20, 22-23, 25, Solomon writes a few more conclusions after musing on several other analyses of wisdom and labor:

Therefore I turned my heart and despaired of all the labor in which I had toiled under the sun. . . . For what has man for all his labor, and for the striving of his heart with which he had toiled under the sun? For all his days are sorrowful, and his work grievous; even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also is vanity. . . . For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I?

Solomon admits that his quest rewarded him with a certain amount of joy, but he still found it unsatisfactory. We might think that with all his wealth, good health and a discerning mind, he would have had joy in abundance. What he accomplished, however, did not leave him with an enduring sense of well-being because his search continued after this experiment ended. He seems so frustrated that he says we should seize the joy as it comes along and be content with it (verse 24). His ultimate conclusion, found in verse 26, is that God determines whether we experience joy.

What Are People Pursuing?

Does the fact that people laugh and diligently seek laughter indicate they are experiencing joy? Proverbs notes that laughter and pleasure often hide grief and sorrow (14:13). Indeed Proverbs frequently pictures fools laughing on the road to destruction (10:23; 26:19; 29:9). Wisdom also laughs (1:26). Proverbs shows that the difference between the fool and the wise is the timing of laughter, its cause and its object. There is a time for laughter (Ecclesiastes 3:4), but Solomon's record shows that just because a person laughs does not mean he is experiencing biblical joy. Many other scriptures echo Solomon's conclusion.

Could the world have the wrong object in mind in its mad pursuit of happiness? As we saw in the previous article, biblical love is much different from this world's concept of love. Biblical love is keeping God's commandments (1 John 5:3). It is the product of God's Holy Spirit shed abroad in our hearts and our yielding to its guidance. It does not arise naturally within us and frequently requires us to set our will and make sacrifices. We can see this clearly in Jesus' requirement to love our enemies.

Since love is a fruit, a product, of God's Holy Spirit, could its companion—joy—be produced in us differently? Like love, joy is not the product of the natural mind but the product of the supernatural

Holy Spirit of God. If it is not a product of the natural mind, then pursuing it apart from the guidance of the Holy Spirit will produce only very limited and pale imitations of what God experiences by nature and greatly desires to be in us.

David writes, "You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11). It is interesting to compare our joy with God's continual joy and simultaneously think of what destroys joy for us. As long as we are human, joy diminishes and eventually ends. We realize this even as we experience it. I have owned several new automobiles. Each time I took a new one home, I received it with joy as if I had a new toy. But in each case I eventually acquired the same attitude toward the new car as I formerly had toward the old one. The joy was gone, and the car was again nothing more than a tool to convey me from one place to another.

No matter how secure the sources of our joy seem, we know joy does not last long. We may die; a mate or a friend who brings us joy may die; good health ceases; comforts vanish; social tragedies and natural disasters destroy loved things, properties depreciate and wear out; and our senses become dull so that we cannot see, hear, taste, feel or smell as we once did (II Samuel 19:31-35).

The God who created everything is aware of all the human tragedies that have unfolded before His eyes over the past 6,000 years, and He still finds cause to be joyful. Our great God does not find joy in the tragedies themselves. His Word records times when He expressed regret, sorrow or anger over the conduct of mankind, and yet He still experiences a vibrant, lasting joy. This seems to imply that His joy generally wells from different sources than mankind's. It is this joy we need to seek.

Joy Defined

Webster's New World Dictionary defines *joy* as synonymous with "happy," "glad," and "cheerful." A thesaurus relates it to "exultation," "rapture," "satisfaction" and "pleasure." *Webster's* specifically defines it as "a very glad feeling; happiness; great pleasure; delight." It also refers to the source or cause of delight.

These definitions only define the expression of the wonderful emotion. They fail to consider the causes of joy, the circumstances in which it is expressed or its longevity. In these areas, the Bible presents a much more complex virtue than these definitions indicate.

Recently, the state of Texas executed a woman for murder. Her execution was well publicized because several groups appealed to Governor George W. Bush to commute her sentence. An item the murderess mentioned while giving her testimony pertains to this subject. She stated that in her drug-induced state of mind while killing two people with a pick-ax, she experienced a sexual thrill each time she drove the pick-ax into the body of her victim. She actually felt a pleasurable satisfaction in murder!

This gruesomely establishes that the cause of joy—or perhaps any other emotion—must be an important consideration in understanding biblical joy. Our minds can become so perverted and twisted in its response to stimuli that what we feel or what another sees on the outside cannot be blindly trusted as the righteous response of a righteous cause. The cause may be the very reason the joy is neither enduring nor satisfying.

Thus, the Bible takes a dim view of mirth or laughter, showing much laughter as having its roots in scorn or folly. Many in this world find enjoyment in other people's discomfort, stupidity or even embarrassment, laughing uproariously at its exposure. God admonishes in Proverbs 24:17-18:

Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles; lest the LORD see it, and it displease Him, and He turn away His wrath from him.

Because it is natural to do so, many do precisely what God warns not to do! God implies that He will turn His wrath from the enemy to us. *Barnes' Notes* comments that rejoicing like this could be suicidal.

The Greek and Hebrew definitions of the words translated as "joy" and its synonyms are virtually the same as their English counterparts, except for one whose specific definition is not "joy," but "blessed." This word, the Greek *makarios*, reveals much about some of the major sources of biblical joy. It frequently appears as the first word in the well-known Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount, as in Matthew 5:3: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Strong's defines this word as "supremely blessed; by extension fortunate, well off, blessed, happy." The King James version translates it as "happy" five times. In a marginal reference, E.W. Bullinger in the *Companion Bible* says the word means "happy," and J.B. Phillips translates it as such in his *New Testament in Modern English*.

Spiros Zodhiates' *Complete Word Study Dictionary* (p. 937) gives a more comprehensive definition:

Blessed, possessing the favor of God, that state of being marked by fullness from God. It indicates the state of the believer in Christ, . . . said of one who becomes a partaker of God's nature through faith in Christ. The believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit because of Christ and as a result should be fully satisfied no matter the circumstances. *Makarios* differs from the word "happy" in that the person is happy who has good luck (from the root *hap* meaning luck as a favorable circumstance). To be *makarios*, blessed, is equivalent to having God's kingdom within one's heart. Aristotle contrasts *makarios* to *endeos*, the needy one. *Makarios* is the one who is in the world yet independent of the world. His satisfaction comes from God and not from favorable circumstances.

The *Amplified Bible* translates Matthew 5:3 as:

Blessed (happy, to be envied, and spiritually prosperous—with life-joy and satisfaction in God's favor and salvation, regardless of their outward conditions) are the poor in spirit (the humble, who rate themselves insignificant), for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Verse 5 reads, "Blessed (happy, blithesome, joyous, spiritually prosperous) . . ." and verse 9, "Blessed (enjoying enviable happiness, spiritually prosperous). . . ."

It appears that for us to experience biblical joy, the fruit of God's Spirit, we need godly inner qualities that we do not possess by nature. As with love—the love that springs from us by nature that is but a

pale reflection of God's love—so also is it with joy. Until we come to the point where by faith we are supremely confident of God's presence in our life—of His providence toward us in the past, present and future—we will not experience the enduring fullness of satisfaction God wants us to have.

Short-Lived Joy?

A Christian's joy can be just as short-lived as anyone's in the world if we are seeking it for itself as the world does. Biblical joy is a fruit, a byproduct, an additional blessing, not the end in itself. It flows into and grows within the person whose life and energies are not focused merely on being "joyful." The lives of those in this world who are so zealously chasing after it prove this point. If they are still chasing it, they must not yet have it. God's Word also substantiates this.

In this regard, we need to be aware of a danger inherent in festival times: that our pursuit of joy does not obscure more important elements. Psalm 81 is a festival psalm, and verses 1-4 bids us to enjoy God's feasts fully:

Sing aloud to God our strength; make a joyful shout to the God of Jacob. Raise a song and strike the timbrel, the pleasant harp with the lute. Blow the trumpet at the time of the New Moon, at the full moon, on our solemn feast day. For this is a statute for Israel, a law of the God of Jacob.

God commands us to rejoice in His feasts (Deuteronomy 14:26), but Psalm 81:8-10 cautions us to remember certain things so that their real purpose is not lost in an unthinking keeping of that command:

Hear, O My people, and I will admonish you! O Israel, if you will listen to Me! There shall be no foreign god among you; nor shall you worship any foreign god. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt; open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.

God knows that even among His people, human frailty can misuse festival occasions, for they seem to beckon us to play. Relaxation and merriment tend to become the sole interest. Yet the greater the gaiety, the more obscure God's intent for the feast becomes, and the feast's spiritual value diminishes. God reminds us of the meaning of our songs of praise lest our joy becomes gaiety, gaiety becomes hilarity, hilarity becomes revelry and revelry becomes debauchery. Our God-produced joy is lost.

"Listen to Me while you rejoice," God says. "Stay completely clear of idolatry and remember I am the God who freed you from your bondage. Open your mouth and I will feed you!" When we follow God's prescription, He will feed us so that we experience real joy and satisfaction. God removes the burdens that make true rejoicing a reality. He continues, "I would feed you with the finest of wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you" (verse 16). He makes it plain that real joy lies in the quality of our relationship with Him!

Our relationship with Him through Jesus Christ makes possible all the wonderful qualities given in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12). "Blessed are the poor in spirit, . . . those who mourn, . . . the meek, . . . those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," etc. These are some of the qualities those in God's Kingdom will possess. They work to produce joy, and in us they are part of the manifestation of God's workmanship by His Spirit.

Biblical joy is inseparable from our relationship with God and springs from our knowledge and understanding of the purpose of life and the hope of living with God for eternity when there will be joy evermore. If God is actually present in our lives, the joy He experiences can begin in us (Psalm 16:11). Joy is the sign that life has found its purpose, its reason for being! This, too, is a revelation of God, for no one can come to Him and find the purpose of life unless He, by His Spirit, calls him and reveals it (John 6:44; I Corinthians 2:10).

Quite a number of verses show that the joy of God's children arises from sources other than those sought by the world. Notice how the early believers found joy:

- » So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart. (Acts 2:46)
- » Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household. (Acts 16:34)
- » And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction with joy of the Holy Spirit. (I Thessalonians 1:6)

These verses point to the same general source of their joy. Once they were called and heard the gospel, they believed and received it. Upon repentance, they were forgiven, baptized and given God's Holy Spirit, and they reacted with joy at God's revelation of His purpose and at their communion with Him in His wonderful work.

A Common Thread

One characteristic that plays a major role toward producing biblical joy is common to all the Beatitudes. Each contains a measure of self-denial, of selflessness. When considered with contrasting verses, a clear picture of another source of joy emerges. One of Job's friends tells him, "Do you not know this of old, since man was placed on earth, that the triumphing [rejoicing] of the wicked is short, and the joy of the hypocrite is but for a moment?" (Job 20:4-5). Solomon adds, "Folly is joy to him who is destitute of discernment, but a man of understanding walks uprightly" (Proverbs 15:21).

These scriptures indicate causes that produce opposite effects. Self-denial done with the purpose of serving God and fellow man produces sustained blessing, one that carries on into the Kingdom of God for all eternity. Meanwhile, pursuing self-centered pleasure will indeed produce joy. The longest it can possibly last is to the grave, but the Bible implies that it will be much shorter because evil—and self-centeredness is evil—has the devastating proclivity of devouring its perpetrators.

This is undoubtedly why the proverb warns us to use our understanding to walk uprightly. This agrees with Paul's instruction in Ephesians 5:15-20:

See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

"Joy" does not appear in this passage, but Paul's purpose is to instruct us how to produce the sustained sense of well-being that should mark a Christian's life. When a person feels good about life, about who and what he is, what he is doing with his life and where it is headed, a sense of joy is always present. Paul's instructions are timeless in producing this.

"Walk circumspectly" indicates keeping the commandments. Paul advises us to make the most profitable use of our time, considering the state of this world. He warns us not to be foolish, and always to consider, search for and focus upon the purpose God is working out. Then in verse 18 he makes an interesting contrast that directly involves producing the joy that should accompany the life of anyone heeding these instructions.

The verse contains a play on words. It is no accident that alcohol is associated with "Spirit." Paul's counsel is not to seek joy in the sensuous, self-centered, worldly ways that produce dissipation or debauchery, but rather to be filled with the Spirit, singing and meditating on God's Word as we give thanks in all circumstances. This formula is guaranteed to produce a sustained sense of well-being because it removes the natural self-seeking from our lives and replaces it with a God-centered way of glorifying Him. This allows joy to be the fruit, the blessing of the Almighty, rather than the direct object of our pursuit.

Source and Cause Shown

This world, with its multitude of insolvable problems, is not a place of joy. We must all live in anticipation of disaster simply because we know it has happened so often to so many. Disease destroys the lives of multitudes. Potential war and violence on the streets strike fear into our hearts. Discouragement over the difficulties of making ends meet—or of even having sufficient to eat or a warm, dry place to live—precludes happiness for millions. How many vibrant lives have accidents or natural disasters cut short? Except for brief spurts, this world's current condition and history are sufficient proof that mankind does not know how to produce joy.

David writes in Psalm 4:5-8:

Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, and put your trust in the LORD. There are many who say, "Who will show us any good?" LORD, lift up the light of Your countenance upon us. You have put gladness in my heart, more than in the season that their grain and wine increased. I will both lie down in peace, and sleep; for You alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.

God Himself and our relationship with Him are the source and cause of any real joy we might have. Notice these scriptures:

» Then they returned, every man of Judah and Jerusalem, with Jehoshaphat in front of them, to go back to Jerusalem with joy, *for the LORD had made them rejoice over their enemies.* (II Chronicles 20:27)

» And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy; *for the LORD made them joyful*, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel. (Ezra 6:22)

» Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced, *for God had made them rejoice with great joy*; the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off. (Nehemiah 12:43)

In each case, the specific incident that caused their joy is less important than the undeniable fact that, for those who have a relationship with God through a covenant, God Himself, combined with their yielding to Him within His purpose, is the source and cause of joy. This is vital to understand because it points out a major cause of biblical joy.

The Work of God

Anybody can experience some form of joy. As we saw earlier, joy can even arise from perversions as horrifying as brutally murdering another person created in God's image. The greatest of joys, however, are those that arise when we are so absorbed in some creative task that we are set free from self-concern. It is self-concern that brings us sorrow, blunting the possibilities for joyful living.

We can seek joy, but we cannot find true joy merely by seeking pleasurable excitement. The best and longest sustained joys result from self-forgetful activity. True joy can be sought, but it must be sought God's way. It must arise as a product of yielding wholeheartedly to the creative purpose God, the Master Creator, is working out in our lives.

Joy that is a fruit of God's Spirit has its roots in the realization of God's purpose and its outworking that transforms us into His image. Biblical joy begins when God calls, and we hear the gospel, understand and believe it. Notice this in Isaiah 61:1-3, which Jesus quoted as He began His ministry:

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified.

This is only the beginning because the process continues. Paul writes in Romans 5:11:

And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

Hearing and believing the gospel leads to repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation with God. The apostle adds in I Thessalonians 1:6, "And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit."

Isaiah devotes much of his book to showing this process of transformation as people yield to being converted into the image of God as the precursor to or cause of joy. For instance, Isaiah 51:10-11 is typical:

Are You not the One who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; that made the depths of the sea a road for the redeemed to cross over? So the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing, with everlasting joy on their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Isaiah 55:12-13; 65:11-19 and many others show that yielding to God's purpose and being converted is the key to biblical joy, a fruit of God's Spirit. A son of God can suffer disappointment, persecution and sorrow from a multitude of sources in his life, but the joy of the Lord in him will always lift him over them because his joy is greater than any negative circumstance that might occur.

Biblical joy is bound up in our relationship with Him and our understanding of what is happening to our minds. We walk to the beat of a different drummer than this world because we understand God's overall purpose. We know we have been forgiven and have a place in His purpose because we now have His Spirit. No more life-changing experience can ever happen to a human than when God calls and understanding dawns. It forever alters our perspective on life itself and on the things we formerly trusted to give us satisfaction.

Henceforth our joys must arise from yielding to fulfill God's great creative purpose and seeing it accomplished. This is why we were born! Because of this, we can look forward to hearing Him say:

Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord. (Matthew 25:21)